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Interview with Frantic Assembly: *Beautiful Burnout* and training the performer

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Abstract

Boxing is one of the very few sports in which the aim is to inflict injury on your opponent to the extent that they are unable to continue with the contest. It is a sport of violence, danger and endurance. In 2010, the physical theatre company Frantic Assembly, in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland, began a training process to prepare for the creation and rehearsal of their production of *Beautiful Burnout* by Bryony Lavery, a play about a group of young people training in a boxing gym in Scotland. In an interview in June 2011, the co-founders of Frantic Assembly and co-directors of the production, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, talked about what drew them to this project; about what they learned about physical training, combat and performance within the boxing world; and about how the experience has changed and developed their own approach to training and performance. This article presents key extracts from the interview alongside a critical reflection on the issues that are raised. My thanks to Scott and Steven for their patient engagement with the interview process, and to Scott for the permission to use the rehearsal images that accompany this article.

Keywords

Training, boxing, performance, physical theatre, gym, sport.

Introduction

In 2010, the British theatre company Frantic Assembly, in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland, began rehearsals for a production of Bryony Lavery's play, *Beautiful Burnout*. The production had grown out of a development process, involving the directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, the writer Bryony Lavery, and a group of physical performers, that aimed to explore how boxing could be portrayed effectively on stage. This process raised a number of questions around the kinds of training necessary in order to make the experience authentic enough to be believable and meaningful for an audience, to do justice to the commitment of the sportspeople whose working lives were represented, and to ensure that the well-being of the performers was maintained and theatrical effectiveness achieved. The resulting production was about a group of young boxers, their experience of boxing training, and its impact on their lives and aspirations. The final production toured the United Kingdom during Autumn/Winter 2010, and was also performed in New York in Spring 2011 and Australia in January 2012.

The text below is taken from an interview with Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett of Frantic Assembly in June 2011. The interview material is interspersed with reflections and quotations that aim to contextualise, to provoke, and to point to other sources.

The interview

Mark - What was behind the initial decision to do *Beautiful Burnout*?

Steven - I'd been to St Anne's Warehouse in Brooklyn¹ with *Black Watch*². St Anne's at that time had no shower facilities, the *Black Watch* cast had to go

Dancers, boxers and bodies

'Like a dancer, a boxer "is" his body, and is totally identified with it.'
(Oates 2006, p. 5)

Frantic Assembly work across forms commonly identified as physical theatre and new dance. As in sports, the physical performer's body is not just a definition of the limits of what is possible; it is also, paradoxically, that which is capable of exceeding those limits. The dancer, the physical theatre performer and the athlete, offer us experience of a body that continually strives to overcome its conventional limits. As Steven Connor states, 'the body is both what constrains us (...) and also what seems to offer us the chance of overcoming or going beyond those conditions' (Connor 2011, p. 16). For Joyce Carol Oates, the boxer also participates in this public accounting of the limits of their bodies: 'they will know,

across the road to Gleasons Gym³ after every show to have a shower. (...) We were there for probably not more than ten minutes, but it was just incredible how I had a sense that there was a world that was happening, and at street level I had

New York. For details, see:
[2011].
produced by National Theatre of Scotland in 2008,
performed nationally and internationally. The
<http://www.gleasonsgym.net/home.html>

no idea about it. When we opened the doors, you could just hear the punch bags. You get closer and closer, and when you open the door there's just this incredible visual environment. Every single one of your senses is assaulted. And these places, they stink, they look amazing and they sound amazing; everything was going on. When we got back, Scott asked how things had been with *Black Watch* and we didn't talk about *Black Watch*, I said 'We've been to a boxing gym. Andy took me to a boxing gym one night', and as is the case with so many Frantic shows, that was the actual genesis - through an innocuous comment or experience. Scott just started talking about his hitherto unknown-to-me but expansive and encyclopaedic knowledge of boxing from the twelfth century onwards.

