
Second Skin Theatre's *Poe: Macabre Resurrections* – An Electronic Post-Show Discussion 21st- 25th November 2011

Interviewer and editor, Steven Barfield (University of Westminster)

Interview Questions, Introduction and Notes: Steven Barfield

Names of Respondents Indicated (see biographies on theatre programme).

STEVEN BARFIELD: Second Skin theatre was established by Andy McQuade and William Whitehurst in 2007. The production discussed here, *Poe: Macabre Resurrections*, was a very free-ranging adaptation of separate stories from Edgar Allan Poe that had its initial run from November 16th- December 4th 2011. As an example of contemporary gothic theatre, it was therefore part of a long tradition of such work. The original English Gothic drama of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (c.1768-c.1839), like its counterpart the better known gothic novel, was a populist entertainment, characterized by an emphasis on supernatural events (or events at first seeming to be so) and melodramatic and contrived plotlines, which were accompanied by displays of on stage suffering intended to evoke pity and sympathy from the audience (see Jeffrey N. Cox, 2002).¹

More recently (and perhaps it is because of an ever increasing popularity for the gothic among audiences, as Emma McEvoy suggests) such gothic theatre and performance has become an important style or genre within the contemporary period. Such gothic performances uncannily evoke the subversion of the opposition between the real and the fantastic, the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious; while continuing to plumb the depths of our contemporary social anxieties (see McEvoy, 2007).² Second Skin suggested to the writers who worked on this bold project that they could adapt Poe's original tales to fit the modern day. This signalled a desire less to update Poe, than to reformulate how his tales might respond to our present day concerns.

The second noticeable aspect of the production was that it was site-specific theatre, although this is a term of definition that is wide and subject to much disagreement, what we mean here is the decision to not just perform the production within St Mary's Old Church in Stoke Newington, but to develop that performance with the church itself as a central part of the performance; in that regard the church is as much the origin of the performance as the play texts. The 'site' in site-specific matters because there should be an intimate and perhaps unrepeatable relationship between the location and the performance (see Andy Field, 2008).³ Such site-specific performances depend not just on the constraints of a generic type of space such as a church (in which case the term 'site-generic' may be better, following the term from Field *op. cit.*); but site-specific performances are frequently designed to only work with a very specific instance of a space, that is to say this particular church: St Mary's Old Church in Stoke

¹ For a concise introduction to the earlier period, see Jeffrey N. Cox, 'English Gothic Theatre' in Jerrold E. Hogle, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge UP 2002) 125-145.

² For what we mean by today's gothic theatre see Emma McEvoy, 'Contemporary Gothic Theatre' in Emma McEvoy and Catherine Spooner, (eds.) *Routledge Companion to the Gothic* (Routledge, 2007) 214-223.

³ Andy Field, 'Site-specific theatre'? Please be more specific', *Guardian theatre blog*, Wednesday 6th February 2008. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/feb/06/sitespecifictheatrepleasebe>.

Newington, rather than in another church. For these reasons the church itself plays a large part in the interview that follows, as the ‘setting’ is integral and in this way affects so much of the performance.⁴

Lastly, we might mention the issue of the audience which is thrown into interesting relief by the following discussion – and I feel this combines the two aspects of the production discussed above. As Fiona Wilkie (2001) has suggested, site-specific practices tend to lead to a convergence of the audience’s identity, because the sense of location tends to frame audience as well as the performers as a distinct collectivity.⁵ In this sense, site-specificity especially involving promenade tends to intensify an audience’s experience when compared to the normal sense of identity at a more traditional play. In this particular case, the audience was also strongly involved because of the updating of Poe’s stories in various ways to match contemporary concerns and the assumption that the gothic is as much about a contemporary audiences’ unease as anything else. This combination of gothic and site-specific aspects leads to some interesting observations about theatrical strategies to engage the audience and their reactions in the discussion that follows.

1. STEVEN BARFIELD: I wanted to start by asking Second Skin about the original impulse behind the production? Whose was the original idea to create the show in the format that we saw?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: Poe –along with Wilde and Dickens –were my first loves in literature as a boy. It’s always been my desire to stage ‘something’ of Poe’s but I’ve always been reluctant, held back by the thought of creating museum pieces. For me, personally, that’s not what excites me about theatre. That’s not to say other productions haven’t worked this way –it’s just not my style or place in theatre to make those kind of shows. Sam Julyan (producer) and I had discussed the idea of staging Poe in his old haunting grounds of Stoke Newington, but it was only when I realized that I knew enough incredible writers to transform the idea into something bold and new that we got the ball rolling.

2. STEVEN BARFIELD: Why did you decide on a site-specific performance in the Elizabethan St Mary’s Old Church, (built 1563 by Sir William Patten) in Stoke Newington, as opposed to say, a more traditional venue such as a theatre?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: The plan was always to be as bold with the staging in order to reflect the writing. I love churches –and knowing that Poe himself once worshipped at St.Mary’s made the idea even more attractive and exciting. I’m actually not a fan of church productions though, due to the dilution of the spoken word through vast echoing acoustics, but St.Mary’s has a unique sound and so limits the sound reflection. This means that rather than performers bellowing, or audiences being almost spoken at, or looking up into the air for words flying around, you are directly engaged by the performers as there is a great level of intimacy within the space.

