

The following article was written for *The Skeleton Key* published by Action Transport Theatre.

The Skeleton Key is for writers, directors, teachers, students and anyone interested in making new plays which have a writer at the heart of the process. The book contains contributions from some of the UK's leading writers and companies working in young people's theatre. It offers an insight into how leading professional theatre makers practice their craft.

To order a copy of the book or for more information please visit <http://www.actiontransporttheatre.co.uk/>

Lockpickers – The Skeleton Key

For a professional theatre company like Half Moon, which engages specifically with young people from birth to 17, our responsibility is to engage meaningfully and respond honestly to our audiences and participants, and to grow and change accordingly. Those who do not do this will produce and present theatre work, which is at best boring, at worst irrelevant. But how is this achieved? Young people are, of course, as diverse as the world within which they live, be it globally or be it locally. The common thread theatre-makers must recognise is a young person's right to participate actively in their world and, by so doing influence our own creativity. As a result, Half Moon recognises its part – however small – in opening up this process, by breaking down the barriers that stop participation as a result of culturally, socio-economic, or practical and philosophical restraints in the case of young disabled people. When an arts organisation like Half Moon offers the space, time and resources, we must also engage openly with a young people's mindset. Where this happens, the interface can become an inspirational, dynamic and creative catalyst, both for the young people themselves as they make their own work as well as importantly for the professional artists with whom they engage to create new and meaningful theatre. It is at such moments that innovative, startling and sector-moving pieces of work are conceived. *Locked In* by Fin Kennedy, like many of our commissions, began at one of these moments: where the authentic voice of our community and our audiences spoke directly to an artist who had the skills to frame and broker their stories and aspirations into a piece of theatre. This, surely, is where the real writing begins.

Over the past 3 years our writers have emerged from our 'pool' of freelance artists. These artists have been attracted to Half Moon because of our work and have been employed as workshop leaders across our participatory portfolio – working in our schools, our youth theatres and so on. They all have 3 things in common. They are wanting to:

- ◆ explore and place language at the heart of their creativity;
- ◆ engage with the emotional maturity of our young audiences;
- ◆ understand and work in direct contact and consultation with young people during a writing development period.

Usually, as tutors, they will have already written short plays for the young people to perform themselves – *Performance works* and *Scriptworks* being our most popular programmes. Here, we place the writer alongside an experienced theatre tutor and designer for up to 16 hours of direct contact with young people in an after-school or in-school, holiday or other youth context. At the end of this process, a 'play' is presented by the young people to their peers, the script published – albeit in a simple photocopied booklet format. At this point, a writer may well have something they want to say. Importantly, the writer has been inspired by the young people to tell 'their' story. It is at this point that a writer will be offered a commission.

Commissioning at this time may simply be:

- ◆ a 'translation' of the 12 or 20 hander 'play' into a more focussed small-scale piece often to be realised by 2 to 4 actors;
- ◆ simple treatments of ideas based on the encounter or similar experiences and observations;
- ◆ a selection of script extracts equally inspired.

These are offered up to our young people once again through our range of participatory programmes to explore, pull apart or to be used as a stimulus for their own creative work. Their reaction and response is observed by the writer. The creative continuum has begun - a fusion between the participatory work and the writer's creative processes. In due course, a full script will emerge. This will be read to focus groups in our local schools, or presented as rehearsed readings for our youth theatres to critique. Although at the end - usually having produced 4 drafts in total - Half Moon would want the option to produce the play as one of our 2 annual national tours; it is the process and the nurturing of writers that underpins the work with writers. Producing the commission is not the overbearing goal. Such pressures can stifle innovation and reduce risk-taking.

To date 17 writers have participated as 'writers-on-attachment' with the company, and importantly Half Moon always pays the writer for their time whenever they participate. The process moves forward as quickly or as slowly as is required. If the play is produced, as with *Locked In*, the process doesn't end at the performance. The play in turn acts as the stimulus for our young people to create their own work. So *Locked In* was presented to an audience, which included our senior (15-17 year olds) youth theatre. The group in turn presented *Locked Out* - a 30-minute reflection on the life of the central characters post the death of Zahida through the eyes of a series of external characters affected by their story. As a result, new 'stories' have been seeded, reflecting upon grief and depression. These sit alongside other work in development, which include, for example, exploring martyrdom in contemporary London, body image in young men and female sexuality. Exploring is important, as the plays should not be 'about' an issue, but rather through presenting true human stories, authentically reflecting young peoples' worlds.

