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If In Doubt: editing, devising and Third Angel

Alexander Kelly

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1. A Postcard From (The) Paradise (Project).

Autumn 2014. We are making a new show with our friends, the Portuguese company, mala voadora. Back at the end of 2013 we did two weeks of R&D at Warwick Arts Centre, and in the ten months since then we've met a few times, and have been circulating ideas and texts by email and video call. We've not ruled anything out, but we have been prioritising ideas through audits of what we are, individually, more and less interested in. Now we regroup in Sheffield, and then Lisbon, for the 'final making', and some editing occurs by virtue of what everyone brings back into the room, and what they don't.

As ever, we have "too much" material, and, as ever, there is more than one possible version of the show. Our aim, of course, is to make something that none of us would make on their own. But all of those individual shows are in the room, in our heads; and they have to be let go of. We know this. But sometimes it's hard.

We're looking for a simple structure that can exist with the (terrifyingly wide) field of research we have been undertaking. At the moment we have a set of different, overlapping structures. We have texts that could exist in any version of the show, or, with a bit of tweaking, a couple of the versions, and some texts that define one particular structure. There are long discussions about what the show *is*, seeking the heart of the Venn diagram of our interests. Some of these discussions get reframed as potential material.

At some point a realisation: *that* idea, *that* section, *those* speeches, they're all the same show. But they're not *this* show. A number of section-title-index-cards are removed from the table. We look at the skeleton of a show that remains, revealed, in front of us. Is this the show? Or the basis of it? Maybe.

2. Lessons Learned in Film School

In an edit suite at the northern media school, Sheffield, there are two pieces of paper stuck on the wall. On one of them is written the phrase:

IF IN DOUBT, LEAVE IT OUT.

And on another:

IF YOU CAN'T WIN, LEAVE IT IN.

This is 1994, and I am studying film and video editing as part of my post-grad course in Film & TV production. I had applied to direct, but all of the directing places were full, and although I had a lot of experience of working with actors, I didn't have much filming experience, and so they offered me a place as an editor. I was a bit pissed off about their reasoning at the time, but retrospectively, I'm really pleased that I got to train as an editor.

We were taught by Derek Ingliss, who taught us a couple of key approaches, and then encouraged us to get as much practical experience as possible.

The first thing he taught us was this. Once all the film or video rushes are in the edit suite (we worked on film, and on video – the digital editing suites came in the following year), you make up an assembly cut – everything useable in the

'right' order. Then you make a story board cut, using the best version of each shot, and tell the story of the script in the way the director storyboarded it. Then you see what's wrong with it. Then you throw away the script ("Literally don't have a copy of the script in the edit suite!") and start again.

Because the script isn't your raw material. The rushes are the raw material because they include all of the discoveries made in performance, on set or on location, by the cast and crew. This is what you make the film out of. And even though it might feel that things are set because the images and the sound are all recorded, actually there are still discoveries to be made.

I'm sure that we would have been taught all this by most editors. But there were some other important things I gained during this course that were more individual.

We were taught that the editor's job is to "tell the story, protect the performance". You choose the take with the best performance in it, over a take with the better framing or better sound. The editor has great power over the actors' performance, simply by choosing a particular take over another, but also by what they juxtapose each shot with. He showed us the famous film of the woman looking hungry, scared, happy and so on, in which it's the same shot of the woman, edited with shots of food, a dark alley, a baby (or something like that).

Often, we were warned, the director will ask you to try something, and you will know it is a terrible idea. You will know in advance that it is not going to work. Because you know the rushes better than the director, and the director is still probably holding on to the script and the storyboard in their head. You will think that it is a waste of time to try it, but it will be quicker to just do it and show the director that it is a bad idea, than it will be to argue about it. It gets it out of the director's head, and the director will see why it doesn't work, and together you can have a better idea. And sometimes you will be wrong, and the director's idea will work, in a way you didn't expect, because the director doesn't know the rushes as well as you do, so is asking different questions.

Derek told us that in his mind there was just one right way to cut a scene together, and his job was to find it. And that probably, it was the shortest way that made sense. He told us his maxim was 'If in doubt, leave it out'. If you're not sure the scene needs it, then it probably doesn't. Get rid of it.

But in a conversation between the group of us (eight students I think?), the contrary argument was posited. If it works both ways, why not leave it in. Give the audience more to work with, more to respond to. Try it both ways. Leave it in – you can always take it out later.

I'm not sure I fully believe that there's just one right way to cut a scene, but the idea that the story (/film /structure /performance) is a problem to be solved is one that has stayed with me. A problem that we have set ourselves.

