

One & Other Project

My name is Verusca Calabria and I'm here today on the 14th of July 2010 at the Wellcome Trust to interview Richard Boyce about his experience on the plinth. Thanks for coming Richard.

No problem.

Before I begin I just wanted to ask you, I noticed in the pre-plinth interview before you went on the plinth that you called yourself [?]?

Dickie Beau.

Is that an artistic name?

Yes, yes, it's a performance name.

How did you choose it?

Well actually I didn't choose it really, it was a friend of mine who chose it, I was beginning to perform in nightclubs and on the cabaret circuit and was looking for a name that was kind of gender neutral but catchy and my name's Richard so I started with 'Dickie' and we, my friend and I, just handed back and forth ideas and came up with 'Dickie Beau' because it sounded good and it was a pun on you know the Dicky bow tie and so it stuck. Yes, it's that simple.

You mentioned that you are a performance artist in the pre-plinth interview but we never got to find out how you became one. Would you be able to tell me the story of how you got into it?

Well, I've got quite a varied background. I did a drama degree and then I worked in TV drama development for a while but I wanted to go back into acting which had always been my dream from when I was a child. So I did some fringe work in London then I went to Milan and spent about six months there with a physical theatre company before coming back to London and getting on a treadmill of meetings for things like being in the background of a BT ad and stuff that actually, in the end, I thought wouldn't be very fulfilling and having had a really great artistic experience in Italy I wanted to get more out of performance than just to be famous or to earn money. I had ideas of my own so I started to try and realise them and the best arena for me to experiment in was the nightclub cabaret alternative performance art circuit ... so that's how I became a so-called 'performance artist'.

What attracted you to it?

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Well I always wanted to be an actor from a very early age I think because it was exciting to explore new areas of identity and to be things that you may be in real life I felt perhaps I couldn't be, you know. It's a bit more expressive so as I got older and became more comfortable in my own skin, the requirement for validation through performance diminished so I didn't necessarily need to perform in order to get a round of applause to be loved you know? But I didn't lose the interest in exploring ideas and expression.

Can you tell me some of the work you've done in terms of performing arts?

As Dickie Beau? Yes, well the thing that really seemed to make people sit up was a deconstruction I did of ...

That's okay ... just the mic is falling over and we're just going to put it on again. There.

Ok, so I'll start again shall I?

Ok.

What have I done? Oh well, I started off doing sort of drag, clowning, what I called electro-burlesque vignettes in nightclubs which were basically like strip teases to my own music so I would sing to a backing track that I'd created and do things like, for example, start off as a clown, a candy-coloured clown and then emerge as a cat burglar that kind of thing. So it was just a little twist, you know, what's inside isn't the same as what you see to begin with. It was very simple and then I began to work with spoken word audio and created more constructed and complex narrative vignettes and then that's really the direction that I've pursued so now it's very visual what I do and physical because of my work with a physical theatre company before. But I also ... it's also very theatrical so now I'm moving back and sort of doing a full circle going round from being in nightclubs and cabaret circuit going back towards theatre but this time it kind of ... the theatre work I'm creating is has travelled, has been somewhere else, does that make sense?

Can you tell me more about that?

Well yes, specifically what I'm working on at the moment is a project that I call 'Blackouts: Twilight of the Idols' and that is about the idols of popular culture who are as notorious for their tragedies as for their triumphs so it's like an exploration into a sort of subconscious underworld of people like Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse, Britney Spears, Michael Jackson. It's all those kinds of performers who in some way or other perhaps never had a childhood ... nearly all of them have issues of, or had issues of addiction,

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mental health problems, some kind of compulsive disorder and my theory is that the reason they can they're so compelling to the general public and capture our imaginations so profoundly is because they actually articulate dysfunctions that are endemic that almost everybody has within them and enacts because the popular perception of, say, an addict is of someone on the outskirts of society but actually I think that it's central to the entire system within which we live so you have a pub on every corner. The Arts Council has even been partially funded by gambling in the form of the National Lottery so the economy has even become founded ... dependent on addictive processes. We also perceive addiction to be related only to substances but actually it's as much about behaviours like the way people function within their love relationships how people become literally addicted, it's a common topic of love songs that I'm ... you're toxic, I'm addicted to you and all this kind of thing, addicted to love and the behaviour around those kind of things is exactly the same as an addict's behaviour around the substance that they're addicted to. So that's something that I perhaps wouldn't have been exploring in such detail if I'd just been a jobbing actor.

You mentioned also in your pre-plinth interview this interest in the constructed nature of identity and I just wondered when you began to consider these issues in your life?

