

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2017 – The Nature of Forgetting

☒ Part of British Council Edinburgh Showcase 2017 and following a sell-out run at the 2017 London International Mime Festival, **Theatre Re** presents a powerful, explosive and joyous piece about what is left when memory is gone. Tom is 55, today.

As he dresses for his party, tangled threads of disappearing memories spark him into life, unravelling as a tale of friendship, love and guilt. Theatre Re is a London-based international ensemble creating thought-provoking, tangible and poignant work.


This company's shows examine fragile human conditions in a compelling, physical style embracing mime, theatre and live music.

The Edinburgh Reporter spoke with Theatre Re's **Guillaume Pigé**, about The Nature of Forgetting.

TER : Can you explain the background to the British Council Showcase collaboration and what impact it has had on the show and the company?

GP : The British Council Edinburgh Showcase happens every two years during the last week of the Edinburgh Festival and provides a platform for UK theatre companies to introduce their work to international promoters. And as the British Council puts it: "The programme comprises new work that represents the very best of contemporary theatre and dance, reflecting the breadth and diversity of British performing arts".

We have always looked up to the British Council Edinburgh Showcase picks and it is an incredible honour to be part of the programme this year. It is a proof of quality for audiences, industry professionals and peers. It hasn't had an impact on the company nor on the work yet, but it will definitely be a boost at the Fringe and beyond. Our work is not language dependant and relies on the universality of movement to tell a story, so there absolutely no limits to where The Nature of Forgetting can be performed. We are really hoping that the showcase will help us create connections with venues and festivals around the world and enable us to share our work with more and new audiences.

TER : Are we to infer the narrative about Tom, aged 55, is  informed by either dementia or Alzheimer's? Did you deliberately want to avoid categorising, compartmentalising an individual's unique situation?

GP : Yes, our main character, Tom, is living with early only onset dementia and he is being cared for by his daughter Sophie.

And yes, it was important for us to be very specific about the subject matter we were dealing with – early onset dementia – but at the same time we did not want the piece to be based on one person's unique experience of forgetting.

First because it is almost impossible to know exactly what is happening in someone's head and portray it on stage. And then because there are so many variations and everyone's experience is vastly different from someone else's – whether you are living with one form of this condition or whether you are caring for someone who is.

Of course, some symptoms are similar but a lot of the time, they don't manifest in the same ways.

The journey of Tom and the people around him in The Nature of Forgetting was informed via workshops and interviews conducted

with people living with dementia and their carers throughout our development process (16 months).

Our aim was not to collect personal stories but to explore the special bond that exists between music and memory. Music seems to be using parts of the brain design for purposes other than memory, therefore people living with dementia keep responding to music and that is where we understand that memories do not disappear, it is just that they become inaccessible.

We also collaborated with Professor Kate Jeffery of the Neuroscience Department at the University College of London. Our aim was to use forgetting mechanisms to develop our piece and create links between the science and the real human experience.



TER : In 2016 there were two stage productions that explored similar themes, Florian Zeller's *The Father*, and the equally, much talked about Fringe mask & mime, *Finding Joy*. The former dark and visceral, the latter witty and uplifting. Why did you think mime and physical theatre suits your approach so effectively?

GP : Our aim was not (and still isn't) to make a show about dementia, but to use forgetting as a tool to unravel something else. Something that could be the answer to the question: what is left when memory is gone?

It is this question that led our exploration and to start with we focused on the technicalities of what happens in the brain when we forget: what is affected first, what impact it has and how it works. The challenge of making a memory that isn't there anymore visible on stage was very appealing.

Very rapidly we understood that memory works visually and that our hippocampus – small region located at the centre of the brain – acts a little bit like a workshop area where memories

are constructed. For instance, if we try to remember our first kiss at school, space – the classroom – is the first thing that gets constructed in our hippocampus. Then, that space is being filled with more details such as wooden school desks for instance, and then with people – other children, the teacher...etc.

And then the actual event – the kiss – comes last. So when we remember we visually construct and re-construct memories. Portraying forgetting on stage thus became about introducing more and more physical problems in this visual re-construction, and that is where the medium of physical theatre and mime takes its full potential.

TER : You describe Tom's experience as, 'tangled threads of disappearing memories.' Was this a deliberate metaphor that resonates with research into how the mind and memories work – those enigmatic 'sparks' of synaptic connections?



GP : Yes, absolutely. Neurobiologists tell us that memories are triggered and unfold in a sequence. Once a memory is triggered it often triggers related memories, and these tend to progress forward in time.

This leads to our impression that memories are all attached to some sort of imaginary threads and once you start pulling on one specific thread, the whole sequence of events unfolds. Throughout the course of one's life, as one acquires more and more memories, one develops more and more of these memory threads, and keeping them separate gets harder.

In the case of Tom, it is not old age that triggers the confusion but early onset dementia. We wanted to make it clear that it had nothing to do with ageing as the boundary between old age and dementia is often very thin.

Tom is not able to find the right threads and memory sequences

start to interfere with each other (one memory involves many neurons, and one neuron can participate in many memories). As the show unfolds, they also start to break, making it impossible to retrieve a whole sequence of event.

TER : The title, The Nature of Forgetting plays in a number ways. Our propensity to forget things, especially that bad ones, though some research suggests that one aspect of clinical depression debilitates the brain's function to balance this with the happier ones. Also, of course, we have cognitive bias, where we give agency to those thoughts and memories that best reinforce our self-identity.

GP : Common experience tells us that we forget far more than we remember, and research confirms that the brain selects which memory traces will be retained and which will be discarded. We are therefore as much a product of our forgetting as of our memories. And yet, much of what we think we have lost in the mists of time returns with the onset of memory decline.



So forgetting also offers the possibility to retrieve the past. Neurobiologists donot know yet why, but we find it absolutely fascinating. This is also what we have noticed during our interview sessions: some long terms memories, which had been apparently forgotten, appeared to be more vivid than ever before. We have used this phenomenon in the development of Tom's journey as well.

TER : Given your success at the recent London International Mime Festival you must have received considerable feedback. Did this inform on any developments in the performance you are bringing to The Edinburgh Fringe.

GP : The responses at the London International Mime Festival last January were extremely positive and it seems that people

connected with the work in a deep and intuitive way. It gives us confidence and encourages us to keep raising the stakes of the work – to not take anything for granted and re-discover and re-invent the piece every time we perform it with imagination, energy and heart.

TER : Is laughter still the best medicine?

GP : Laughter and love!

TER : Explain why The Nature of Forgetting is a show people will never forget!

GP : People might forget eventually, but we can promise that The Nature of Forgetting will live with them for a long time.

Venue 33. Pleasance Courtyard. 12.00. 75mins. All ages.

[Tickets here](#)