

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023 – is talent or sound more important?

What happens when an Action Hero walks into a small sound booth by themselves, alone on a dark stage? That's what audiences can find out over six performances starting on 22 August when Summerhall hosts a collaboration between the Action Hero partnership and Deborah Pearson.

[Action Hero](#) are Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse, a Bristol-based company who have created artworks together since 2005 across different forms including performances, podcasts and work for public space. For their current piece – [The Talent](#) – they're collaborating with [Deborah Pearson](#), who is also co-directing the show with James. Deborah is a live artist and playwright, as well as a founding co-director of UK artist collective Forest Fringe. Together they've created what feels like a haunting and thought provoking show about the voice and whether it can take on a life of its own without the person. On stage there's a small sound booth and inside it sits a voice-over artist. Off stage, seen but never heard, are two disembodied voices directing her to create different voices for commercials, self-help audiobooks, computer games, anything and everything. Is she a powerful protagonist,

literally building her own reality, or is her voice being used to create something more complicated?

I spoke to Gemma Paintin, who plays the voice-over artist in the booth, about the show and how it came about.

She said: "While we were at a Madrid festival presenting different works we had a great discussion over breakfast about what ideas the three of us were working on. Both us (Action Hero) and Deborah had ideas about doing something centred around a voice-over artist and things went from there. James and I have worked with Deborah regularly since 2007 as part of Forest Fringe, as well as on some projects together. We thought this was a great chance to create something together and combine the different ideas we had around the same subject."

If you have seen Action Hero's previous works then you'll know that they are very physical. My first memory of them and Gemma in particular is watching her kick James' head in the brilliant Watch Me Fall. The Talent seems as physical as that or A Western but more concentrated, especially as the focus of the audience's attention is fixed on one part of the stage. Gemma agrees, and explained how the work is a very physical one in a constrained place. "James and I have an acting background so we feel the body is vital to performances. I think that's why some of our works have that aspect. For this one, there's still that forceful presence; for a start you have to adjust your body to create different voices, sounds and tones. Doing that over the course of sixty minutes in a small space is exhausting, by the end of the show I'm shattered. Plus I like that the physical nature of the show adds to the sense of a live experience for the audience."

While it sounds like the Talent is a one person show, James and Deborah are a constant presence, although one the audience never sees. They are the disembodied voices speaking to ask her from the edit booth. Gemma's character talks and responds

to them, interacting with both throughout the show. However, the focus is very much on her character and Gemma's time on stage is relentless, performing a physically demanding part in a space that's approximately one metre square.

She said: "While I'm the only one on stage I don't feel alone at any point. In a way that's strange because I can't see anybody. The audience can see me in the sound booth but I can't see them because of how it's lit and I'm behind glass. Given it's such a small space you need to be very aware of your surroundings; you need to focus on everything you do, every movement. The precision you need is very controlled but the acting feels relentless for me – it's a big show to perform and the focus is on you."

The Talent looks like it has a ghostly quality to it from the preview clip. The show's description talks of a non-human or post-apocalyptic world. This made me wonder if it was horror or more of a speculative foreboding. Gemma agrees that there is some of that but says they didn't set out with that aim. "We wanted to explore the voice and what vocals leave behind, an audio echo of somebody. Hearing the voice of somebody you know who has died is a strange experience – it's them but there's nothing substantial to it. While we gently step near the horror and science fiction genres we're thinking more about what is left behind. Thinking about a non-human future where the only thing that remains is audio recordings."

Of course, it's hard now to talk about a voice not attached to somebody without thinking of AI. Gemma continued: "While the play does cover AI, it doesn't centre on it. When AI feel 'real' there's always a sense of something uncanny about it. Maybe an odd timbre, but something that doesn't sit properly. Having said that, this is more about the alienation around the loss of voice as it originates in a body, a disconnection. If the sounds were made by you but aren't you then there's a strange feeling."

Gemma believes that the Talent will be a great Fringe show and suits August – a small space taking your attention and giving you a sharp and rewarding hour in return.

She said: “Edinburgh feels the right place to perform this show and we’re really happy to be back. The Talent is a funny, interesting, dynamic and thoughtful piece. I think it connects to all our lives, especially after having spent time as a little box on a screen during Covid, a disembodied voice wanting to be heard. I think that will strike a cord with people and they will recognise that feeling.”