Scott – I've pretty much always been a boxing fan, I used to watch it with my dad. (...) I hadn't told anyone that I was a massive boxing fan. I realise at the time that must have been because I was slightly ashamed, and I hadn't quite formulated my defence of boxing because I knew that any defence could be unpicked. Even now I find it hard to defend a sport where the object is to inflict temporary brain damage on the opponent. Despite having many, many positive feelings towards boxing, I still think that's the point that I struggle with. We started talking about boxing, boxers, some of the interesting events that I felt were really important; but the main thing was that experience that Steven was talking about, about being led up the stairs not knowing what to expect. It

meant that his eyes were fresh; he was experiencing it completely for the first time and that was really invigorating for me to hear. Also the simple thing was that we were both aware that there is a vast physical vocabulary as well as all these stories, very human stories, that are intertwined through boxing. There is that vast physical vocabulary. So it struck us both that, whilst not knowing what it was, there was a show here; there's something for us to explore. (...) That was the initial starting point, and we both became really excited about the idea of what we could bring to boxing and what boxing could bring to us.

[Insert image BB1]

Mark – I think, interestingly in a sense, that what the play became about was the training of the boxers, the actual fight only happens at the end.

Steven – Yeah, that was a big thing for us, even before we made the show. (...) I often thought how did that person

Training and performance

In both sport and theatre, training practices are required to lead purposefully towards actual performance; however in both cases the emotional and affective experience of training is different from the experience of the moment of performance. For the boxer, the fight is the end point of a long and gruelling training process. As in theatre, the possibility of failure is always present; however, in boxing the stakes are much higher, and failure more absolute. In both theatre and boxing, the performer trains to subsume the self to a clear intention – the process of preparation takes both the actor and the athlete towards a moment (specific in quality to their field) when they reveal something about themselves in a profound sense to

end up there? Regardless of it being a sport or not, on a purely human level, what led that person to be facing that person in such an oppositional event?

What is it about their lives?

Scott - The other thing was that as soon as we started to do our research, we started going to gyms, and the rooms are utterly extraordinary. These are the places where it all happens, and the level of investment from all the people in the two short hours that they spend there is just incredible. It's a place of incredibly focussed positivity, so I think that pushed the balance towards the gym itself rather than the boxing ring. The gym seems to be where the real dreams and aspirations were born and the fights always seem to be at the end. A boxer's career ends in the ring, it doesn't end in the gym.

Mark – So how then did you move to a decision about the kind of training that the actors needed?

Steven – It was kind of guess work really, we did one workshop with some actors in Scotland from the National Theatre of Scotland, a handful of ex-*Black Watch* people, and a couple of people we knew. The principle aim of that workshop was to see whether you could punch somebody and not fake it, for it not to be a stage fight. (...) We spent three or four days, and at the end of it our conclusion (and also the conclusion of the actors) was that if you were to choreograph

something that intricately then it's possible to put boxing gloves on and give somebody a hard hook, as long as they know where it's coming to and the timing of it. Your body can prepare itself and absorb the blow - this place where you are really going to punch hard consistently and continuously. (...) So we just took a punt, and we said, 'Let's get them into a gym six months before we start rehearsing'. (...) We had to say that we're making a provision that before we start the rehearsal process we will pay for these people to go to a boxing gym (having auditioned them and seen that they had got a capacity to look like they understand the boxing world). It just felt like it was a provision that we could provide for and that National Theatre of Scotland and ourselves could actually pay for something like that and hope that it was long enough.

Mark – So how did you set it up, when you came to actually rehearse was the training still continuing?

Scott - One of the more inspired decisions, I think, was to base our rehearsals on boxing training and to take five principal actor/boxers and say that each of the five day's of the week you are responsible for the warm up. You have to bring

back what you have learnt.

The training space and the gym

The boxer 'rehearses' the patterns of activity required for the ring during the training sessions in the gym. The gym mimics many aspects of the ring, but the significant difference is the reduced level of danger and the decentring of activity. The training process must build in the boxer the ability to continue boxing when his body and instincts may be telling him to stop. To achieve this, strict discipline and obedience are developed, supported by a mutual respect for the endurance of pain and the demonstration of skill and ability.