⁴ For more discussion of site-specific theatre/ performance see Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010); Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/archaeology: Disciplinary Dialogues*. (Routledge, 2001); Nick Kaye, *Site Specific Art: Place and Documentation*. (Routledge 2000); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press 2004)

⁵ Fiona Wilkie (2002). ‘Mapping the Terrain: a Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain’. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18, pp 140-160.

3. STEVEN BARFIELD: As an audience member I was very interested in the fact you chose not just an adaptation of Poe's original stories within the space, but an ambitious reworking of the stories by a number of contemporary writers. How did this whole project come about and evolve into what the audience saw?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: I like very much that you've mentioned 'evolved'. We took on board five writers and six directors. For me to single-handedly decide on every aspect of the production would have been short-sighted in the extreme. I had chosen some incredible directors whose creative juices I cherished! Each director was afforded the opportunity to stage their play in any part of the church –the only proviso being that no space should be used twice if it could be avoided. By happy 'chance' all of the pieces lent themselves, as if by magic, to different areas of the church. This freedom for the directors created an ownership of the production as a whole, incited ideas and suggestions –and also meant that nothing stayed still for too long as Sarah Cogan, our Lighting Designer, Nika Khitrova, the designer, and Sam Miller (director 'the Pit and the Pendulum'), in particular, came forward with some wonderful ideas! In fact, from show to show more and more ideas emerge from everyone –and that is incredibly exciting.

4. STEVEN BARFIELD: I was wondering what issues you encountered in reworking/ adapting each tale – did each writer choose the tale you wanted to adapt/rework and then, perhaps you could talk us through the process a little? I'd be interested to hear about each tale and what issues you found as you reworked the original material. I'd also be interested in whether there was a brief to update the stories and to make them politically relevant to contemporary issues, or did this simply happen organically during the process of writing?

MIKE CARTER, writer of 'The Black Cat': Andy McQuade suggested 'The Black Cat' to me, and explained the brief was to 'modernise it.' I don't consider myself a political writer so I read that as creating a recognisably 21st century character rather than tackling an issue *per se*. We bounced round several suggestions and the idea of a young widow floated both our boats, influenced by casting options too no doubt.

During writing, it was clear the character had to remain real and contemporary. The scariness to my mind came from the fact that this could be your wife, your friend, your co-worker, anyone. Contemporary themes – working motherhood, alcohol, mental health, class etc. all happened organically. But what's made me happiest, and people seem to have responded well to, is we've remained true to Poe's style and kept a little bit of Black Magic in there too.

ROB JOHNSTON, writer of 'Premature Burial': I had a free choice of which tale to adapt, as long as it had not already been chosen. The only brief other than that was to 'keep to the spirit of Poe'. 'The Premature Burial' has always been a favourite Poe story of mine since seeing the film version and reading the story a long time ago. On re-reading the story I found that it was pretty much as I remembered it: basically a series of 'funny-but-scary' stories about people being buried alive, driven by the narrator's fear of it himself. To capture the spirit of Poe's original I therefore knew the story would need elements of black humour alongside the underlying horror. The mix of humour and drama suits my writing style so I was happy with this approach.

The idea of setting the story in Afghanistan came immediately. It just seemed an obvious choice, as the fear of being buried alive is probably more immediate for a serving soldier than for almost anyone else. It also seemed obvious to update the story. If Poe was writing today he would be writing stories set today. And it is essential that each character, even in a fifteen minute play, has a story to tell, so it was important that the soldier, his wife, and the corporal delivering the bad news each had the chance to articulate their fears.

All my writing has social and political purpose so those elements came naturally to me. I didn't want the play to be 'anti-war-in-Afghanistan' (although I am) but anti-war, so contemporary politics were avoided. (Had the play been written ten years ago it would probably have been set in Iraq; and thirty years ago in Northern Ireland.) I wanted the heart of the story to be about the insidious way war affects everybody, not just those on the battlefield, so setting the play both in Afghanistan and back home also came quite early, at least by the second draft (the first draft was set wholly in Afghanistan). I felt that telling a story in two time-frames simultaneously was going to add to the 'dream within a dream' quality that the story needed. Is the soldier dreaming of being dead? Or is he dead and only dreaming of having once been alive?

When I was told we could bury an actor, the central scene where the soldier bursts from the ground (scaring half the audience to death in the process) was irresistible. And you can't really do a play about being buried alive without actually burying someone!

5. STEVEN BARFIELD: I was interested in how the space was used for this production. If it was a site-specific performance, then it was also partially a promenade one. For instance different areas of the church and surroundings were used for different tales and the audience were led/moved to these different areas. Why was this? Why did a particular area of the church lend itself to a particular performed tale? What were the particular challenges and opportunities offered by the space of the church overall?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director *Second Skin*: For 'The Black Cat' the writer, Mike Carter, had already helped me by setting it in front of the altar, so my space was practically predetermined by the setting. There were no challenges as such in working with that area – only with ensuring that the distance between the audience and the performer was reduced and as close-up and personal as possible. I'm not a fan of theatre-from-a-distance and have always, and will always, love intimate and close-up and personal theatre.

Luckily for me I'd found the actress Mia Zara, who also loved the idea of a real connection with the audience and so by breaking walls and exploring shadows we ensured the play never had any of the usual barriers or constraints a theatre with a conventional stage may present.