Well, I probably started considering these issues when I was about six because I was kind of sexually precocious and was aware that I was attracted to other men at the age of about six. So I remember watching the, I think I maybe mentioned this in my original interview, I remember watching the Madonna video for Material Girl and where she recreates the Marilyn Monroe routine in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend and she's surrounded by all these men and I remember watching it and thinking there's been some great cosmic error because that should be me, you know, I ... maybe I was born a woman trapped in a man's body because I'm sexually interested in men and I was also, I was quite bright and attentive as a child so I would read newspapers, you know, sensationalist stories about somebody at the job centre in, you know, Harrogate who's had a sex change on the NHS, you know, and thought "Oh maybe that's where I fit in." So that's when I first started to think about it, quite young. But then when I went through puberty I thought perhaps puberty will get rid of it and then I'll be interested in women and that will right the wrong but it didn't and then just as I got older I started to think "Well actually I'm quite happy with my body so all it is that I perceived at the age of six that there were only two ways there's only one way of doing things and that binary male/female hetero-normal society and as I got older I decided perhaps I can just be as I am and that's fine so that would be my initial experience with questions of gender identity and people couldn't ... people commonly say that gender dysphoria, for example, is not related to sexual identity but my experience of that is different. I think that it is

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inextricably linked and in fact I think that if it wasn't then the ultimate aim of a transgender person wouldn't be to reassign their genitalia.

So how would you define yourself?

I would rather not but if pushed I would say that I was a queer person. I don't really believe that there's any such thing as straight or gay completely. I think that probably some people are more inclined one way or another but generally I think most people are bisexual and I think in terms of gender roles we've fallen into patterns but there are no hard and fast rules really as far as I'm concerned.

Just to bring you back to the time when you were growing up. You mentioned in the previous interview you grew up in a steel town. What was it like for you to express your different identity in that context?

Well I didn't really express my different identity in the context of the growing up in a steel town except through drama so I did school plays but I was very fortunate because I was considered to be of above average intelligence in my school, in my junior school, and so I went to a private school in secondary school and my parents both worked very hard. They worked two jobs each to see me through that but it gave me many more opportunities for expressing myself in theatre terms because we had a theatre at that school and ... but again I was a bit of an outsider because I was the working class boy who was attending quite a posh public school so I think that helped me again to observe things from without which at times was a bit lonely but to be honest it was a bonus, it was a benefit because I feel retrospectively like I've had a luxury of being able to observe and understand the world in a form, a unique perspective.

I wonder whether you talked about it with your parents at some point or came out to your friends and family and community and what the reaction might have been. Get some context?

Sexuality? Well, I didn't come out to my parents until I was in my early twenties because I was quite fearful of what their reactions would be but I remember when I came out to my dad he was incredibly cool, he was great and in fact I couldn't have asked for a better response so with him there hasn't been a problem. I think that, in fact, in the town that I grew up in I was almost surprised by the fact that people don't really care that much on the whole. In fact, my experience is that the people who seemed to care are the people who in some way feel threatened by it and people who perhaps haven't reconciled their own issues around sexual or gender identity so people who are comfortable in themselves really don't mind what you get up to. I think that's probably true but my fear of what their reactions might be because you

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hear homophobic jokes or comments or you know bullying in schools takes the form of homophobia always or nearly always regardless of what the reason for bullying is. If you go into a playground and you observe bullying it's nearly always the person who's gay who is being bullied, it's not that they are gay necessarily but they're called gay and that was the case for me as well when I was bullied at my secondary school and to the point of being very v miserable and that that's what I was bullied for, it was homophobic bullying and I thought that they could see through me I thought that they could read my mind but that's just the form that bullying takes. So there's definitely still a stigma attached, it doesn't matter where you are there's the ... it's basically considered to be pretty low to be gay on some level even though people generally don't care. I know that that sounds like a contradiction but gay people are considered to be lower rate citizens. Did that go round in a circle; did it make any kind of sense?

It did, thank you.

So you mentioned you studied drama at university?

Yes.

Where did you go?

At Manchester University I studied drama and that was fantastic because I had my independence for the first time ever and I did loads of school plays and not school plays rather plays at university, extra-curricular drama, directed some work and did some writing and discovered nightclubs. So I got a job in a gay nightclub and then I discovered drag queens but I didn't really, I did drag once while I was at university but I didn't do drag again properly until I was in my mid-to late twenties and that informed my moving into the world of Dickie Beau.

So talk about drag, can you explain to me what you mean by that, in your own terms?

Oh yes, well yes, as far as I'm concerned everybody's in drag and I think if you're wearing clothes and you're in drag and you have a haircut you're in drag and if you shave you're in drag, if you have chosen a particular type of frame for your glasses you're in drag, if you wear earrings, if you wear a particular cut of coat, if you ... whatever you wear if you're not walking around naked and letting it all hang out fully bearded with hairy legs and hairy armpits and all of that then you're in, as far as I'm concerned, you're in drag because you're adjusting your identity. You're toying with the presentation, how you choose to present yourself to the world. Most, I think, conceive of drag as

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being about a man dressing up as a woman but to me it's about any conscious or even subconscious choice that you make about how you present yourself to the rest of the world. Usually that's very closely related to some kind of gender role. So, for example, there's a subculture within the gay scene of leather bears of men who ... generally quite stocky and they grow a beard and they wear leather waistcoats or then chaps perhaps that's a form of drag, it's not only about ... and some of those men would say, "I never do drag" but as far as I'm concerned it's it is drag.

