

E A A R O N / M I C H A E L
B A N H A M / M I C H A E L
L / L E E N T J E V A N D E
D A V I E S / C R I S T I N A
M / M A R T I N E L F E R T /
Y / R A N I A H O / S O N I A
H U N T E R / B I R A Y
M A T T O C K S / J O S L I N
O ' S H E A / C A R O L Y N
D E R / Z A F E R Y E N A L
/ C O N T R I B U T I O N S

**An interview with Simon Banham, Richard Gregory and Renny O’Shea
part three: *Autumn*.**

Cristina Delgado-García

Autumn., the second piece in the quartet, crystallised as an interlude during which audience members were free to nip in and out of the many activities proposed onstage, stretch their legs outside, or sit back at the raked seats and observe everything from a distance. It was a necessary comfort break between performances, but also a moment to adjust the scale and mood between the joyous, mass portrait offered by *Summer*. and the reflective zooming in to a singular life that was *Winter*. Across the stage, the invitation to join in was implicit and extended spatially: there were headsets for a silent disco in a corner, a small library of books offered by the volunteer performers in *Summer.*, a long kitchen table where one could join in the making of delicious samosas or enjoy those prepared by others the previous day. There was a round table with experts on memory and identity, where one could join and contribute in the conversation with one’s own knowledge. There was an intimate space where a clairvoyant would read your future. A small group was playing a game Quarantine called ‘The History of the World’. There was table tennis, and a board to map the connections between everybody in the room. Progressively, almost imperceptibly, the stage was cleared and ready for the screening of *Winter*.

Autumn. did not always look like this. Prior to the quartet premiere in 2016, there was a work-in-progress sharing in July 2015 and then a preview in October 2015, both at Lancaster Arts. Although they contained traces of what would be the final version of *Autumn.*, they were also vastly different from it. I took part in both try-out performances. After the premiere, the new version of *Autumn.* also took place at the Norfolk & Norwich Festival in May 2017 as part of the quartet, where it continued to change.

Richard Gregory, Renny O’Shea, Simon Banham and I met in Cardiff on 31 May and 1 June 2018, between rehearsals for the then-forthcoming piece *English*. What follows are edited fragments from those conversations, which not only attempt to remember *Autumn.* in its various iterations but also seek to partially do *Autumn.* with and about the people in the room – a display of memories of the company’s lifespan that is necessarily disjointed, full of gaps and associations.

CRISTINA: One of the devices that appeared in most versions of *Autumn.* was this collective piecing together of history; sometimes the movement was forward, from the start till this very moment, and sometimes we attempted to reconstruct history in reverse. Could we do that? Can we try to remember together the history of the company, starting on this day and making our way back to when you first started making theatre?

RICHARD: That’s a good question.

SIMON: My memory doesn’t do that.

CRISTINA: We’ll play the game as you invited us to play it in *Autumn.*: if someone is explaining something about 2005 and then the next memory someone else raises is of 2001, then we cannot go to 2003. The aim is to keep going back in time.

RENNY: But that's awful!

SIMON: We can give it a go.

* * *

SIMON: On the 31 May 2018, at the end of the day's rehearsal of *English* at the Welsh Millennium Centre at the National Dance Company Wales, Quarantine bought us this meal.

RICHARD: Today, working with Jonny, Sonia and Chelsey for *English*,¹ we spent time on the text and made it more solid, and then knew that what we needed to do was break it into pieces and then crumple it up and then scatter it around. The same thing occurred the other day.

RENNY: How many days ago?

RICHARD: When did you come with the brown paper? Tuesday? We're playing with having a gradual layering of materials on the floor for *English*. We've had this idea of a floor cloth made of brown paper. But brown paper inevitably makes these beautiful landscapes when you crumple it up, and it fills me with horror that it looks like a landscape –

SIMON: That it looks *like something*.