SAM DAVIS MILLER, director, 'The Pit and the Pendulum': It's always challenging working in a non-theatre space. But in general, the church has been a very good home to us. It's far enough away from the road that it's quiet, and it's a beautiful building. It is however unfeasibly cold in there – we were generally working without heaters, to save on the church's electricity bills, and it was a challenge keeping warm and active in a building that was often considerably colder than the outdoors. In terms of using the space, we decided very early on that we would be missing a trick if we didn't use the church's features in the plays – especially the graveyard for 'Premature Burial'. Once that had been decided, we began scouring for possible playing areas. 'The Pit and the Pendulum' had various possible areas –

on top of the pews, with boards across and the character of Maheen walking around above the audience's heads; in a tiny cupboard we found in the corner of the left transept of the church; on staging in the area where 'The Masque of the Red Death' happens now. But it was Andy's idea to use the hole under the grate that leads (if you dug for long enough) to the crypt. We all wanted to use existing features of the church so this worked beautifully. The main challenge has been finding ways to make sure everyone in the audience has a sightline – the church wasn't built for people to look at performances in this way.

JOHN KACHOYAN, director 'Premature Burial': I think some of the beauty of knowing your ground so to speak – from the outset- of a production is that it can inform and shape your work from the beginning in the room. The graveyard was pitched to me very early on as the site for 'Premature Burial' and it immediately suggested a geometry, for the piece, a way to move the actors and even though our orientation changed several times – as the designers, myself and the actors got to move around in the space – we always had the actual physical objects of the space to guide us, suggest ways to stage the piece. I think there's also so many angles, vistas in and around the church that meant we all as directors were challenged to be specific in our needs, to think about where and how and if we moved the audience – which is a great thing to be conscious of – how are the people actually watching this going to see, hear, experience these pieces – it's sometimes harder to keep in mind in a proscenium/auditorium space.

YOLANDA FERRAT, director 'The Cask of Amontillado': Taking the pieces into such a unique space required responding to the space in a unique way as well. Otherwise why make theatre outside of a traditional theatre in the first place? Most theatres in London are end-on (or similar variation) performance spaces, where the addition of large sets and pieces of furniture are used to create the world of the play. St. Mary's Old Church was the starting point of the design, most of us in our direction and design have worked with what is there already. In the frame play ('The Preacher and the Raven'), Poe's connection to the church is highlighted, and connecting the stories to spaces in the church helps to deepen that association between the space, its story, Poe's original stories, and the unique adaptations we have created for this place. It became an intimate and organic process and hopefully feels that way to the audience as well (who begin by being seated in the Victorian pews and addressed as if they were the preacher's congregation). Direction and design choices were also driven by practical necessities and limitations in terms of respecting this grade 1 listed building. Why a particular space lends itself to a particular tale was a matter of exploring the space and finding the nooks and crannies that offered possibilities to facilitate the action of a story, explore what could be revealed through that story, and which would create the appropriate atmosphere for a specific story.

6. STEVEN BARFIELD: Creating characters is always a challenge for actors, especially when as in Poe the characters are so distinctive. Here there were both new characters in some of the plays and also characters that were in Poe's original tales. I also wondered what challenges the actors felt they faced when having to breathe life into and create conviction in these eerie and gothic characters – where does psychological realism end and stylisation begin? What kind of research, for instance, was relevant to building up a character considering they were sometimes new versions of what were recognisable as Poe's notorious characters, but

sometimes not so related to the characters found in Poe's original stories? How did you approach your role as an actor?

MIA ZARA ('The Black Cat'): The first challenge for 'The Black Cat', whose original story is narrated by a male, was finding the dark thoughts of violence in a woman, cruel thoughts a loving mother would unleash. I found the answers in jealousy. Also in hatred towards the cat that has stolen her son's attention. Having worked intensely on the character of the Widow with director Andy McQuade, I was asked questions about where my character comes from, what was her childhood like, was she religious, what brings her to the church to tell her story, was sort of wife and mother was she? All of these 'facts' which Andy and I created in the rehearsal process, have led the story to a crescendo finale where the only way out for her is to give up on life.

My research included suicide by hanging. My character's husband commits suicide and I describe his features after we found him dead. The images I managed to find are engraved in my mind and help me with delivery of lines each night. Andy has asked me to find a child in my life that I care about a lot and I have to admit this was the hardest task. I am not a mother, but I have a particular child I would do anything in my power to protect. This was my inspiration for my son in the play. The final moments of our lives together are packed with emotion. My interpretation of the widow is helplessness: "I just had to make it stop!"

I have stayed away from portraying her as a cold blooded murderer.

STEPHEN CONNERY BROWN ('The Preacher and the Raven'): The role of the preacher was especially invented for the framing device. However given the gothic nature of the piece and especially its brilliant setting in an old Elizabethan church and surrounding graveyard - I had the licence to let my imagination run wild and develop the most fantastical of back-stories for my character. For an actor, that is a real treat. The other treat is to perform in such a special setting that totally takes you back to another era - where very little imagination is needed to create Poe's dark world.

JENNIE GRUNER ('Masque of the Red Death'): My character, Miriam in 'The Masque of the Red Death', is never actually mentioned in the original story, so it was very free in that respect. Although I read the story and got an idea of the way the guests would be feeling, and the way Prospero (Miriam's father) behaves, Miriam was an entirely new character and a human being who had her own story to tell. I approached her as I approach any role (that is not based on a real person). I used a lot of imagination to create her backstory, researched her situation (read much about The Illuminati, father/daughter incest), worked through her motivations, and worked a great deal with the actor playing Prospero on the relationship to create a believable, living and breathing character. She is 16, so it was also important to get that essence of the character. The story itself, what happens at the end, and above all, the setting - the old church - was enough to help me feel the connection with the eerie and the gothic of Poe's original. The key for me was to create a believable human being in a very difficult situation.