What attracted you to be in drag or dressing as drag?

Well I thought to myself I am in drag anyway so why not jazz it up a bit you know and I think that drag queens have historically subverted popular ideas about what it means to perform a gender role in everyday life so I embraced that particular function of being a performer or a drag queen, whatever you want to call me, I know a few performers who don't like to be called a drag queen, they'd rather be called performance artist but it doesn't bother me if people think that I'm a drag queen, you know, and because then they might see that I'm doing things which aren't only about ... which aren't necessarily about female impersonation because I don't even know what female impersonation is. To me, female impersonation is really impersonating a pre-pubescent child isn't it now? Because girls are encouraged to shave all of their public hair and resemble as closely as possible a virgin because that's apparently the ideal woman, don't you think?

It's an interesting idea.

Yes, that seems to me the way that things have gone and well, an interesting aspect of that is the fact that paedophilia, for example, is the ultimate taboo and the reason = it's such a taboo is that it's a monster which has been created by society but not acknowledged. Does that make sense? It's absolutely been created and it's being sustained by glamour, by the images of glamour. Pamela Anderson, Madonna unfortunately even subscribed to it, as little hair as possible on the body, look as young as you can.

To bring you back to the type of drag costumes you may wear or use when you perform, can you describe some of them and how you came to formulate this particular look?

Yes, well some of it comes about by accident but the makeup is ... I just like clowns and I think that with ... and I think that more and more people look like clowns in everyday life, people who have expensive cosmetic surgery or wear huge amounts of makeup to completely misrepresent their natural features so the so I ... that's kind of ... my staple look is a white face, clown face and I embellish aspects like I wear enormous false eye-lashes and make much

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bigger lips than I really have and quite often I will create a look of anxiety with my eyebrows like Edith Piaf used to do because I prefer that look and an uneasy face; usually people find a bit unsettling and I quite like that.

I thought you had a very expressive face on the plinth when you dressed in your costume.

Yes.

You mentioned you wanted to represent the blonde bomb the sort of Marilyn Monroe type.

Well yes, I deliberately put on makeup that evoked the sort of, you know, the blonde bombshell but at the same time looks a bit ... looks completely exaggerated. It looks like a clown and what I wanted people to think when they looked up at the plinth from a distance was, "Oh there's a naked woman on the plinth." And then get closer and see that I'm not a naked woman at all and that I'm wearing a suit and it's all completely constructed and a bit weird perhaps a bit disturbing that's kind of what I hoped for and I don't know how many people really did think I was a naked woman from a distance but I didn't attract as great a crowd as I hoped that was for sure.

So yes, your time on the plinth. You said that you hoped for people to be challenged by their perception of what it is to be either female or a male and what do you think happened when you were up there? What sort of reactions did you get?

Well it depended on whether or not I had my fur coat on. I think that there were mixed reactions in the faces of the people that I could see from up there. I think that at one point I took my coat off as a tour bus was coming round the corner so I waved at the tour bus with my coat on and then decided, "I'll take it off and see how they react." And I did see a definite shift in the looks of people's faces from kind of "Oh it's fun, it's a funny thing on the plinth" to, "Oh, that's not quite right, you know, for there to be a naked or seemingly naked woman on the plinth at 10am on a Tuesday morning." One guy directed me into poses which was quite fun so he directed me into glamour poses, that was quite amusing. There were quite a lot of screwed up faces, people thinking it was a bit purvey or a bit, you know, a bit ... I don't know, a bit too weird for them and then there were lots of people who thought it was great and I don't know how many people thought about it as they were looking at it but it was quite nice to be able to get up and publicly, you know, make that statement of our idea of the blonde bombshell as a construction and hopefully confuse a few people about what was inside that figure, whether it was a man or a woman and what it was saying, whether it was meant to be sexy or whether it was meant to be disturbing, you know. And I think that I did get a

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little bit of a mixed bag of those sorts of responses because everybody's opinion is different about those sorts of things anyway.

What was it like when you came off the plinth? Did you get any comments or reactions then?

Yes, the guy who was operating the forklift said something about he got somebody to take his picture with me and said something about how I would be his ideal woman as I shaved my legs which I thought was quite funny. And yes, that's the interesting ... quite often in my experience the people that seemed to be most intrigued by me if I'm in drag or in some kind of gender confusing look are the people who appear to be the most heterosexual butch males. I don't know what that's all about but beyond him I got some messages from people who watched on Sky, on the website live and I think there were a few comments about Judith Butler on there and I didn't get heckled really. I expected to, I thought people would be much more kind of vocal and probably they would have been if I'd been on at 2am on a Friday night. You know.

Talking about your profile, which I have a copy of here, you had a 163 people liked it [?]. Did you use any other kind of social networking sites to let people know you were going on the plinth, such as Twitter or Facebook?