'If the arena represents the peak of performance, if not always triumph, the gym is the place of promise and decline, both a factory production line and a kind of 'second home' (...) a place 'where men are allowed to be kind to one another' without a 'shadow of impropriety' or 'question of motive'.'
(Brody 2008, p. 389)

Whilst the gym, like the rehearsal room or drama class, cannot provide the same

Sometimes that was aerobic exercises, sometimes technique work, and sometimes basic boxing practice. It meant that there was an hour to an hour and half of absolutely exhausting work that actually meant that the training was still continuing, because this was just one boxer's experience being shared with four others, and the next day it would be another boxer sharing their experience with another four. (...) The surprise was that it changed the atmosphere completely in the rehearsal room; it

wasn't a typical theatre warm-up for a start, we were doing very, very different things. We worked with a boxing trainer who said this is how we start: we do a minute stretching to just loosen up, we're all talking to each other, there's a bit

of banter before we go straight into the aerobic work – its completely the opposite to dance. He said that you need your body to have that physical snap in it still; you don't want to stretch that piece of elastic so it's all floppy, you want it to be able to react. So we took that boxing model and applied it to the room, and what happened was that it was a continual learning process. People were developing and learning from one another, and that changed the atmosphere of the room in terms of constantly encouraging each other, constant banter. It became a very positive, high testosterone environment - one you find replicated in gyms and changing rooms across the country.

Steven - We brought in a trainer that had worked with us on one of our workshops, he came on the first week and did a really long session where we looked at principles and details. It was very interesting, as it allowed everybody to realise how non-universal practice is. They'd all gone to their five separate clubs - Dublin, Glasgow, London, Edinburgh - and then this one guy comes in who was the one-time coach for the Scottish Youth Team. It was at that point that they all realised that there is no single take on how people are taught to box. There's this man in the middle of the room who is an absolute authority, but he's not *the* authority, and there isn't one. It really freed us, I think, as a company; that there's a version of the training that suits our needs and purposes as a company, that's as valid as anything else, that's ok, that can work for us.

Scott - The thing about making the boxing choreography, was that it has to be very, very careful and it has to be

step by step. But because the boxers don't want to fail, because the boxers want to be real, and they've got an idea of what that is and what that looks like, they raced ahead. And that was probably the biggest risk that our production had, was the creation of the fights themselves and the

Combat and choreography

Boxing is not just about naked aggression or blind power. Nor is it an activity in which the technique is natural – 'All is style' (Oates 2006, p. 9).

Both the actor and the boxer must be able to work through well-practised moves without getting distracted by the emotions generated through the activity itself: 'We had to be very careful to always think of the fighting as placed choreography that must be danced as a duet' (Graham 2010, p. 18). But whereas the co-ordination of movement in boxing sometimes achieves aesthetic quality through transcending its brutal aims, in

boxers getting frustrated about how slow it was and how it didn't feel like boxing. Until it started to click, it was here, here, here, knock, back, step by step by step [demonstrating section of fight choreography] until they got to a level...But it was a very, very frustrating process; because they had an image of the end point, it made it really difficult. I think that happens a lot in how we make our work, if they have an idea of what it is you want, they'll aim for that end rather than the steps on the way. And that can be quite difficult, and dangerous in this example.

Steven - I remember when that became apparent to us, and we made them construct two rounds where we drew it out the floor and we actually gave them

a floor pattern. We'd say, 'OK. This next round, you have thirty-two seconds and you need go from there, to there, to there, to there, to there, to there', say. You make it a task that means just figure out the feet first of all for thirty-two seconds, and then put the boxing on top. The fight took a massive amount of rehearsal time. You have to put your foot down as it's got to be ready by the end of Week Five, so you can polish it. But how do you move them forward without them being so driven that they're compromising safety?

Mark – Did you change the layout in the rehearsal space in relation to the gym training and to boxing?

Scott - Yes. If you walked in you would think it was a boxing gym. First of all our rehearsal space was in Bethnal Green for three weeks and we didn't have the set, just the markings on the floor. The permanent things in the room were the punch bags and lying around were boxing gloves, weights, skipping ropes, all set out in circuit training stations. What we realised as well was that we couldn't make this work if anyone had a script in their hands.