DAVID HUGH (The Raven in 'The Preacher and The Raven'): The Raven is, of course, the most "Poe-like" character in the production - but in human form. So my research centred on the poem, understanding who The Raven was to the doomed lover - and then in the wider

context of researching Poe and his work, and information I could locate on the background to the poem.

The Raven had to terrify the Preacher (and the audience) every time he appeared – to the point that the Preacher finally accepts his fate, and The Raven summons him back to hell.

This terror had to be generated through the physical appearance of The Raven, a “bird-like” quality, the way he moved, and his stillness...so the challenge was to create a person whose presence was extremely unsettling...

OWEN NOLAN (‘The Cask of Amontillado’): I am by no means an expert on Poe, indeed I have had only fleeting encounters with the author before being involved in the production of *Poe: Macabre Resurrections*. I am familiar enough with his work to know of the chilling nature of the stories. And so as a preparation for the part I found myself realizing that no matter what approach is taken there is a sense of the inevitability of impending doom. Although my character should not be aware of this notion at the start of the piece as the show has progressed I have found that the distance that he travels, from lecherous drunkard to a pathetic creature begging for his life, seems to have become greater. His journey is from arrogant confidence at the start to abject pathos. I have attempted to transmit to the audience the utter terror in my character at the end and how this has been transformed so quickly from his cocky demeanour at the start.

7. STEVEN BARFIELD: I wondered about the challenges and solutions you found as directors for these particular site-specific spaces used by each play both inside and outside the church. Did each director of a tale choose a particular space? How did sound, lighting costume design integrate into the whole directorial vision within and without the spaces? Could each director perhaps give some specific examples in answer to these two related questions?

SAM DAVIS MILLER, director, ‘The Pit and the Pendulum: I’ve already addressed this a little above, but really sound, lights and sound weren’t very important for ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’. Obviously for some of the other plays they are paramount – ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ in particular, but in the case of ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’, I wanted the focus to be on Priyank’s performance as Maheen. Every element we introduced to accentuate what he was doing ended up taking away from it instead, and the show evolved from a fairly sound and light heavy piece to one with two lighting cues and three sound cues. This isn’t to denigrate the excellent work done by our sound and lighting experts; it’s just that I’ve always felt we should be able to do our plays without any tech at all, and for it to still be just as effective. We’re half-expecting the power to fail us at some point during the run, and to be obliged to perform the entire evening in candles and torchlight – in some ways I think we might even be hoping for this. It would certainly be atmospheric!

JOHN KACHOYAN, director ‘Premature Burial’: For me one of the challenges of ‘Premature Burial,’ being the only outdoor piece, was to make it feel a bit found, stumbled-upon, to make it a surprise. That is why the audience are led there by the Preacher. I didn’t want you to round the corner and see a stage or prepared area, this story could happen anywhere, could be happening anywhere...and that meant being quite subtle with most of the effects; keeping the light low as if spilling from the church and the sound just hinting, at the edges of the world. Rob and I both felt that anything that looked ‘stagey’ would pull you out

of the world and the story, make you wonder where the equipment was. The grave itself was perhaps the biggest challenge, without giving too much away, it was really the key to this surprise and solutions ranged from elaborate to very simple. We thankfully settled on simple, a reveal which is quite startling, but still unexpected and organic – nothing fancy if you will. This is a play of language and character, and the beautiful setting is nothing without the actors knowing the relationships and telling a story – that's all the design elements and indeed my direction attempted to do – just tell this wonderful new/old story.

YOLANDA FERRAT, director 'The Cask of Amontillado': My first discussion with Andy highlighted our shared desire to make the audience feel like they were inside the tunnel with the characters of 'The Cask of Amontillado'. Rather than try to design the look of a tunnel, I wished for them to share the feeling of being in a tunnel. From this starting point, it was a matter of exploring the church to find the space that could help tell that story. Before they enter the tunnel we have the chance to establish these characters through costume and physical mannerisms, once in the tunnel we shift the focus onto what the audience hears. The sound designer chose to use deep bass sounds, the kind you feel physically as well as hear to augment this. The lighting for this second part of the piece is in the hands (quite literally via a hand-held torch) of one of the actors, making its presence directly tied to the action.

8. STEVEN BARFIELD: I wished to ask how you approached the interplay between the gothic elements and features of many of the stories (the gothic as a form often hides its political and social anxieties beneath its eerie surface) on the one hand, and what on the other hand was for myself and many in the audience the real surprise of the evening: the existence of contemporary political contextualisations of these reworked tales as provided by several of the writers?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: I think that many people came to the show not knowing quite what to expect! I think the audience reactions so far have been nearly unanimously approving and delighted –with perhaps the exception of one 'Poe purist' who left the church midway through 'The Pit and the Pendulum' exclaiming 'I didn't come to watch a play about bloody Arabs!'