It is within this context that *Locked In* emerged. Over a 3 and half year period, with myself as the Dramaturg, initially as a series of monologues developed through a *Scriptworks* programme with Year 10 students from Mulberry Girls School, E1 (*East End Tales*); to *B-Minor*, a short play looking at a suicide bombing in Leicester Square through the eyes of 3 bystanders, used as a stimulus for *Careers-in-Theatre* (a Borough-wide Y10 'play in a day' programme); repeated with extracts from draft 1 of *Locked In* for the same programme a year later; then a full reading of draft 2 to Half Moon's senior youth theatre quickly followed by a full rehearsed reading for Year 11 students at Swanlea Community School, E1 of draft 3; the unexpected influence of the London bombings on July 7th 2005; a full script development day with actors and the designated director for the production, Angela Michaels, and then the inevitable edits and re-works as the play is rehearsed.

So what of the play itself? *Locked In* toured nationally from September through November 2006. The world is set on the 20th floor of an abandoned East End tower block, where a Caribbean MC (Blaze) and Bengali DJ (Tariq) rip up the airwaves on a leading pirate station. These two 16 year olds are sick of people telling them what to do - go to school, do your exams - and that people don't recognise their talent or understand them. Their first CD, sold in the school canteen, was a massive hit and they're all set to hit the big time with their first live set at Exile FM's birthday bash coming up. Then Zahida (of mixed race Pakistani-Trinidadian heritage) comes into their lives. She is a great MC herself. A local gangster Rob asks Blaze for a serious favour, to hide a package because he's getting some heat from the police. Blaze tries to impress Zahida by using his earnings from Rob to buy her an expensive camera for her photography course at college. But Tariq opens the package and it turns out to be a gun. The gun becomes an evil fourth character in the room, exerting its power and influence over the boys. Tariq has started hanging around with his Uncle Samir, who has some pretty extreme radical Islamic views, which Tariq becomes interested in. The boys argue about this, but the presence of the gun, makes the debate potentially deadly. As things get heated, Zahida tries to come between them and mediate, but in a scuffle she is accidentally shot. As she is dying, Zahida urges the boys to shoot the camera not the gun, and repeats what she has been saying all along - that only by trying to find non-violent solutions to their problems will the boys ever get what they want.

Although directly connecting thematically with Islamic fundamentalism and gun crime, the thrust of the play is a human experience exploring the struggle for identity or finding one's true voice, making choices and friendship – a 'coming of age' in a world where (given the characters troubled backgrounds), falling into the stereotype can seem to be the only option. The piece uses a certain lifestyle that of hip-hop and pirate radio, a very specific and contemporary medium as the frame of the action. There are three potent symbols in the play: a camera, a gun and a knife. These are invested with equal weight, ensuring that they were all equally seductive, so that the audience comes to see that ultimately the potency comes not from these instruments but the choices we make about how we use them. Zahida, the character who contains the voice of reason and has the broadest perspective on life, is the casualty of this 'hot-house' atmosphere and implosion. Dealing with this dramatic loss without sentimentality is the play's biggest challenge. The play aims to realise a legacy of hope, showing that the two boys have broken from the constraints of their limited thinking and have made positive choices in their lives. Importantly, *Locked In* invokes stereotypes, but it does so in order to take on those who are so irresponsibly peddling them. It does so in order to say to audiences of all ages that there is another way.

And then there is the language, which delivers an appropriate authenticity.

BLAZE Yo yo yo! Big up da East London massive!
 It's dat time again!
 Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Bring it on!
 Yo it's MC Blaze on da mike controllin
 Always hit a strike like I'm ten-pin bowlin
 If yu playin Keeper den I'll always get a goal in
 Rhymes rock steady like a boulder in da dark
 I can smell yu fear like a Great White Shark
 Or should dat be Great Black cos white ain't always right
 But whateva - you're da meat an I'm gonna take a bite

He makes a biting manouvre towards ZAHIDA.