Yes, I did a Facebook update as I was going up on the forklift to say that I was going up on the forklift and so I think a few people tuned in as a consequence of that. At the time I can't remember if I used Twitter but I definitely put a Facebook update on and got some comments and then actually my photo of a Facebook friend came down to Trafalgar Square with his camera and took some photos. He's a photographer, he took some great photos and one of them is my current profile picture on Facebook.

So what was it like being up there?

I think it seemed to drag initially and I wasn't really sure what to do because normally in performance I have a very constructed idea of what I'm going to do on stage and I did consider getting up onto the plinth and doing something that I'd rehearsed but I didn't think it would read very well. Usually I perform to audio and there was no dedicated audio sound-system or whatever and the idea of organising that was too much and I also thought it would be quite an interesting like personal experiment just to go up and be on the plinth. I know I've got a friend who is a therapist and he frequently says we are human beings not human doings so I thought that would be good just to go up and see what happened, you know, without feeling that I have to entertain, you know, a crowd or something like that so I felt a bit at a loss at the beginning because I did feel that perhaps I should be offering something more but then I thought well I've given them a look which is worth the entrance fee so that's

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enough and I relaxed into it and played around with taking my coat on and off. Then I had this microphone wired up to me so, "Oh I'll have a voice so then I just started to talk a little bit about whatever came into my head and by the time we got about forty minutes in I felt that the time was going by a bit too quickly and I was just starting to get into my stride and could have quite happily stayed up there for maybe another hour and then maybe five minutes before leaving I think I remember just sitting down and trying to capture in my memory what it was like to take in the view and from that part of Trafalgar Square because it's quite an impressive place to be and knowing that you're in this prime position is a little bit surreal. You feel a bit like a target potentially.

What impact does think the experience had on you?

That's a difficult question to answer actually. I don't know, I think it's just one of many, just another of many experiences. I don't think it profoundly changed my life in any meaningful way but it was definitely good to do and I think it even made a couple of people aware of my existence that wouldn't have been aware of my existence before. It was good for me to express myself artistically in a way that was a bit different to what I normally do as well and ... yes, I'm not sure how else it would have changed me, what other kind of impact it would have had on me ... just a bit difficult to answer that question, I'm sorry.

Okay.

I don't know. May be I'll think of something in a minute.

You can take your time as well.

Okay.

You said that it made a couple of people aware of your existence. Who do you mean?

Well, I definitely got more Facebook friend requests as a consequence of being on the plinth somehow and I got into a couple of conversations with people about Judith Butler on the internet which is conversations which would not have evolved if I hadn't gone up onto the plinth. So I suppose this is an impact that it's had ... it developed my discourse around that subject and introduced me to some people who are reading the same sorts of things as I am at the moment or were was reading at that time and who have formed opinions about it which we could share with each other and it raised different ... I raised in particular questions with other performers that I know about things like gender dysphoria, particularly gender dysphoria, in fact gender dysphoria became a big topic of conversation for about a month after I was on the plinth and maybe that's because I started talking about it all the time but

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it's possible it has something to do with the fact that I didn't, that I made that display of the nude Marilyn. I formed more tightly my perspective of where transgender fits into my kind of philosophy of life, my understanding of social mechanisms.

These new people or friends on Facebook, as you mentioned, were they following the project online and as a result got in touch with you or how did they find out?

Yes, I think a couple of people must have been following the project online and found me that way but I don't know, it might have been because, who knows, quote ... often people put things up on post a picture from Twitter or a link to something on their Facebook page so it could have been a Facebook friends to be honest I don't know. It's a good question, I didn't ask them how the how they how they came across ... or if I did I can't remember.

There's a kind of community of people or, say, social group created at this project of One & Other who keep in touch and also in the first place got to know each other using social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Did you know about these two communities?

I didn't know about them but I can ... but are they people who are involved in the project? It doesn't surprise me because everything's got a group on Facebook and Twitter and so I haven't joined it because I haven't looked for it because I have lots of things to many groups and social networking things going on already so I'm not really adding things. It doesn't surprise me and it would be quite interesting to check that out, both Twitter and Facebook, okay. And what do they talk about? Their experience on the plinth?

Yes, I mean I think what I'm understanding is that some people were influenced by what they did and what they left out according to what the participants or the followers of the project might be saying on either Twitter or Facebook so I wonder whether that had an impact on the choice of what you did or what you might have left out.

When you say 'left out' do you mean things that you decided not to do?

That's right.

Ah, right. No I wasn't influenced at all by anybody in that way by what I did. I think it's probably a good thing that I wasn't a member of a group because it might have given me a bit of angst around what I was doing and I hadn't really read or looked at comments or anything around what I did do because, you know, if I did see something that was really truly negative or something it would be probably ambush me into a corner for a while, you know, and make

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me want to isolate myself. So I haven't paid too much attention to that, I've got into ... I've communicated with people who have contacted me directly but not so much looking at comments and stuff like that. I have observed what other people have done on the plinth and looked at videos and formed opinions around that but I haven't really involved myself in a dialogue about it although I think it was a fantastic project. I preferred the activities that people did which was in some way a social commentary. I wasn't so wild about things that promoted specific religions or were only acts of self-promotion and neither was I so wild about the people who only went up there and just sat there as themselves without anything to say just for the experience because I think it's quite nice if you have an opportunity to be in such a public place to make a contribution as well as, you know, take away an experience.