I actually think that it's accurate to describe the torture of human beings, war and the murder of **anyone** as falling into what can be depicted through the category of the 'modern gothic'. It isn't necessary for the 'modern gothic' to be all sweetness and *Twilight*. It potentially touches all of us - our deepest fears which we'd rather not face. But we are often able to remove ourselves from any true sense of responsibility for or implication in such events and instead safely admire the 'architecture' of the gothic tales and characters on offer from a comfortable, aesthetic distance. This is one reason why in 'The Cask of Amontillado' we try remove that barrier between events and the audience and press the audience up as tightly as possible with the two characters.

SAM DAVIS MILLER, director 'The Pit and the Pendulum': For me, I always get irritated when an audience member expects to see a period piece – for instance people who become annoyed when Shakespeare isn't in doublet and hose, or Ibsen doesn't have 19th Century Norwegian costumes. Writers don't generally write for a period, they write for a period they know. If Poe was around today, would he be setting his stories (whatever format he would find himself using today!) in the 19th Century? I seriously doubt it. Although some of his

stories, like the original 'The Pit and the Pendulum', are set in a particular period of time, many are set in the world he knew. It was important to us to find a 'modern horror' – to ask the question, "What are *we* afraid of?" In 'The Pit and the Pendulum', Jacob (the writer) and I wanted to find the nearest modern equivalent to the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition, and we hit upon the tortures and indignities meted out to 'unlawful combatants' by the military. In 'the masque of the Red Death', Prospero is a banker – the modern equivalent of a count who reaps the rewards while the poor suffer. But equally, we didn't want to lose the Gothic. In 'The Cask of Amontillado' and 'The Black Cat', and especially in 'The Preacher and the Raven;' we kept some of the feeling and atmosphere of Poe's original work. I think that what we've achieved is a blend – enough of the Gothic to keep the atmosphere, but modern stories that resonate with our audience's own lives and experiences. Audience reaction to the updating has been interesting; by and large people have been very positive, but we have had a couple of strong negative reactions, most notably one man who left 'The Pit and the Pendulum' while pronouncing racial slurs regarding the ethnicity of our actor. You can't please everybody.

MIA ZARA ('The Black Cat'): 'The Pit and The Pendulum' and 'Premature Burial' especially, have adapted the political headlines of modern time. To me it simply shows the nature of today's violence and for those involved in it, their lives mirrors Poe's macabre characters, such as the pleasures that arise from doing wrong. Poe's work is ageless and the proof lies in the adaptations of all the plays. As long as there is interest in human stream of conscientiousness, focusing on the darker side of the mind and as long as we are brave enough to reveal them, then we become one step closer to the characters that live in Poe's imagination.

JOHN KACHOYAN, director 'Premature Burial': Rob's political updates were a great joy when I first read the adaptation – and one of the lovely coincidences of a multi-writer, multi-director show has been some the synchronicity between seemingly unrelated adaptations. There's something about our modern consciousness of terror (in all its forms) that links to the politics of now. Abu Graib, special renditions, domestic terrorism and sanctions feed and feed on our fears.

STEPHEN CONNERY BROWN ('The Preacher and the Raven'): Reconciling the gothic elements and the contemporary political contextualisations of the reworked tales was not difficult at all. As an actor emotions and feelings have a greater currency than logic - and the horror, terror, pain and retribution in the Poe tales are very present and even more real, immediate and accessible in the contemporary updatings—not in spite of, but because we are so familiar with the events.

YOLANDA FERRAT, director 'The Cask of Amontillado': 'The Cask of Amontillado' adaptation introduces sex as the motivation behind its action. While a new twist to this particular story, it's nothing new to gothic work! The original *Cask* story deals with pure revenge, we're not given any motivation but we're told that one exists. The dramatic adaptation needed motivation, but we didn't want to belabour this tight, mysterious, unapologetic story with a big backstory. Sex does this: its energy tells you what you need to know without having to explain itself. Connecting the original revenge to another raw urge highlights the base human instincts that are really at the heart of the piece, whether set in ancient Italy, or perhaps after a modern corporate soiree.

9. STEVEN BARFIELD: I liked the use of framing device of the preacher's story as the overall frame of the tales we saw and this gave it something of a *Tales from the Crypt* type feel?⁶ Could someone say something about how this came about and why a framing narrative seemed to make sense in terms of the collection of performances of tales as a whole?

ROB JOHNSTON, writer of 'The Preacher and The Raven': I wrote the framing story. The production was always going to have a framing story, partly to mimic *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, etc, but also to help bring the five tales together into a single piece.⁷ With so many different writing/directing/performance styles it was essential to have a consistent 'spine' throughout. And from a practical perspective the framing story character also allowed us to direct the audience around the space (and deliver essential health and safety info!) without breaking out of the drama.

The idea of using a Peter Cushing⁸ type character to link the five tales and also to have his own tale was agreed on from the start. And it is a bit of a tradition of 'compendium stories' to draw the main characters from the audience, (in this case the audience is the 'congregation' seated in the pews) so that format was also agreed early on.

The idea of having a preacher lead us through the evening came quickly because of the church setting. He soon became a 'fallen preacher' with demons of his own, initially in the 'whisky-priest' tradition of Trevor Howard (and Graham Greene's novels).⁹ This soon became the gentle parish vicar we arrived at (especially after casting) haunted by his guilt at some unnamed crime, and visited by an emissary of Death intent on retribution.

Once it was decided that extracts from Poe's 'The Raven' would be read by the preacher then the preacher's nemesis just had to be The Raven. It was suggested during writing that The Raven could be played by an actor rather than exist only in the preacher's imagination and this enabled us to develop interplay between the two and for The Raven to deliver the final words to the preacher as he descends into Hell.