RICHARD: Yes, that it looks like something where everyone goes: 'Ah, look at that, they made that thing look like a landscape, that's what we're supposed to think it looks like.' I hate that in theatre – that leading you into a reading. We smoothed out the brown paper a little bit.

RENNY: Okay. Two weeks ago, I was feeling quite poorly, I had vertigo coming and going and it was worrying.

RICHARD: Two weeks ago, it was Simon's 60th birthday.

SIMON: I think maybe that was three weeks ago.

CRISTINA: Happy birthday, Simon!

RICHARD: A week before we started rehearsals for *English*, Renny and I were in the Baltic Gallery in Gateshead doing a five-hour version of *Wallflower* with six people in it; normally there's only four, and three of them on this occasion hadn't done it before.² We'd rehearsed with them for that specific version and it was a really interesting experience. It was a great space for it: a big empty white room with a lighting grid in a big contemporary art gallery. For the first time it felt that an audience could come and go as they pleased.

SIMON: Did they?

1 Richard is referring to performer Jonny Cotsen, writer Sonia Hughes and NTW emerging director Chelsey Gillard.

2 *Wallflower* premiered at Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival, Groningen, in July 2015. The performers were Jo Fong, Nic Green, James Monaghan and Sonia Hughes. *Wallflower* was presented at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art as part of GIFT Festival, in Gateshead, in May 2018. On this occasion, the performers were Kate Daley, Caroline Dubois, Jo Fong, Karl Jay-Lewin, James Monaghan and Miriam Wild. The central task in *Wallflower* is for the performers to remember all the dances they have ever danced.

Autumn.

RICHARD: More than ever before.

RENNY: I think the context helped, as other shows at GIFT Festival had people coming and going, so audiences got used to it.

RICHARD: The piece also took on a different quality. There was something in the coming together of a certain set of people that meant they met around certain background of experience; there was a lot about class on this occasion. I hadn't really noticed this in *Wallflower* before.

SIMON: *Wallflower* feels like a significant show for us.

RICHARD: Why?

SIMON: I think there's something about it, particularly about the durational version, about being in a room with people really making something, the sense that you are witnessing a real activity that affects you. The introduction of new people into it is also important for us. As intended, it allows different conversations which have different connections for different audiences. It can constantly refresh itself and I think that's fascinating. I was going to say *Wallflower* was the most effective instance of that, but I think perhaps *EatEat* in Leicester.³ I am sorry, I am breaking the rules of the game about chronology! When we did *EatEat*, one's first impression of going into a timbered Tudor hall with a concrete table down the middle was a very theatrical situation, but during the course of the evening it simply became a dinner party, an occasion in which you are engaging with the people next to you, opposite you, you kind of forget it is a piece of theatre and it becomes a conversation.

CRISTINA: Both Richard and Renny have said before that there were moments in *EatEat* that feel awfully theatrical to them now, so it's interesting to hear you having a fonder memory of it.

SIMON: I can see why, but it was part of my ongoing Quarantine education, in that you set up a design and you can observe it being used and being discarded as the evening progresses, when it becomes about the people in the room.

RENNY: I'm still very proud of it.

CRISTINA: So, where were we?

RICHARD: *Wallflower*, May 2018. We had an abortive version of *Summer* in Béthune immediately before that.⁴ The process of working on the show in French was more challenging than we naively imagined. We had decided, foolishly, that we could make it in about two and a half weeks.

3 *EatEat* was commissioned by, and made in collaboration with, Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, in June 2003. It was a meal-based performance, hosted by refugee and asylum seeker performers.

4 A French-language version of *Summer* was due to premiere at Comédie de Béthune, in Béthune, France, on 14 April 2018. A strike of theatre workers around conditions of work at the Comédie began on 29 March 2018. Supported by both strikers and management, the company continued rehearsals elsewhere in the hope that the dispute would have been resolved by the time of the performance. Unfortunately, the strike continued until 12 April, by which time the show had already been cancelled. A low-tech version of *Summer* was shown in a local hall, away from the theatre.













