

‘SHIPWRECK’

[Scenario for a devised performance piece directed by Richard Negri and originally performed by second year students from the BA (Hons) Theatre Design course at Wimbledon School of Art in 1981.

This scenario is the transcript of Negri’s handwritten version held in the SPARK archive at Wimbledon School of Art.]

The action begins with the quiet sound of surf. This sound is present as the audience enters, its delicate slow rhythmic insistence remains throughout the performance, except where silence or subtle changes of mood have been called for. The sound is of pure surf – it contains no gulls or extraneous noises. There is one stone on an otherwise bare stage.

Two people, one of whom we still call the ‘Voyager’ and one whom we shall call the ‘Philosopher’ (this actor also doubles Clown / Death later on) are seated on the front row of the auditorium on either side of a main entrance D/S. They begin to talk to one another (at first inaudibly) – the Philosopher has obviously been pondering the one object in view – the stone, eventually rises and walks over to it, making various observations and comments until he manages to draw the Voyager on. He moves down and joins the Voyager about centre. A long improvised conversation develops on the quality of sand and shore (Voyager) and the quality of sky and sea (Philosopher). This conversation is very relaxed, and moves naturally from the immediate and physical through the poetic, imaginative, philosophical becoming more and more rarefied and abstract.

They are eventually joined by three younger persons (two women and one man) who are not together and enter at different times as people who are just awake and taking a walk in unknown but accepted surroundings. These join the conversation, their interest being awakened, and they provide a quite different impulse to the conversation – one of freshness of enquiry rather than one of predisposition so far established by the Voyager and Philosopher.

During the moment of maximum absorption, when they are a central group – silently from behind them – and as yet unnoticed – a character enters whom we shall call the ‘Pierette’. It is a very delicate, shy and beautiful creature carrying an open parasol with which she tends to hide her face which is often lowered, as if listening.

She has great stillness, delicacy and presence. She moves round to the front of the group and silently sits on the ground with her back towards them, - the conversation ceasing with the power of her stillness.

From their point of view, it is as if she has appeared from nowhere, and for a moment the three men are looking up the sky above her and the two women are looking at her.

A quiet – broken and slightly unnerved conversation begins about how to make contact with such a creature, until one of the young persons suggests that they should all sit down as the Pierette has done. They readily assent to this idea, and do so, and although there is no reaction from the Pierette – the tension instantly disappears. They seem at one in themselves, with one another, and in the surrounding environment. This sensation is remarked upon, and is expressed quietly in different ways by each of them.

At this point a pretty schoolgirl of about 13-14 – faintly old-fashioned, and wearing a blazer and carrying a sand-bucket – enters U/S – quickly followed S/L by an also faintly old fashioned young man in his early thirties. He has a quality about his look and dress that is reminiscent of a dance band vocalist / entertainer of the 1930s. We shall call him the ‘Gigolo’.

On seeing the Schoolgirl coming to play on the deserted beach, everyone courteously disappears before she sees them, the Pierette however does not move until the Gigolo enters, when she silently moves to a position C/S and sits quietly listening but not watching.

The Schoolgirl has knelt on the sand L/C happily and is approached by the Gigolo who is very charming and polite to her. He sits next to her and a conversation develops in which he asks her age and what she would like to be when she is grown up.

He discovers that her dream is to be an actress, and tells her that he is in the world of entertainment and can help her. During this conversation, he has given her great encouragement, removing the ribbons in her hair and letting it fall loose on her shoulders – fondling it delicately with his hands and commenting on her rare beauty. This scene needs to be filled with all sorts of ambiguities and not a clear-cut case of corrupt seediness and innocence. Just before an unwritten contract has been made, another character enters from S/L who we shall call the Guru. He is also in his thirties, and is dressed rather like a hippy – long hair and hair-band – but nothing sloppy or drop-out about him. He is actually to begin with – very bright and cheerful – only a faint air of being on a high emanating from him. He seems to have actually come in answer to some unknown call, and also to meet someone who has not yet arrived.