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: We'd toyed with a number of framing devices. In fact, thinking about it, I think the whole project wouldn't have happened were it not for this clear starting point. I'm a huge fan of Hammer and Amicus films –but especially

⁶*Tales from the Crypt* was originally an EC comic that ran from October/November 1950 (issue no. 20) and finished its run after twenty-seven issues in February/March 1955 (issue no. 46), due to pressure from US censors. See Franklin Harris, 'The Long Gory Life of EC Comics: Why the Crypt-Keeper Never Dies', *Reason*, June 2005, available online at:

<http://reason.com/archives/2005/06/01/the-long-gory-life-of-ec-comic>. This comic series gave rise to similar *portmanteau* collections of horror stories in television and film. A TV series ran on HBO between 1989 to 1996 called *Tales from the Crypt*. The *Tales from the Crypt* that is being referred to here is a British feature film, made in 1972, which featured some stories adapted from the original comics and which was produced by Amicus and directed by Freddie Francis.

⁷*Vault of Horror*, directed Roy Ward Baker, 1973, Amicus, UK.

⁸British actor, 1913-1994, was famous for his work in horror films, especially for Britain's Hammer studios. He formed a famous on screen partnership in the days of Hammer's greatest successes with actor Christopher Lee, 1922-present.

⁹Trevor Howard, 1913-1988, a celebrated British actor who played a memorable 'whisky priest' in *Ryan's Daughter* (dir. David Lean, 1970). Graham Greene first used the term 'whisky priest' in his 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, here the unnamed Mexican priest is an alcoholic and guilty of other failings, in this case having fathered a child with a parishioner.

the greatest portmanteau of them all: 'Dead of Night'.¹⁰ It was always essential to me that the stories should have a link –a thread that would somehow join them –and afford us contact and connection with the audience. After a number of false starts we turned to Rob Johnston ('Premature Burial') who, in a few short days came through with the first draft, creating the beautiful and fractured character of 'The Preacher' –and the equally disturbing 'Raven'. It's one of my favourite pieces in the whole production actually –mainly because it takes me back to those long scary nights in front of our black and white telly watching characters very closely resembling Stephen Connery Brown (The Preacher) and David Hugh (The Raven).

10. Last, (at least in terms of the performance) I wanted to ask do you think this is a performance that Second Skin will revive in the future – with something this site specific, do you think it could only be performed in this particular church, or would it be suitable touring to other spaces and perhaps even to traditional theatres in the UK? Obviously as the performance has been so successful we all hope it will be revived in some form?

ANDY McQUADE, artistic director Second Skin: Well, Steve, we're only halfway through this production! When I think about all the sleepless nights, three long intense months, and the momentous amount of work involved with this project (rewiring the whole church with lights and a PA just to get started with) my answer would have to be 'no'. But that's because you're asking me right now... Ask me the same question when I've rested and recovered –it may well be different.

That said, we're already discussing the transfer of two of the stand-alone shows to Europe in Solo Festivals –and it would be a tragedy of the play as a whole was not even published. There is some blisteringly good writing in there that I believe should be available permanently for any other theatre company to work their own form of magic with and keep the spirit of Poe alive. His legacy belongs to all of us and not just the costume department.

SAM DAVIS MILLER director, 'The Pit and the Pendulum': From my perspective, I don't actually think it would make any sense to shift the production to a separate location. Our reviews have all said that the church is the star of the show, and I completely agree with this. There is something wonderful about performing these pieces in the pews that Poe would have sat in, and it would lose magic to take it somewhere else. Given that we're in the business of trying to create that feeling, to go against it would be unwise. I think that there's definitely scope for reviving the evening in the church, however – it's been increasingly popular, and I think we'd have the potential to fill at least a few more weeks, or perhaps to bring the evening back when it's not quite as cold...?

MIA ZARA ('The Black Cat'): I would love to tour with the play. There is enough scope to develop each individual story into a full length play. As such, the story would be suitable for more traditional theatre space as well.

Having said that, the project of six stories as it is today, works brilliantly at St. Mary's, purely since it is the ground where Poe himself visited and worshiped. This alone gives me as an

¹⁰*Dead of Night*, directed Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden and Robert Hamer., 1945, Ealing Studios, UK.

actor an amazing significance. It would perhaps be an idea to research other establishments Poe has lived and breathed in and adapt the stories for there.

David Hugh (The Raven in 'The Preacher and The Raven'): It would be wonderful if this production could be revived in the future. I don't think it is necessarily "site specific" - but I do believe it would need to be performed in a church that is similar to this one. Part of the appeal for the audience, I am sure, lies in the atmosphere of this church, the inter-action between the actors and the audience and their involvement in the production in different areas of the church.

As such, I do not believe this would translate very well to a traditional "stage" production.

OWEN NOLAN ('The Cask of Amontillado'): In general, the show is quite site-specific and it could not transfer to another venue and remain intact. Other buildings similar to St Mary's could be used, but clearly adaptations would have to be made and so a different show would emerge. Poe's writing is so powerful; however, it could still be an excellent show. If the show were to take place in an establishment intended for more traditional theatre it would take the imaginations of a very creative set designer and a director to come up with something that would produce similar effects.

