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Inspiration Exchange: The Value of Sitting Opposite
5th Draft, 10 March 2013
(a few minor tweaks from v4)

Words: 1,543 = ? pages

1. Currency

The currency of an *Inspiration Exchange* is stories. Story titles are written onto A6, branded (or “watermarked”) and dated cards. At the start of the day I select the stories I would like to swap – these stories are my own, or have been given to me in previous Exchanges - and I write out the titles. Each day is its own exchange, but also part of one longer conversation. I set out the furniture, lay out the room to be welcoming.

The engine of the exchange is a one-to-one story swap. Choose a title you like the sound of, and I'll tell you the story behind it. The deal is that you agree to tell me a story in return. Perhaps you already know what you would like to trade, perhaps you will wait to hear what I tell you before you decide. I pay you attention as you tell me your story, it would be rude not to. And I need to be able to retell your story, later. It's mine to share now.

You write your title on a card, and we swap them, just like we did with Figurine Panini stickers in the playground when we were kids. This physical exchange is important to me. Of course you still have your story, and I still have mine, but now I have licence to tell it. A promise to pay the bearer. If I retell your story, I will re-evaluate it. Tell my version, place my emphasis. I will take from it what I remember, what I value, and that's what I'll pass on.

2. Swaps

I swap THE IDEA OF A RETRONYM
for ECTOPLASM IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

I swap HOW THE CHURCH BELLS WORK
for DENDROCHRONOLOGY

I swap EMPTY BENCHES
for DESIRE PATHS

I swap A 6B PENCIL
for TOO MUCH HEAT ALTERS YOUR PERCEPTION
I swap TOO MUCH HEAT ALTERS YOUR PERCEPTION
for BUILDING HOSPITALS

I swap A BOTTLE OF MARBLES
for A BOX OF MARBLES

At some point I say to someone, "Pick one that sounds good." And then I think what a stupid thing that is to say. People don't know what they're getting. The titles are just starting points: clues, or decoys. I think about the disappointment - for them and for me - when someone picks THE WRONG CARD, and gets a story that they're not that interested in.

Most of the sources of inspiration are positive things. Inspiring things! But a couple are not: they're bureaucracy or idiocy that led to an idea for a new piece of work.

Sarah is visibly frustrated that THE HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIM SYSTEM is, as she suspected, not at all inspiring, but rather baffling and unhelpful. She had been hoping for a positive in this, but is in fact upset by personal associations

with the coldness and inflexibility of this system. Yes, I did find inspiration in this – it made its way into a show, but I only share that as a fact. So what I have given her, I realise, what she gets to take away, is not actually very inspiring at all. I feel fraudulent. Like I've given her a fake bank note. Perhaps, I think later, it is time to take this one out of circulation.

Because there is a gamble here. Obviously. Is it worth that gamble, for when it pays off? What is a story worth? Is the story I give worth the same to you as it is to me? Impossible to say. Worth the same as the story I get in return? *Inspiration Exchange* is at its most affecting when someone gets a story more personally resonant than they expected, and this in turn encourages them to share something important, something it feels a privilege to receive.

Rachel sits at the table with two or three others. After listening to someone else's exchange, she considers the cards and chooses THE INSIDE OF A SAXOPHONE. This story starts with a series of endoscopic photographs, by the artist Andy Eccleston, of the insides of musical instruments, and then progresses into the cataloguing of my body using a multitude of technologies, concluding with Magnetic Resonance Imaging. This is not where Rachel expected this story to go. She explains the personal connection she has with such medical technology, and then carefully tells me a story she calls LETTING GIRLS BE.

Later, after the exchange, I ask Rachel about her experience of it. She writes:

The title doesn't mention mothers; I deliberately dodge the handful of cards which contain parents or daughters, picking one which appeals because I can't guess where the inspiration in the story might be. But the saxophone sings an MRI song, so the thing I'm avoiding is right there: a brassy coincidence.

So I, slightly thrown, accept the connection but try to turn it, too: another kind of exchange. I give you a memory of her, her long before the tumour, the her I'd rather remember.

& you ask if I'm happy for you to retell this story, & I think if I say no you'll probably break your rules for me. & this capitulation, this care, is more than enough, & of course, you can tell the story, although I'm glad I can't stay to hear you speak it.

But the next time I'm blindsided by grief's coincidences, there's a saxophone memory of the small significant kindnesses that conversation can perform.

3: A Conversation Generator

It isn't entirely a one-to-one conversation. It can be, but usually there are other people present. When you tell your story, you will have an audience – or, when the exchange is at its best, more people to share the conversation with.

Making space and finding time. Sitting opposite. Playing conversation - talking and listening. Over the years, alongside our end-on seated-audience theatre work, Third Angel has returned to the exploration of a mode of performance built on conversation, or interview, with individual audience members. Performance in as much as you know more about what's going to happen than they do. But their interaction is what makes the work. Making the performance involves making the space in which the audience member is encouraged to be creative. A space in which they feel comfortable enough to think about things, talk about things that at, say, 10 o'clock that morning, they hadn't thought about for days, weeks, years. A space in which, at the end of it, they feel comfortable enough to say of what they have given you, 'Yes, that's fine, I'm happy for you to share that with other people.'

In these interactive pieces, the key is to find a clear mechanism that allows the conversation to happen. When we're making work we're looking for the right frame, or form, to best explore the ideas we're interested in. The form that adds something, that articulates something that another form wouldn't. In this case a form that allows sharing. That is sharing.

No-one asks for "SUNDAY WAS ALWAYS A GOOD DAY"

No-one asks for BUILDINGS AS TIME-TRAVELLERS

No-one asks for SNAKES & LADDERS: A GAME OF CHANCE

No-one asks for MULTI-STOREY MAPS

No-one asks for 01369 8670212

No-one asks for 36 DAYS LOOKING FOR STUFF IN THE FRIDGE

4. The Room

Inspiration Exchange is the most direct of these projects. If no one requests a story, nothing happens. The layout of the room is important here. The Exchange can pop up in pretty much any space it is given. It needs to feel relatively enclosed, safe, but be open and visible enough to encourage people to enter. The cards sit on a surface, usually a table. And it seems to me that the Exchange works best when the table serves as a focus, and we can all sit around it – the stories – the currency – central.

When the Exchange is running well, my role feels like that of curator of the conversation. That conversation can wander off in different directions. People ask questions of each other, tell a story related to the one they've just heard, and the conversation moves around the room. When I can feel it beginning to slow or dip, I bring it back to the cards on the table and bounce it back out in to the room. The new story from the cards feeds into the mix of ideas that are already there in the discussion. Another ball to be kept aloft.

And then people leave, or the new story is such a break, the Exchange feels like it has been reset, and we set off in a different direction. But those ideas we've just been talking about are resting on the table, waiting to be chosen again, later that day or in another Exchange, ready to feed into another conversation.

You can, of course, sit in the Exchange for several hours and not give a story, just listen to other people's. Or join in the discussion without actually swapping your own story. It is open like this to encourage people who might be a bit shy. To give inspiration time to strike. And usually it does. But a few people just listen. Spending time in the room. With the work. Paying attention. It's hard to state how much that's worth.