He introduces himself with a cheery ‘hullo’, and makes the Schoolgirl sandcastles, as if trying to make a child happy by joining in with its games. The Gigolo is drawn into this and gathers invisible twigs to make flagposts on the invisible sandcastles. The girl sits listening, as during this operation the Guru is swiftly gathering information about the Gigolo – that he was performing in a theatrical troupe. The show was a musical called ‘Shipwreck’ – How did it go? ‘Oh it went down well’. The Gigolo is also trying to obtain information about the Guru’s activities but the latter is very evasive in his answers and seems to be both preoccupied and apprehensive – glancing about him as if expecting someone.

Suddenly his female assistant (also hippy) appears, and whispers something in his ear. He answers by whispering in her ear. They are both still and silent contemplating whatever words or information they have exchanged. She hands the Guru a small battered cow-bell.

Immediately from D/S/C enters a character we shall call Clown/Death (he was to begin with the actor playing the Philosopher).

He stands before the Guru and his assistant looking at them, with a totally self-contained, quiet hypnotic presence. All his actions are sudden, abrupt and decisive. He is wearing a dark raincoat and soft white beach shoes, and carries a small rather worn suitcase.

He drops his trousers, steps out of his shoes, bends without kneeling and opens the case. He takes out a small black veil, a bowler hat which he places on his head, pushes the trousers and shoes into the case, taking out one small object, and then

shutting the case. The object turns out to be an elastic band and red ping-pong ball nose, which he places on his own. He picks up the case, comes to attention and springs lightly to USR making light squish-squash sounds of walking barefoot on wet sand. He stops abruptly in this far position and remains still as if watching the sea and thinking.

The Guru and assistant having been slightly stunned by this apparition, shrug it off and go into a trance-like state, the Guru abruptly rattles his bell, and begins to chant. His eyes become glazed and he moves towards centre squatting on his haunches, followed by his assistant who does likewise. She has joined the chant. This very low mumbling chant begins to influence the Schoolgirl and Gigolo. All sorts of other people start to appear from all directions as if called hypnotically. Their hands are held like those of sleep-walkers – they have a vacant expression and are all chanting in a manner that is like a collection of deep sonorous murmurings, waxing and waning – never in perfect phase, and the Guru's lips moving all the time to an almost unheard and unintelligible gibberish. All the people have formed a line across the stage and are on their haunches swaying as they chant. The Gigolo and Schoolgirl are seated the same but in front facing the line – but not chanting. The Guru marks their foreheads with his thumb as some sort of imitation anointing. As this chanting has been in progress, the Clown/Death has been crossing and recrossing diagonally across the stage – U/S R scooping handfuls of wet sand into the small piece of veil, carrying over DSL behind the chanters and splatting it down – as if attempting to remove all the sand from one side of the beach to the other. He vocalises his footsteps across the sand and the splat of wet sand dollops that he deposits – all these sounds forming a lunatic, mesmerising musicality.

The sound and action stops dead as the Guru suddenly rattles his bell and stands up followed by the others – the trance having been broken. Clown/Death remains still U/S R having put the veil over his face and replaced his bowler. (He has removed the nose). All exit in line abreast D/S – the Gigolo and Schoolgirl in front centre.

There is a lull, with only the presence of Clown/Death on stage.

It is now mid-day.

The sound of the surf continues.

Six people enter – one at a time. Each carries an empty bottle – comes on stage from S/L – sits stretches and yawns to the muffled but fairly strong blast of a ship's siren (a large ship). These blasts are not exactly the same in volume or length. After they have stretched and yawned they fall asleep more or less immediately until we have a line of sleeping bodies across the stage, each with an empty bottle by their side.

Entering behind them, comes the 'Bohemian Lady'. She is young/middle age, dressed in a rather 'ethnic' way. She is barefoot, and carries two empty bottles milk bottles, or at least clear glass but misty. She is taking an occasional delicate sniff from one of the bottles, and is obviously quietly ecstatic about being alone, under a vast sky with limitless horizons, and drawing the sharp salty air into herself.