11. STEVEN BARFIELD: Anne, one of the question I wanted to ask you specifically (as I know you have co-edited a recent book on the subject), is about the general relationship and attraction between the gothic and London.¹¹ It seems to me to be very much flagged up in a performance like this, particularly as it is set within an Elizabethan church, St Mary's, that Poe must have known when he lived in the area as a child. Why is it so common to see London as some kind of ideal gothic setting?

ANNE WITCHARD: Well perhaps for audiences today it's because the chief medium of the gothic has been film. In the twentieth century, cinema made icons of characters from late-19th-century fiction set in 'Darkest London,' Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray, and that Transylvanian interloper, Count Dracula. A cinematic iconography of London – swirling pea-souper fogs, dense mazes of alleyways, glimmering yellow gas-lamps, and opium dens hidden in the dockside labyrinths of Poplar and Limehouse – would become an instant signifier for Victorian London's association with gothic confinement and claustrophobia. The authors of these gothic fictions, Stevenson, Wilde and Stoker, were indebted, as Poe was, to Charles Dickens and his truly gothicky descriptions of London, starting in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *Oliver Twist* (1838). The British Hammer and Amicus films mentioned by the directors, when they are set in London are a British continuation of that tradition. And today this notion of a peculiarly London gothic is more popular than ever. One marker of this is the way a very replete and detailed gothic Victorian London was recreated in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). The recent explosion in television and film adaptations of neo-Victorian fiction is further proof of this, Sarah Waters' novels, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998; filmed 2002), *Fingersmith* (2002; filmed 2008) and *Affinity* (1999; filmed 2008), for example, and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002; filmed 2011), exploit this

¹¹ Anne Witchard and Lawrence Phillips (eds.), *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination* (Continuum 2010) For details of Anne Witchard see her web page <http://2009.westminster.ac.uk/schools/humanities/english,-linguistics-and-cultural-studies/people/english-literature/witchard,-anne>. Another recent book on the subject of gothic London is Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London*. (Palgrave 2010). A path-finding article in this critical tradition is that of Roger Luckhurst (2002): 'The contemporary London Gothic and the limits of the 'spectral turn'', *Textual Practice*, 16:3, 527-546.

fascination we have with a London gothic, especially through their re-workings of the eroticism created by sexual repression and the resultant pleasure of transgression against what were once much stricter social conventions.

12. STEVEN BARFIELD: And secondly (I also know you spoke at the Stoke Newington Literary festival recently), whether you think there is anything particularly gothic about the area of Stoke Newington, bearing in mind the associations it has with Poe living here as a child and attending primary school, and that other gothic/ decadent writer Arthur Machen (1863-1947), whose story 'N' is famously set in this same area, Stoke Newington: ¹²

Iain Sinclair by the way made an intriguing claim in a 2009 'lecture' ('London's Lost Rivers: The Hackney Brook and Other North West Passages') that the locale of dear old Stokey is so weird and mysterious because it follows the line of the long lost Hackney Brook river. ¹³ And hence in Sinclair's book *Hackney: That Rose Red Empire: A Confidential Report* (2009), he journeys to Stoke Newington, like a psychogeographer with a mental dowsing stick, following what he imagines is the line of that river ('Abney Park, Clissold Park, pubs named after Robinson Crusoe') as if Stoke Newington is the kind of uncanny outer-limits of Hackney proper. ¹⁴

ANNE WITCHARD: Poe was a little orphaned boy, adopted and then brought from Massachusetts to England, aged eight, where he attended the Manor House school for a short while (three years) in what was then the sleepy village of Stoke Newington on the outskirts of North London. For me, what is gothic about Stoke Newington has far less to do with Poe's brief childhood association with the place, between 1817 and 1820, than with what I refer to in the *London Gothic* book as a mid-Victorian Suburbophobia. Just as much as its inner urban slums, North London's spiralling new suburban terraces in places like Stoke Newington were locations of fear and loathing for mid and late-Victorians. Countless tales of horror were set in what were seen as these ghostly stucco outposts. While it might surprise us today in a much larger London, these really were for Londoners of the time the outer limits of civilisation for a respectable bourgeoisie. Housing the swelling ranks of the lower-middle class, suburban development was pictured as a devouring cancer, representative of a social upheaval that suggested the impending moral collapse of England. By the time of Machen's story 'N' (1935) the assault of modernity on the past glories of London is figured in Stoke Newington's

¹²Poe's most important revisiting of his memory of Stoke Newington is in his classic doppelgänger story, 'William Wilson'. The text of Arthur Machen's 'N' a short story/novella concerning a fragment of earthly paradise that has somehow become hidden in Stoke Newington, is available in various collections, such as Arthur Machen, *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural: Volume 2*, (Pinnacle Books 1976) 128-156, and also as an illustrated book, Arthur Machen, *N*, (Tartarus Press UK, 2010). Available outside UK online: <http://93beast.fea.st/files/section2/machen/N.pdf>. See also Amanda Mordavsky Caleb, "'A City of Nightmares": Suburban Anxiety in Arthur Machen's London Gothic' in Anne Witchard and Lawrence Phillips (2010) 41-50 *op. cit.*. 'N' refers continually to Edgar Allan Poe's 'lost' school in Stoke Newington, the site is now occupied by the Fox Reformed Wine Bar and Restaurant, 176 Stoke Newington Church St, London N16 0JL.