You went up there on the last week of the project. What was that like?

Well I was very glad that I got the opportunity to do it because actually I wasn't sure when it began whether I would and I was ... because I was on a waiting list, I wasn't on ... it just so happened that somebody obviously wasn't able to do it and I was able to come in so that was quite arbitrary and I found out at quite short notice that I was able to do it so it was great that I was able to come in on that last week and it felt like there was a bit of a buzz around it as well. Certainly the atmosphere in the office and backstage was quite excited, people were quite excited because it was the last week and they'd seen lots of really interesting things happen, lots of really interesting people go up there so although they were really exhausted all of the people that were working because it was a 24/7 activity ... there were ... I think it's that final stretch syndrome that was perhaps ... there was a general excitement about it, you know. There's only a certain number of people left and they appreciated anybody who made some kind of an effort so that was exciting about it at that time.

You were replacing somebody who had cancer, you didn't have a lot of time to think about what you might be doing because I was going to ask you whether you contacted any media or had any media attention afterwards.

Oh, I didn't contact and I didn't have any attention that I know of but I don't think I would have contacted any media anyway even if I'd had a scheduled appearance. I don't know, maybe I would of ... I thought that it was possible that it might get a little bit of attention being nude but there had already been a nude, there had already been ... people had already been nude on there, in fact somebody had even taken a poo, hadn't he? So what I was doing was pretty tame probably by comparison except that it was early on a Tuesday so perhaps a few parents were offended who walked through Trafalgar Square but I was hairless, you know, and I think people probably didn't mind that.

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How will you look back at the experience as a whole?

Well, I'd quite like to go back and look at what other people have done again because I feel like in a way I missed out because I didn't see everybody, probably impossible to do that really unless you take a year off but that's something I think ... "Oh well" when I see somebody who's done something really interesting. I think, "Oh God there must be loads of people like that who've done something really interesting" and so it would be quite nice to be able to see it and watch all of those videos, all of those archive videos and so that's how I kind of look back on it. I think I did that one thing but there were all these other people who did all these other things ... I kind of feel like I missed out a bit in some way because I haven't seen everything ... that's yes, that's how I how I feel about it, looking back, but because of my experience of it, yes it was good, it was a good exercise for me to go up and do it, yes it felt a little bit brave going up there.

Did you have any friends and family coming to support you or watching you online during your time?

I had some people watching me online. I received a couple of text messages while I was on the plinth and I had the friend that I mentioned from Facebook who came down and took some photos of me. I had some friends in Montréal who are doing a show and I plugged their show, actually I mentioned their show just in case anybody in Montréal happened to be online and I don't know if anybody in Montréal was watching and I don't know if they went to see the show but they were watching and so that was nice. I had ... my partner was watching, he was also in Montréal at the time and I think he felt a bit weird about the fact that my bum was being flashed all over the internet ... yes, quite a lot of people watched but not very many people came down although I didn't make a big song and dance about the fact I was doing it until I communicated via Facebook that I was there.

What sort of reactions did you get from your friends and family?

Well, I showed my dad the video later and I think he thought it was a strange thing to do but he was quite amused by it. I think he probably thought it was quite brave and a few of my friends were really excited by it. They thought it was great and quite a lot of people said "Well, why didn't you tell us you were doing it?" But I didn't even know that I was going to be doing it until quite late in the day and like I said I had some conversations with people about what it was I was trying to communicate, what I was trying ... what my sort of statement, my artistic statement was, in presenting myself the way I did and that was very good that was very fruitful because I think that this is a really important issue. I don't think it's just about, I don't think it's just an academic issue. I think it's really tightly bound up in issues of power and control. I think

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that almost the extreme sexualisation or objectification of the blonde bombshell is as controlling on another plane as the enforced invisibility of Arab women in some Middle Eastern cultures with the full burqa and the full veil and everything so I just think that they're two sides of the same coin actually and they're both exploitative and undermining of, you know, they deny female empowerment because both of them are ... both of those expressions of men controlling women are ... well, they're completely diminishing. They render women as only being about a sex object really and I know I've heard people ... I had an Iraq academic who's a woman on the radio talking about she found the burqa and the veil actually empowering because it removed the idea ... the feeling that you were being observed sexually. Does that make sense? So that actually you could then be academic she could be an academic and not feel that she was being judged on that level but I think that that I hadn't thought of it like that before and I thought, "Oh that's interesting but I don't think it's a good enough argument actually because that means you still have to be invisible" and I think that I don't think that's good enough. I think that's insulting to women, you know. Men don't have to be invisible in Middle Eastern cultures. So I don't think it's good enough, then at the same time I think that it's an outrage that fifteen / sixteen year old girls feel that they have to shave off all of their pubic hair in order to be attractive to the boys and to have perfect hemispherical breasts and not, basically, not be natural so that's what I was trying to draw attention to in a roundabout way, well, in a very direct way but in a visual way.