She is suddenly disturbed from her meditative raptures by the entrance of the 'Submarine Commander' from D/S/C. He is young, rather inexperienced, and somewhat bewildered. He steps over the bodies, as if they were just large stones on the beach, and does not notice what they really are at all. He comes towards her and stops. For a little while they say nothing, but share looking at the vista of sea

and shore – she quietly offers him one of the bottles, which he takes mechanically, not knowing what it is for as well as being too preoccupied with his immediate thoughts. He suddenly blurts out that he is the captain of a submarine that has gone down to which she replies ‘Isn’t that usual’. There is no humour implied or taken. He continues to talk about the shock of it happening, the loss of his crew, the responsibility that he feels. She tries to assure him that it is all the hand of fate and that he should not continue to blame himself. ‘We are all straws in the great wind – exciting isn’t it?’ He is still more or less loathe to drop his isolation and preoccupation and share hers, and rambles on with his broken thoughts about members of the crew who were very loyal and trusting – and Taff – splendid fellow – bloody awful cook’.

During a lull in this conversation, a young/middle aged ‘Insurance Clerk’ enters from SR. He has practically no self-assurance whatsoever. He looks very bewildered and anxiously smiles at them, introducing himself as – “Rook – Insurance” – he offers a limp hand. They both look at him, but do nothing making him more socially ill at ease than ever.

At this moment a young dynamic ‘Oil Prospector’ enters from SL with tape rule, small special hammer and smart notebook. He walks quickly around the stage area, hopping over the bodies, taking measurements, making short stops to consider, decide and continue to take more measurements. En passant – Rook performs the same interlocutory ritual – perfunctory handshake from ‘Prospector’ – “Nash – High Purity Petro-Chemicals” – carries on – Rook following behind him desperate to be accepted but of no avail as Nash is totally occupied and using his vocalised, highly technical thoughts as a form of conversation that requires no answers or comments. He is saying all this as he lies flat with his ear to the ground, tapping with his hammer and listening intently, springing up – moving somewhere else and repeating the process.

All the time, the Captain and Bohemian Lady are watching in a study of disbelief and quiet amazement.

A gradual quietening of the Prospector’s activities and the reacceptance of his isolation by Rook, - the inward settling of the captain, now seated on sand – and turning away of Bohemian Lady towards the sea and sky is overlapped by a slow, one after the other, awakening and sitting up of the six people. Half asleep they in turn pick up and start gently blowing across their bottles. This produces an eerie fog and mist blanketed atmosphere and is added to by the other four being gradually drawn in to the trance-like state, blowing bottles also. They have all now formed a line seated on their haunches as in the first chanting sequence. This is also added to by O/S bottle blowing etc, and as it builds, the Guru and his assistant, the Voyager enter silently and stand behind the line, - Death/Clown and the ‘Sirens’ behind all of them standing. The whole group are caught up in a heightened expectancy that emanates from above the all-enveloping fog. The Guru rings his bell abruptly and all take part in an eerie but oddly beautiful unaccompanied chant, but much more highly pitched than the first chanting sequence. It still has a chilly space-sound quality – hanging in the still air. Short piercing high pitched sounds are supplied by the Sirens, who are hardly visible. During this passage the Pierette enters backwards drawn by the sounds, head on one side, but without parasol and carrying some clothes. With her back to the others, and looking up into the surrounding mist, she places what turns out to be – a seaman’s jacket, trousers, sea-boots and cap haphazardly on the wet sand.

When the space sounds have reached their peak and the clothes are placed, the Guru rattles his bell abruptly and everyone squelches off, criss-crossing one another,

suggesting people lost in a sea mist/fog with the sound of footsteps in the wet marshy sound being vocalised softly, plus spasmodic blowings of bottles, the muted 'whoop whoop' of tugs, odd blubbings, and one whom we shall call 'the Young Mother' quietly and anxiously calling Cara – Amanda – Marjorie –

The sea acquires a flat lassitude through this scene, but is not really heard until now. They have all made exits to the sides now except for Pierette, Death/Clown and one other person. The latter pair are U/S and the Pierette is SR of the Seaman's clothes.

Rook has come to and is standing centre looking down at the clothes of the mariner.