Similarly the idea that it's never too late to make a change to the structure is still current in Third Angel's process. *These things might work together now, at this stage of making, but in a week's time, when the overall structure, or frame of the show, has shifted – this section might make a different sense. We might need more, or less, of that.* Whilst the process for every project inevitably varies depending on the context in which we're making work, and who's in the room, this approach has stayed with us. We try out versions. We'll put stuff together deliberately, but also arbitrarily

("What happens if...?"), in order to discover things about the work we are making, about the problems we have set ourselves.

[Sidebar. Whilst I was at film school, Rachael Walton, Co-Artistic Director in Third Angel, was training to be a secondary school teacher. This training, and approach to speaking to a room full of people, brought another, equally important, influence into our making process, and performance style, but that's not the brief of this paper...]

3. What If It Works The Other Way Round?

When we were making *Presumption* in 2006, we (Rachael, Chris Thorpe and I) had two parallel strands. The show had started with Rachael's idea of a character/performer backing on to the stage carrying a tray of glasses, turning to put them on a table, and discovering in a crash of broken glass that not only was the table not there, there was no furniture/set at all.

She would then have to assemble the furniture on the stage, dragging it on from the wings, and figuring out where everything went by enacting snatches of a conversation/scene, in order to place the furniture in relation to the actions of the people who would use it. In the first version of the show, a 25 minute work in progress, this was a solo task. But in the later, full version of the show, the woman and the man would both undertake it.

We tried this task of bringing the furniture and props on in many ways – from overtly physical and theatrical to unassuming and entirely functional. What we particularly liked was the moment that always came when an apparently random collection of domestic objects would, with the addition of one more, suddenly feel like a room. We began to build up a menu of ways to bring the objects on, attitudes to the task, and started to design and build some bespoke pieces of furniture.

Alongside this, we worked on the characters and their relationship. Improvising conversations between them and other text generating exercises, describing their back stories, writing letters between them, inviting them to talk to the audience about what was going on. Our menu of material about their lives, and the central questions of the show, built up to be several hours of material. Like many devising processes, we log sections we're interested in – material that is 'in play' – on index cards, or post it notes, or pieces of torn A4. These will be stored in columns taped to the wall, to remind us what we've got, and to enable us to experiment with different orders.

With *Presumption*, with only a couple of weeks to go, we couldn't get any order to work. Because we couldn't get the two strands to work together. One person struggling on with a living room's worth of stuff and occasionally hiding some jigsaw pieces under a sofa cushion had seemed good fun. But as soon as you knew there was a second person in the wings, the immediate thought was "Why aren't they helping?" The task of the show didn't make sense.

We had planned that the show would only give the audience fragments of the large body of material we had about the couple's life together, through the device of each piece of furniture triggering a small moment of dialogue or action in order to check it's position. Whilst we enjoyed the tone of this (rather like doing a speed line-run after a couple of weeks off), it didn't allow for much variation, or indeed for the sharing of much material. After a fairly depressing run one Friday afternoon, we looked at the huge list of sections up on the wall, and the rehearsal room full of furniture, and we knew it wasn't working.

With each project we're looking for the frame of the show; the rules, the task. What's the level of fiction? What's the performers' relationship with the audience? How is the story told? Once we have that mechanism, we are able to start ordering the material, start cutting stuff out and looking for gaps.

The following Monday morning Rachael came in and said, "What if it works the other way round? What if, instead of each piece of furniture prompting a little bit of text, they try to play out a scene, have a conversation, and each time they need to sit somewhere, or use something, they have to stop and go and get it? And then start again?"

And in that thought, we had the show. We understood the mechanism by which the two strands could interact, and by lunch time we had the first half of the show assembled. We chose the one long, late night conversation that they would attempt (and therefore knew we didn't need three or four others). We realised that the 'line-run' energy that we liked so much was the way in to the restarts and repeats, and that it needed to develop into the same text being played with very different attitudes. We understood which asides and audience aware sections were required, and we knew what needed to be different in the second half, as the narrative moves into the next day, and becomes more concerned with the future.

4. Finding the End

Sometimes the end is very clear. Sometimes the beginning and the end are the first things in place. But sometimes it's not so obvious. We have a rehearsal room shorthand: *Lord Of The Rings*. An epic novel is allowed (needs?) multiple endings to tie up multiple strands. Often we have several attractive endings, but they only work as endings. You can have both/all three.

And sometimes, you don't realise a section contains the end, because it isn't the end of that section. In the first 4 performances of *The Lad Lit Project*, after the penultimate section, *How To Remove A Human Brain*, we had a section about how to end the show. I posited several ways to finish, but chose none of them.

We all knew it was over, but I was still standing on stage talking.

"We should cut that final section." But the end of the removing a brain story didn't feel like the end of the show, because it talked about what happens afterwards to the whole body. But the first image of the show is an MRI scan of my brain. It's obvious when you see it. Cut the stuff that happens afterwards, as well, and finish with the statistics.

"2% brain.

Thank you for listening."

**

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