You mentioned in the previous interview, and partly today as well, that your work is about challenging perceptions and go underneath what lies, you know, on the surface. You mentioned that in your previous interview which I found very interesting. Would you like to give me an example of some of the work you've done that discusses these issues in a more overt way?

The gender issues? Well once I did do a drag performance as Michael Jackson and I used ... it was a sort of multi-layered performance in that I did a white-face make-up of this, my usual sort of trademark, clown face makeup and so as a white man playing a black man who dressed up as a white man or a white woman because there was probably, there was some ... that sort of gender dysphoria issue going on with Michael Jackson and undoubtedly some sexual confusion. I lip-synced to audio of a drag queen called Shirley Q. Liquor in America who makes videos on YouTube and he is a white man who drags up as a black woman so I think that the point of what I was doing at the time was the monologue that I lip-synced to was about homosexuals and where are all these homosexuals coming from. So by mixing things up in a ... not just randomly but pointedly I think the idea is to hopefully make people ponder what is lying beneath, you know, not necessarily lying beneath Michael Jackson, lying beneath the surface of Michael Jackson. But within them hopefully as well because it's very easy to sit and come up with pop-

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psychology concepts about what was really going on for Michael Jackson. So it's only useful to do that if it has a wider benefit. I think that in terms of Michael Jackson and in my current theatre project that I'm developing, I'm interested in exploring the location of the moment where adult responsibility is transformed into innocent victimhood in the public perception and for that purpose I am going to juxtapose Pete Docherty and Michael Jackson because they were both ... Michael Jackson was a, we now know, a drug addict and Pete Docherty, we know, is ... both intravenous users but where Michael Jackson in death is perceived as being innocent and a victim and his doctor, who was essentially his legal drug dealer, is held responsible for his death. Pete Docherty, on the other hand, is held as an irresponsible scumbag and he is held responsible for the death of a drug addicted acquaintance when he wasn't even in the same building at the time of their death and there's a book by Anne Wilson Schafer called *When Society Becomes an Addict* which proposes that 96% of the population have codependent patterning which is the root of any kind of compulsive or addictive behaviour. Codependence, put briefly, is basically the illness of ... they call it the illness of 'not enough' and it emerges from being trained to oppress your emotional truth from a very early age, which I believe we all are trained to do. I've sort of forgotten the question so I'm not sure where I'm going.

I just wanted to know more about your work and explain the connection between this interest in gender constructed gender identity in what you do. It's really fascinating what you're saying so please keep on...

Okay, good. Yes, so it's not only about gender constructions I'm interested in, it's about constructions of identity in all sorts of fields. Michael Jackson's great because look at him and you can use him to deconstruct gender or sexuality or perceptions of drug addiction or childhood and adulthood and in terms of childhood and adulthood, childhood is a Victorian invention and in the Middle Ages children were perceived as being little adults. It seems to me that actually adulthood is the invention and in fact we're all just children really we're all just big kids which Michael Jackson promoted, you know, he actually promoted ... he believed his own press releases that he was Peter Pan and I think he probably believed that he would never die as well. Ironically he didn't have what we perceive to be a childhood at all and neither did Judy Garland and neither did Marilyn Monroe and I don't think Britney Spears probably did either and many of these types of people didn't.

Oh God, I've lost my train of again because I'm going in all sorts of directions but yes, I think it's useful to study these people if it has a

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wider benefit and I think we're implicated as audience members or readers of newspapers in the hamster wheel that perpetuates all the [?] that basically traps people in cages really because they are like animals in zoos these, you know ... and they're human beings but we don't generally treat them like they're human beings. Certainly journalists don't treat people like they're human beings and I think that people closest to them probably don't treat them like they're human beings either. Michael Jackson's family say, "Oh, the doctor is to blame," it might have been any doctor, Michael Jackson was an addict and he would have paid any doctor to give him that medication. The doctor was really a sort a sort of ...it doesn't, you know, that a slave, not a slave, but he was an employee, you know. Ah, now that's where I was going. Anne Wilson Schafer talks in her book about I think all the holographic paradigm and it emerges from recent studies in physics and brain physiology and mathematics, I think, and basically the idea is that in a holographic, in a hologram, each part of the structure reflects the macrocosm of the structure. Does that make sense?