¹³Iain Sinclair. 'London's Lost Rivers: The Hackney Brook and other North West Passages', Gresham College, Monday, 22 June 2009 available online at: <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/london%E2%80%99s-lost-rivers-the-hackney-brook-and-other-north-west-passages>

¹⁴For psychogeography see, Steven Barfield (ed.) 'Psychogeography: Will Self and Iain Sinclair in conversation with Kevin Jackson', in *Literary London: Interdisciplinary studies in the representation of London*, 6, 1, March 2008. Available online: <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2008/sinclair-self.html>.

blocks of flats in 'wicked red brick,' buildings that 'curdled the blood: in their purpose and their architecture'.¹⁵

13. STEVEN BARFIELD: Turning to Poe himself now, I wondered as someone who teaches his work if you had any thoughts as to why he is still so popular as a gothic writer with contemporary readers and audiences – not only do people still devour the books, they continue to adapt them into films and comics, and in this particular case, Second Skin Theatre have used them as a stepping stone to create these very exciting and frequently surprising modern day theatre texts (I guess this is why they are called 'macabre resurrections')? Do your own students still find Poe exciting and chilling?

ANNE WITCHARD: I think Poe remains popular because his work is rooted in the psychological, his tales explore the enigma of human emotion and the uncanny workings of fate. In a pre-Freudian era, his mouldering castles represent the psyches of their introspective inhabitants. The aesthetic trappings of his poetry and fiction, the dark draperies, ancient tomes, exotic pets and bizarre works of art, have a symbolic purpose, they are expressions of the unconscious and the irrational. This week I have been teaching Poe's most famous tale, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' in which the physical decay and eventual collapse of the house might be understood as a metaphor for the psychological disintegration of Roderick Usher. The 1960s film *The Haunting* (1963, dir. Robert Wise) is based on this idea, as is, incidentally, Sarah Waters' most recent novel *The Little Stranger* (2009). Yes, I think students today still find Poe unnerving and enjoyable because of this.

14. STEVEN BARFIELD: Lastly, I just wondered as you are someone who researches the gothic genre, if you had any thoughts about the very interesting concept that Second Skin came up with for this new show of asking young writers today to take famous gothic tales, in this case those of Poe, and to update them as it were to deal with today's world and our own issues (some of the re-workings invoke or allude to the war in Afghanistan, the operations of special rendition and secret imprisonment in places like Abu Ghraib, fascism and the fear of riots by a disenfranchised underclass and so forth). Do you think this could become a trend in reworking famous existing gothic fiction? Or is it perhaps just an explicit version of a process that has occurred mysteriously and cryptically in the gothic genre from the time it started (for example, I often think Poe's own 'William Wilson' (1839) is really a version of James Hogg's (1770-1835) *Confession of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and wonder if that in its turn is a version of another, older *doppelgänger* story)?¹⁶

ANNE WITCHARD: I think both of those things are true. I think the gothic works to express contemporary fears, troubles, traumas, it is always a reflection of its social moment. So perhaps what these contemporary reworking of the gothic tales of Poe show is some of our own contemporary fears, troubles and traumas, in a social moment that is marked by such

¹⁵As Arthur Machen writes in 'N': 'But on all the territory modernism had delivered its assault. The big houses remaining had been made into maisonettes, the small ones were down-at-heel, no longer objects of love; and everywhere there were blocks of flats in wicked red brick, as if Mrs. Todgers had given Mr. Pecksniff her notion of an up-to-date gaol, and he had worked out her design. Opposite Canon's Park, and occupying the site on which Mr. Glanville's house must have stood, was a technical college: next to it a school of economics. Both buildings curdled the blood: in their purpose and in their architecture. They looked as if Mr H.G. Wells bad dreams had come true'.

¹⁶The text was originally published anonymously as *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner: Written by Himself: With a detail of curious traditional facts and other evidence by the editor.* Hogg pretended to be the editor of the manuscript dating from the previous century that had only recently been discovered.

features as the legacy of the war on terror after 9/11 and the invasion and occupation of Iraq (in Jacob Hodgkinson's new version of 'The Pit and the Pendulum'); the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan (in Rob Johnston's new version of 'Premature Burial'); or what the recent riots in the UK indicate about the social effects of the economic crisis and the possible Fascist futures such events might produce (in Nadine Hearity's version of 'The Masque of the Red Death'). This doesn't mean older social fears are necessarily forgotten though - for example our anxiety towards alcoholism and about melancholia and madness is probably just as strong as it was in Poe's time, as shown in Mike Carter's reworking of 'The Black Cat'. However, his decision to re-position the story around the figure of a woman protagonist and narrator rather than a man (the performance directly represents the prose fiction's first person narration through being a solo dramatic monologue), perhaps shows how far gender equality has progressed. Richard Alden's largely faithful adaptation of 'The Cask of Amontillado' suggests we are also just as preoccupied as previous generations were with the puzzle of extreme cruelty through vengeance for a mysterious insult, although the fact that Montresor is now a young woman and Fortunato an older male gives this new version the *frisson* of some possible sexual politics. Is sexual slight or harassment the reason for her decision to immure her supposed friend in the cellar? Or is it for some kind of strange sadistic pleasure (hence the handcuffs)? Any theory of the gothic, be it the Sublime, the Uncanny, the Abject, shows us that we make monstrous what is beyond our understanding and since the events of 9/11 we've been subject to a series of tumultuous events and shocking narratives that are hard for anyone to make sense of or indeed, to know what long term consequences they will have.

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