There is a faint movement in the air – a breeze – it is like an overcast end of day. Those at the sides of stage area, ever so quietly clink bottles, tap tins together, rustle paper and blow bubbles in water jar. The sounds are lonely, sporadic and listless, like rubbish left in the wind.

The Pierette has her head turned away from Rook, and her head is lowered under the Parasol.

Rook, stoops, kneels and begins to arrange the clothes in the rough shape of a man on the wet sand. He then looks at it quietly and begins his soliloquy. He seems to open up to this created semblance of a person, and confides in him – all his confusion and muddled feelings – that he has a steady – job – a wife – a house etc but where does it all lead? This is a very gentle, moving scene, wryly comic, full of helplessness and quaint nobility. It is extremely vulnerable. The image of the romantic Seafaring man, obviously awakens long buried aspirations in him, as against the humdrum nature of his existence which we know is not going to change.

He is startled by the entrance, from U/S, of a young, smart mariner clicking his fingers. The clinkings and bubblings have died away. The young man has bare feet. He sees the Pierette, throws his cap away, combs his hair, with Death/Clown mirroring him, - takes a small bottle of cologne from his jacket pocket, - throws the jacket away. He rubs his hands and ears with the cologne and walks provocatively forwards to Pierette. His torso is bare. He kneels by her and is still – and becomes suddenly very vulnerable – she puts down her parasol and they look at one another. Unaccompanied, he sings to her, beautifully 'A girl called Maria' from West Side Story. They are about to kiss – when the sound of sea which is just a whisper returns with the faintest clinkings and rustlings. A pair of almost spectral dancers appears, and the Bohemian Lady, hardly noticed, drifts a black scarf lightly over the stone. Also very faintly, almost hanging in the evening air, we hear strains of 'Carmen' (Habanera) waxing and waning on the breeze. The 'ghost dancers' are the Gigolo and Schoolgirl. He is dressed in a smart white suit and she is in a short black dress with a scarf forming a fringe on her forehead, and a red rose between the toes of one foot. They make no sound, and Pierette and the young sailor remain frozen during this ghostly dance.

The dance is highly polished and professional, containing passages of a subtle and delicate eroticism. They dance over the old Mariner's clothes, also disturbing their arranged shape – continue to U/S where they are separated by the veiled stone and fade with the music to opposite recesses by the stage.

The sailor stands up, as if awakened out of a dream, and moves to centre stage where he stands suddenly aware that the moon has risen. He is looking up at it. At the same time Pierette has quickly moved U/S where she picks up the clothes and

gently pushes them onto the wet sand to the sound of muted bubblings. She sits D/S with parasol – facing the sailor who is no longer aware of her presence.

The stage has darkened slightly, nothing ominous however, as it is balanced by a pale gentle but cold light on the sailor's face.

We become aware – a little way behind him in the night air – are standing the three 'Sirens'. They are all dressed in black evening dresses. Two of them are silvery blonde, the centre one having very dark hair and is a little taller. Their dress is individual, and there are glittering accents of jewellery ie a pendant earring, a shoe buckle a brooch. The materials are soft and rich. They are all pale but wearing exquisite make up, beautifully groomed and in no way brash or tarty. They move silently and gracefully.

The sounds of soft pervasive music gently floods in waves as they dance, gently swirling – advancing and retreating – and creating the gentle but persuasive and powerful caress of an advancing tide. The sounds hold the sailor spellbound, but he is only physically aware of them as they get closer and swirl gently – almost brushing his sides. As the tide advances he shudders and crumples rolling over as if hit by an extremely powerful wave and very slowly rolls twisting over and over, with moments of stillness, until the next slightly softer yet relentless wave hits him – when he slowly rolls on washed by the tide until he is totally still lying on the sand in front of the Pierette. The light (possibly just a torch) follows him – to give the flesh of his torso a pale phosphorescence during this sequence.

The music has died – the Sirens have receded and departed. The sea sounds colder.

The stage is still dark but there is no moon. The desolate luminosity of the small hours pervades the stage.