So to my mind if we were to apply that paradigm to society and in the case of Michael Jackson and his doctor where we hold Michael Jackson's doctor to account for his death, we have to actually hold the entire system to account that bestows legitimacy on those codependent doctor/patient setups in the first place. So we have to question how anybody can employ their doctor to prescribe them medication just because it's been deemed to be legal because pharmaceutical companies are very powerful and have lots of money. The processes that made Michael Jackson an addict were just the same as the processes of a crack head, you know, in downtown Los Angeles or wherever. But what I think ... it's very obvious that stuff but it seems to be that but we're quite reluctant to question those things and one of the things I mentioned while I was on the plinth, to be to be very political, was that I'd spoken to somebody who knows a bit about drugs in prisons and they'd told me that at Brixton Prison there's a dedicated wing for people who don't want to use drugs for religious or recovery reasons and I said, "Well hang on, what do you mean? There's only one wing, what about all the other wings in Brixton Prison?" And they said, "Oh well, you know, just drugs are rampant." You know, within the prison, and I said, "Well how do drugs get into the prison?" and they said, "Well, the guards are being corrupt and smuggling drugs in there turning a blind eye to it because if you stop people from taking drugs in Brixton Prison you have a riot on your hands because you have a prison full of addicts who are all with the rage of withdrawal." And I thought,

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“Well, if that’s going on, no wonder people go out and re-offend because how can they have any respect for the structures for law and order that incarcerate them in the first place?” And actually I believe that’s a hamster wheel and I don’t think there’s necessarily an evil mastermind behind all of this who’s created a conspiracy but I do think that in practice what happens is the criminal classes are kept in their place by the perpetuation of the idea that we need a prison service rather than some form of rehabilitative alternative. Yes, and these are all ... we don’t question the need for a prison service but maybe we should be questioning the need for a prison service because it’s corrupt.

Thank you for that, Richard. What’s happening now in your life in terms of your work?

At the moment I am developing a theatre project called *Blackouts* which I mentioned to you and that’s an exploration of, I suppose, of divas in darkness not only divas. Michael Jackson’s involved in that as well and it’s the idea is that it’s like a kind of adult *Alice in Wonderland* so I am planning on writing an audio script for it, a digital audio script so by that I mean that I’ll take existing audio sources from films and documentary and other spoken word artifacts of my principle subjects speaking as themselves or as characters or however. The audio manifests itself and reframing what the original audio is into new narratives which tie, which are cleaved to the themes of the project. So, for example, with Marilyn Monroe I’m interested in how she can articulate the idea of loss of the inner child so she is the first episode in this piece and the scene is really about her hallucinating on her death bed on the telephone with God begging for ... and then the life of her inner child and then letting it go which is like a subversion of what happens in fairytales because quite often fairytales begin with the death of a parent or certainly one of the things children identify with in fairytales is the fear of the death of their own parent and this is about the death of a child or childhood.

Are you going to be playing all of the characters as part of the show?

That’s the idea, yes. I’m waiting to hear ... I just sent of an Arts Council application so I’m waiting to hear whether or not they are going to give me the grants so that I can spend a couple of months doing this, working on this project. I was very fortunate to be able to go to New York and meet up with the guy who was the last person to interview Marilyn Monroe before she died and he played me the tapes of the interview across a couple of afternoons in his living room. I’d like to go

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back and work on that material and acquire the footage for the purposes of my show which I imagine to be like an inversion of a Hollywood musical but the twist being that all of the spoken word scenes will be lip-synced and the musical numbers will be performed live. So we'll see whether or not the Arts Council will give me any money for that. I don't know, I hope my application is quite strong but one can never tell if they don't then I plan to do it anyway but it might take somewhat longer because I'll have to also find a way to pay rent in the meantime but the same project is also potentially to be developed into a series of short films so I'm talking with a producer about that and beyond that I have quite a few ideas in the wings.

This Blackout Show, will it be shown in a theatre?

Well I don't know, at the moment. I would like it to be shown in a theatre because it would, I think, lend itself well to that arena but at the same time I'm wondering whether a traditional theatre might be a bit too distancing. What the some of the work that I'm including in a piece I performed as little vignettes on the cabaret circuit and in a way I think the cabaret circuit may lend itself better because in some ways maybe there's less of a boundary between the audience and the performance so perhaps if I could find a way of turning a theatre into a cabaret venue that would be good. The good thing about a theatre would be an equipped theatre, would be production values of lights and being able to use projections and things like that whereas there are limitations in a venue that's a cabaret venue, you know.

How do you promote your own work? Do you have a website, for example?

I do have a website but I don't think many people visit it that's really more for things like theatre producers or promoters to visit so they can see what I've done in terms of promoting what I'm doing. I use Facebook and MySpace, not so much any more, but Facebook, Twitter, email and TimeOut have been very supportive of what I do so I'm very lucky that they have quite often promoted me and given me critics choice or a little special mention. And a couple of the other free listings magazines, a couple of the gay magazines: QX and Boyz have been very supportive of me so I usually let them know if I'm doing something and they include me in their listings and perhaps put a photo in.

Have you got any shows coming up?

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Yes, I've got a show at the ICA on Friday actually. It's not so much a show as I'm going to be a lounge singer in the bar. I'm performing with Duckie on Saturday and next month I'm going to present an experimental show called *Retroflection* as part of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern's *Hot August* fringe and that is a piece that emerges from the idea of psychology. Have you heard of retroflection before?