Mark – How did differences in gender, ethnicity and age play out in the training and in the development of the piece?

Steven - Between the five boxers, Vicki [Manderson] is probably one of the most physically proficient people in the room, so interestingly some of the boys were definitely playing catch up with Vicki all the way through the rehearsal process and through the tour. She's a Pilates instructor; she's never boxed before but she's got an incredible stamina, she's short and she's solid and sturdy and she really took to the practice. When she started to get some training, she really got into it. Just by virtue of Vicki being the person she is and the physical type that she is, it was very interesting watching some of the boys seeing her doing some sparring work on the first couple of days. They were thinking, 'OK, she's going at it faster and longer than we are!' So that was great, really exactly what we would have wanted the situation to be like. With Ewan [Stewart] and Lorraine [McIntosh] as the older performers, they were never going to be part of the boxing sequences, however they both joined in the warm ups every day. Lorraine would actually come in, do the warm up and then go home for the rest of the day if she didn't have any scenes on certain days. It was the incredible thing about that company and what that kind of work does to the sense of that company spirit. It became a really essential part of how they operated as actors – not as people doing a warm-up, but as actors in a show, putting a piece together. One of the things about boxing is its absolutely conditioning every single part of your body; you really feel it, and after a week your life is different, your body starts to change.

Mark – One of the things about boxing, and training, which comes over in the show, is about competition and the sense in which you're suffering to get to where you need to get to. I wondered whether that was something that you felt had any impact on the boxing and performance training, whether that was something that resonated in any way with you and the actors.

Scott - Oh I think so, because in one of the first sessions we had observing in a gym in Greenock, the trainer just kept shouting, 'You're only cheating yourself, I can tell!' It's that idea that people can tell, and you're cheating it. That loomed large with us, because we felt that that's the last thing we would want. For people to watch the show and think that it wasn't real.

Risk, injury and authenticity

The nature of boxing means that training for a production such as *Beautiful Burnout* reveals deep tensions for the performer between authenticity and pretence, between danger and safety¹. The boxer who pulls his punches, or who goes down without a fight, challenges something very profound about the nature of sport and of boxing in particular; as Connor puts it, 'Cheating is (...) not an offence to the game, but an ontological affront to it' (2011, p. 178).

The boxer's willpower must take them beyond pain to the point where they overpower their opponent. The actor is not seeking to achieve that point, but rather a believable representation of it¹. In this sense, the actor must avoid being hit; whereas, as Oates points out, 'Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting' (2006, p. 25). For the actor, 'Injury seems to occur (...) when the ego kicks ahead of the body' (Wendy

[Insert image BB3]

Steven - It's interesting, because I think that people did push their physical limits and it's such a precise sport. I think that's the reason why, during the whole of the rehearsal period, we had

fewer injuries on this show than we've ever had on any other Frantic show in sixteen years. Our injury book had two injuries, both were incidents of actors backing off and falling off the edge of the stage. It wasn't even anything to do with pugilism. So there's something kind of fascinating about pushing yourself that far (...) particularly when you're creating that duet work, which is what boxing is for us. When you're incurring that kind of risk something happens, you commit to it in a very precise way.

Mark – Boxing, as a form of training, has perhaps a stronger connection with emotion than there is with other forms of sports training. It's emotionally engaging, because of what it is you're training to do and because of the intensity of the event.

Scott - The boxing trainer would say, 'Don't let that get in the way'. One of the things that was really obvious to me was the trainer saying, 'Don't put everything into the punches. You're not going to send that punch bag into the wall. You're not going to win, you're going to be exhausted, and the punch bag is still going to be swinging there'. What they're working on is technique and speed, and to be able to do what they do for three minutes non-stop rather than throw a big Hollywood punch or take all their rage out on the punch bags.

Steven - I think the emotional element to it is what we as non-boxers bring to it. (...) It's a spectators' construct, because you are involved because of that visceral experience, your emotions kick in. And the thing to remember is, their's don't – and the second they do, they're done for! So actually to be in it is to be rid of everything else, every feeling that those thousands and thousands of people who are there in the room with you are feeling.