ZAHIDA Get off man!
TARIQ Ssh.
ZAHIDA He's tryin a chirps me!
BLAZE Yo yo yo! Big up people!
TARIQ Big yous all up!
BLAZE Da East End massive!
TARIQ Da Stepney gals an boys!
BLAZE Swanlea, Mulberry, make some noise!
TARIQ Messin up da airwaves, loud an proud
BLAZE Crankin up da tunes for da East End crowd
TARIQ It's Exile FM
BLAZE Ninety-two point ten and you're locked into
BLAZE & TARIQ Da Two Wise Men!
BLAZE Yo yo yo! Big shout out to all da regular massives locked in
TARIQ Yu know who yu are
BLAZE And for those a yu dat *don't* know
TARIQ Dis is how it goes
BLAZE We're London's leadin
TARIQ Talk at speedin
BLAZE Fastest breedin
TARIQ Leave yu bleedin
BLAZE Hip-hoppin
TARIQ Non-stoppin
BLAZE Body poppin

TARIQ Rhyme droppin
BLAZE Nanginest
TARIQ Banginest
BLAZE Blinginest
TARIQ Minginest
BLAZE T elephone ringinest
BLAZE & TARIQ Phone-in show!

BLAZE reads some messages from his phone

BLAZE Arright big shout goin out to Wizbit
Hold tight Jiggy B – I see yu blud I see yu
Big up Wiley an Wilco an all da happy hardcore crew in 10J
Hold tight Carnage an Scratchy – you are on it!
Biggin up Maximum, Lady J an da Ginger Ninja! Easy now!
Welcome to da show bwoys and gyals

TARIQ Yeah!

BLAZE Dis is how it goes

TARIQ We chat about da issues dat need to be exposed

BLAZE Cos out dere on road fings is reachin overload
Dere's a bomb in dis manor an its gonna

BLAZE & TARIQ Explode!

BLAZE B to da L to da A to da Zee
E to end like 1 2 3
Burnin like a fire on da M-I-C
Smoke an flames messin up yu gaze
Blowin out yu speakers it's MC Blaze
Jammin pon mike while da bassline plays
Chillin like a villain but I'm only teenage
Mother in a daze prays it's only a phase
But I'm gettin recognition for ma rhymes nowadays
Shootin out ma brain like voodoo rays
Erase da competition knock em all sideways
Dey're Tesco salad cream I'm Heinz mayonnaise
But I wouldn't be nuttin wivout ma DJ
Rippin up da decks it's Riqi A!

TARIQ Yo it's DJ Riqi an I scratch a tricky beat
Broken bhangra riddim aimin straight at yu feet
Bruvvas stop me on da street say 'Blud I saw yu last night
Ain't never danced like dat in ma life -
But what's dat spangly sound dat was rippin up da floor?'
Well dat's a Bangladeshi riddim an dere ain't no cure!
Cos I'm a Asian bruvva got suttin to say
Like to DJ da Bengali way
Cos da past was black and white but da future's multi-colour
Gonna break onto da scene like a dream, Inshallah
I link Blaze!

BLAZE Yeah we're da Two Wise Men an dis is how it goes

TARIQ We chat about da issues dat need to be exposed

BLAZE Cos out dere on road fings is reachin overload

TARIQ D ere's a bomb in dis manor an its gonna

BLAZE & TARIQ Explode!

Finally, what did the audiences think?

"I thought theatre was boring but I have changed my mind – this is real, the lyrics were so real, I know these people - when can I see it again?"
Student, 16, E14

"...a rare moment in my teaching career – the young people understood every word, every moment, and were deeply moved at the girl's death – I looked on and realised that while I didn't understand everything, they totally did."
Teacher, Oaklands School, E1

"...an astonishing, enthralling production, human, believable and utterly compelling. The impeccable choreography is mesmerising, and the clever, complex lyrics are the icing on the cake."
The Stage 3/10/06

"*Locked In* is an example of that rare, beautiful creature: a youth-marketed play that really does make a connection with its audience. Totally gripping and realistic.
Croydon Advertiser 13/10/06

"Kennedy has a highly attuned ear for the patter of local kids and understanding of tribal loyalties. Angela Michaels' production is steely, and the young cast live and breathe their roles ... the show has you in its grip".
The Guardian 20/10/06

A collective endorsement of what happens when young people are listened to. An important lesson for artists to engage with.

© 2006 Chris Elwell, Director Half Moon

Extract from *Locked In* © Fin Kennedy 2006
Images © Half Moon/Patrick Baldwin 2006