No, tell them.

Well I think if I can try to define it briefly that it refers to behaviour which is like you do something to yourself that you would like someone else to do to you or you behave towards another person according to the way you feel about yourself. So, for example, if you are angry, if you have an angry outburst at me which is disproportional to the wrong that I have done you, possibly that leads back to the way you feel about yourself and actually so that's an example and they call that *retroflection*. Or masturbation might be a form of retroflection, the way that you make love to yourself might be the way that somebody ... that you'd like somebody else to do it to you so I'm doing a show that emerges from that idea and I have no idea how that's going to pan out at the moment but I've have got lots of material.

Okay, Richard you just had a thought about transgender that you wanted to talk about before we finished the interview today. Go ahead.

Well really it was it was in relation to what I talked about. What I talked about before when I was a six year old boy and I thought, "Oh, maybe I'm a woman trapped in a man's body." Now I understand that now to be a reflection of the binary world that I understood, which was that men and woman and the hetero-normal thing that I spoke about before, now it's generally considered at the moment in our country and in Western culture generally more broadly that it is appropriate for people who have gender dysphoria to have gender reassignment operations. And I'm not so sure about that and the reason is that I think that it's ... only from my own understanding of it and I can't speak for all people who are undergoing a transgender process it's actually a conservative act. One of the reasons I think this is that I look at Iran and in Iran the state coerce gay men into having gender reassignments quite often they then end up becoming prostitutes and imams essentially run harems of them and it's devastatingly depressing because many of them end up completely miserable and suicidal. But I think it's interesting that a

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country like Iran, where homosexuality is illegal, should see it to be acceptable only if you reassign your gender and I think that in my understanding of the world as a six year old I thought the only way I can possibly fit in is if I become a woman because that will then justify my sexual deviance, if you see what I mean. And I don't think that that is an area that is fully explored because I think people are afraid to go there because I certainly know some transgender people who say, "No, I know that I was born a woman trapped in a man's body." And they're quite forceful about it and they said they that you can't tell them that that otherwise.

My view of gender is rather different. I think it's more ... I think your gender role, the gender that you assign yourself, is much more of a choice than something essential because it's about how you present yourself to the world, it's about identity, it hasn't got necessarily anything to do with an essential truth. As far as I'm concerned if you're a woman the only thing that that means is you have a womb and ovulate and as far as how we interact that shouldn't have any bearing on that but it does seem to be that people who go through a transgender route gender reassignment process are more interested in ... it derives from an external referent. You can't possibly identify as a woman unless you have an external referent of your understanding of what it is to be a woman and so consequently I think the whole argument is flawed. I don't think anybody can turn around and say, "I'm a woman trapped in a man's body" because that only refers to their external referents of that idea. It's a little bit of a controversial view, especially for somebody working in gay clubs, and so on but it ... similarly I think, as I said before, it can't be separated from sexuality because the ultimate destination is often the reassignment of the sexual organ so it's absolutely crucial to the process and I think that there's fear of addressing this issue head on because there's too much fear of a backlash and there's a fear of being accused of being fascistic and I know that the ... I know that people do get a backlash but it's not an attack. I think that people should be free to do what they want with their bodies, actually, I don't think that people should be stopped. I think it's absolutely fine and I'm happy for people to have gender reassignments on the NHS, I think that's all fine. I just think that we should talk about it a bit more deeply because I think that it's a superficial process at the moments.

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To bring all of that back to your own life-story and perhaps the negotiations of these ideas throughout, can you trace a time when you began to change your mind about these issues?

Probably quite recently. Well I remember reading Germaine Greer when I was at university. I read *The Whole Woman* and I think in that book she says, "You can only be a woman if you have a womb and you menstruate and you're a man if you have testes." And she broke it down to the sort of ... that much of that simple outline ... and at that point I started to question all of the other trimmings, you know, that we associate with different gender. Certainly I think that there is a biological sex and it's clear that there is a difference. Sperm fertilises an egg and you can't have eggs fertilising eggs, sperm fertilising sperm but since Germaine Greer said that I have questioned a little more deeply what was going on for me. And as a six year old I had very few references of diversity and I think that thinking that was the easiest way that I could assimilate the idea that my sexuality was different and justify finding a way of fitting into the norm. I think that gender reassignments are encouraged in a way to help people to try and assimilate rather than cut their own path. It's not always true because I know lots of transgender people who also have a consciously undercutting ... they're using their gender reassignment status or their indeterminate intersex status as a way of making a political comment about gender roles. So it's not straightforward but I think that there's a lot of shortsightedness around the issue. I don't think that it's adequately dealt with at the moment because I think that people are afraid it boils too many people's blood.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview?

No, but thanks for letting me say that.

It's great, thank you. I've really enjoyed the interview today.

So have I.

Thank you.

Thanks for having me.