Mark - There's also something about giving yourself over to it; that you can't hold back, you have to commit to it.

Steven - We've got a motto which is, 'Only move forward'. Every time you try something new it has to be better than the last time. (...) You never get there because all kinds of things happen over the six weeks of a rehearsal period. It was amazing watching the rehearsals for this, just thinking it is always getting better and better. There's a sense in which the work doesn't allow for you to be on the back foot, as soon as you run a physical sequence, with that kind of material (...) for instance, the sequence where they are in the training session which we called 'scribble', we actually set it to a much slower count to start with and then just increased it over the rehearsals. (...) So we do try and be mindful of those things, and wherever possible we look at the structure of the week and make sure we're not working them hard every day. Taking on board that this was the kind of show we wanted to make; you do have to try and think as much

as you can about recovery time, you do have to think about how you space your rehearsal week, who's brought in for how long and when, all that kind of thing.

Mark – Did the boxing bring a psychological dimension to the training as well?

Emotions and the boxer

'Boxers (...) need to walk a tightrope of having an intense emotional profile helpful for producing near maximal effort, with a sense of calmness to aid tactical thought.' (Lane 2008)

Scott - Boxing is such a specific world. You can either feel like an absolute fraud as you put your wraps on or you can start to feel like you really grow. And I think everyone worked really hard to make sure that it felt like the latter, so that people felt

As in theatre, the emotion of anger is neither condemned nor dismissed in boxing. The emotion is transposed through the physical language of the boxer. In so far as boxing gives aesthetic form to violence, it can be compared to bullfighting – an activity equally contested as a sport. For the actor on the other hand, aesthetic form is generated through the physical language of the emotions:

'According to Artaud, the actor and the athlete are doubles, the only difference being that while the athlete makes 'muscular movements of physical exertion', the actor's efforts require

comfortable in the space, feeling real and not cheating.

Mark – The nature of the boxing training is something that helps that, and promotes that?

Scott - I think so, because it's really hard, really hard. You get absolute respect for people that do it, and also your eyes open up to a new beauty. Some people may have seen boxing as a blur of limbs, and now they suddenly see it as an incredibly precise act of balance and co-ordination.

Steven - I think there's something respectful about it as a sport, that's why we created a very respectful performance. Because you're taking each other to the limit and you're trying to discover that limit together as well, not always generously towards one and other. (...) At the end of the warm up, it wasn't 'high fives', but there was definitely a sense of, 'Well done everybody, we got through that together', because they are very, very hard.

Mark – The idea of three minutes of intense action, was that something that slipped into the structuring of the show?

Three minute bursts

'Bobby:

Okay

Let's get doon tae business!

(And he sets up...)

See *this?*

(A clock face ... a timer ...)

That's *your* face now.

That's the machinery what's ticking inside your brain.

You're all Human Clocks

From now on, you'll be living your life in three-minute bursts

From now on, you're no made up of flesh and bone ...

You're made of *minutes*

Your minutes are made ae *seconds*

In which you need tae move and think faster than the speed of light.

Seconds full of *activity* and *choices*

(Lavery 2010, pp. 25-6)

Time is always present in sport, often as a form of adversary against which the athlete must struggle and compete. Both athletes and spectators are normally keenly aware of the passage of time within sports events. Time becomes embodied in sport – 'The body not only acts in time, time is also acted out through the body' (Connor 2011, p. 77).

In giving 'shape and significance to temporal experience' (Connor 2011, p. 79), sport is similar to theatre; but though both activities intensify our experience of time,

Steven – The original idea was that the show would all be three minutes scenes. And then we realised the playwright would just ignore us in the end. She would say, 'Well, it is three minutes, just say it faster.' We realised we were on a hiding to nothing. (...)

Bryony writes about it very well in the show, she says, 'Your life consists of three minute rounds from now on', and it is that.

What's amazing is that when you first got into the gym that buzzer feels very intrusive and it's very loud, but for the rest of the guys it's just when they stop and draw breath.

Scott – It's Pavlovian.