Four figures form a circle (looking in) U/S in the half dark. They are the Voyager (right) two others and Clown/Death D/S – the veil is now over his head – he does not wear his hat.

They all make rhythmic movements that are suggestive of mechanical movements of a clock – with arms – twisting of wrists and fingers. These mechanics are also vocalised in a more naturalistic way that is highly evocative. The general quality is one of relentless and hollow monotony.

Coincident with this clock movement is the following sequence.

Three more characters whom we shall call 'Survivors' are seated D/S right but quite near the 'Clock Group'. One of them has an empty bottle in his hand, from which he takes the final gulp, placing the bottle on the floor. The group is comprised of two men and one woman. They are pale, tired, and filled with a numb frozen acceptance.

Each of these characters makes a speech in turn. These speeches have to be in one sense more personal than any so far, and therefore the subject can be much more if not totally open, but if possible should be polarised in the following way. All are expressive of an experience of hell and the state of the damned and rejected.

Person 1.

Reliving an experience from the past that is particular to him ie Being alone at 3am on a wan, desolate deserted railway station – people-less trains passing in the night.

Person 1 (girl)

A long but repetitive and powerful awareness of the coldness of the sea which enters more and more into her physically and spiritually to the very marrow. The total numbing of life.

Person 3

Fevered anxiety of imagination at the future and its terrifying prospects. On the threshold of and even into hallucinatory madness. Visions of personified hostility. Collapses sobbing and inert.

The sound of very strange music begins to take over the very slow rhythm of the surf and replace it. Although strange and unapproachable it has a certain reassuring quality and gentle nostalgic warmth. The only thing one can say is that it has the soft carpeted sound of muted brass and saxophones. With this music is the appearance of the Conjuror. He emerges from the semi dark, dressed in tails and opera cloak which he gracefully removes. He is young but mature, beautifully self-assured and striking to look at. He has considerable presence. During this entrance, the veiled Clown/Death has moved D/S and is seated quietly conducting the orchestra.

The Conjuror walks among them quietly and with great grace and power performs tricks with invisible cards which he has taken from his inside pocket. The movements of his hands are exquisite, commanding and hypnotic. The music finishes. With an air of finality he replaces the cards. The sea floods in as if into a cave the survivors flattening against the sand as if overcome and submerged. Coincident with this the Conjuror has walked D/S formally lifted Pierette by the hand, and they both sit, one on either side of the D/S entrance in the seats that the Voyager and Philosopher occupied at the beginning of the performance.

NOTE:

During the card tricks the 3 remaining clock people light matches and draw light arcs in the air, which softly fall like stars, as far off distress signals.

As the Conjuror and Pierette are doing this, the entire company enter and lie down as dead bodies washed up on the sand. The three Sirens have entered and are kneeling U/S. They are swaying from side to side rippling their fingers. The light has returned to opening form as has the sound of the sea. The accompanying music is from Benjamin Britten's Sea Interludes which is highly evocative of dawn and fresh ripples. A laboured phrase that underlies the music, is used for Death/Clown to drag last body (the Guru) up the beach. Death/Clown has his hat on again, and stands S/R.

There is now a particular piece of music which one can only try to communicate by saying the Sirens suddenly and beautifully rise – turn and arrange themselves to form what is evocative of three black rocks – they remain still – challenging the sea – and caught with the first gleaming drops of spray from the sea at sunrise. The air is sharp and vibrant. The music has wonderfully phrased pieces of percussion.

The Scavengers now enter fro S/L. They are rather pale-faced girls – brownish-auburn or red-headed. Their hair is long and half over their faces with a sad haunting beauty. One is certainly the 'Young Mother'. They are slight, frail creatures and walk slightly sideways as crabs do. They step gently over the bodies feeling them now and again, as if scavenging. One of them seems to have found something – a tiny gold bell – which she slowly lifts with quiet gentle awe. She lifts it just above her face to admire it in the sunlight. As she does so the sea sound fades and Clown/Death

removes his bowler. We have the first real and utter silence. Her hand trembles – the sound is tiny but exquisite – pause – the sound again – pause.

Conjuror and Pierette rise and join the Company.

Curtain.