Steven – I was amazed at how unorganised boxing gyms are. You have to look quite hard sometimes to see who's training who, why are they still talking over there. Different gyms have very different dynamics, but what I loved was that you'd go into a gym and it's like the buzzer goes and everything does that [gestures] and everything knows where it's going. It's like watching atoms fall very cleverly into a molecular construct. Everything kind of shifts and changes, and the buzzers goes and it shifts and moves and starts up again. It's very beautiful. It's all about the buzzer, and they're not even thinking about how long it is. It's a physical durational event for them, not a timed thing.

[Insert image BB2]

Mark – Do you start to internalise it? Do you start to know when three minutes is up?

Steven - Of course you do, you're praying for three minutes to be up. And Joni [Joni Carter, Stage Manager] will be counting the seconds, and you're just thinking please let it be fifteen – it's awful!

Scott - Every warm-up, we're still working to those three minutes. It's a very long time, and you're exhausted.

Steven - That time construct becomes your challenge. I think I would've had to work quite a lot longer on those kinds of exercises for me not to know those three minutes were up. I was definitely counting down or up depending on how knackered I was.

Scott - I'm glad we didn't go all out for 'three minutes' in the show, because it's one of those things that's conceptual; you make your point and move on. Otherwise you're continually making the same point throughout the whole show.

Steven - We tried it in the first scene. We had two actresses both playing the same role over the year that it was on tour. It's just that thing about it being a live event and as actors, even with the best will in the world, if you're

Theatre and boxing – technique and beyond

'In the actors' capacity to give of themselves and in the boxers' destiny for victory there is the same vivid paradox of will and abandon, of discipline and spontaneity: a paradox that is representative of the perfect mastery of technique and, at the same time, is also the bright and evident surpassing of that technique.'
(Ruffini 1995, p. 64)

Theatre and sport require the participant to fully commit to the activity in question; there is often an implicit desire for the sports participant to exceed the demonstration of technical competence and transpose their efforts into aesthetic practice. In certain respects, some kinds of sport and theatre performance can on occasions create for the participant and the spectator an experience in which it seems that the possibility of simulation has been erased. As Oates says, 'boxing really isn't a metaphor, it is the thing itself' (Oates 2006, p. 102). Some physical theatre companies and performers have, in various ways, sought to erase the

playing a three minute scene...there's nights where Lorraine was under, and

nights where she was over, the same with Blythe [Duff], under or over depending on the audience.

Mark - In terms of Frantic's approach now, do you see the work you've done on *Beautiful Burnout* having a lasting legacy in relation to how you train and how you work on shows for the future? Has it changed anything?

Steven – We've been thinking about putting together the next Frantic show⁴ and I don't know how we make that applicable. There's some ways in which that training and that training setup and the way the company comes together has been a way in which we'll definitely be able to work on other pieces. It's not a blanket approach, but (...) it's definitely changed the way that I've approached warm ups, starts of days, how to build company spirit, all of that stuff. It's so much more effective than what we were using before. We actually thought we were quite good at it beforehand, so it's fantastic to discover that there is another way that's even more effective and dynamic. You catch us at a time where we're about to make a show where fifty percent of the company are over the age of sixty⁵, so it's a harder one to transfer. (...) Because it was, above anything else, one of the most enjoyable rehearsal periods of any show that

⁴ *Lovesong*, written by Abi Morgan, produced by Frantic Assembly, UK tour from October 2011 to February 2012.

⁵ *Lovesong* cast included actress Sian Phillips and actor Sam Cox.

we've ever made; because of the way it felt every day working with that company of actors.

Scott - I'm more interested in seeing how we can apply what we've learnt to this completely different demographic, rather than throwing it out and being really soft with them. Because I think if you pander to people too much and don't give them something new, then they don't come alive, they're just having what they already knew. What was so wonderful about this experience was that we all came alive at the same time.

Beautiful Burnout – further information

Videos of the rehearsals and development process are available on the Frantic Assembly website at: <http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/productions/beautiful-burnout/developments/>. There is also a detailed Resources Pack for the production available at:

<http://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/mediaassets/doc/Beautiful%20Burnout%20resource%20pack.pdf>, which includes more information and further discussion on many of the issues and ideas raised in this interview.

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