

## 'Flight Paths' or 'Hope is the thing with feathers'

Extract from a creative diary

24/9/2010

I'm going to write at least one of these a week while I'm working on the libretto, as a self-reflective supportive analysis for myself but also, hopefully, to give an insight into one evolving process of writing a script, or in this case a libretto. One of the main differences between a stage script and a libretto (the words for opera or music-theatre) is that a libretto is much sparer. Cut, cut and cut again! You also have to bear in mind that no matter how interested the composer is in words, the audience will only ever hear 60% of them. It's as much like writing a poem as writing a script, which is one of the main reasons I'm interested in this slightly ego-less process. In fact, it's a lot like writing a Japanese poem.

In script writing terms, what I'm writing about here is the **COLLECTION** stage when you gather ideas and do the research; reading, watching, talking, interviewing, picking people's brains, taking photographs, sketching and looking at a myriad of background materials and other inspirations which gradually sift down. It's often the longest stage, though definitely not the hardest. It's probably the most enjoyable time, apart from that feeling of having the first completed draft printed out on pristine white paper.

It must be six months before I had my initial ideas and longer since I decided the general theme for this first of two music-theatre pieces: the birds and landscape of Bempton Cliffs and Flamborough Head. I spent a couple of days with Steve Race of the RSBP in the summer. He works at Bempton Cliffs and is an amazing photographer of birds: on the first day in July, he introduced myself and Steve Kilpatrick, the composer, to the sounds and sights of some of the 200,000 nesting birds especially the kittiwakes, gannets and fulmars, and pointed out the 'secret' birds of the cliff meadows too; on the second day in August we did an observation and writing workshop with two groups of adults and children, largely responding to the landscape and to the gannets, since most of the other breeding birds had left by then. A few bits of writing done on that day, especially the one below, written by a woman who came with her young child helped towards my thoughts about the narrative for the piece –

As the water beneath

lights a moment

I stop I sit

time is not there

*Helen Matthews*

This led to me thinking about Bempton Cliffs as a different kind of space in life, a place of transition, a stop along the journey which might change you for ever – and a space where time operates in a different way to everyday life.

There's a quotation on all the RSPB poster boards at Bempton which connected with this –

'It was sanctuary from the city, from clouds of exhaust fumes, from anger, from drudgery – not just for the birds – for me and my little girl.'

*Simon Franks*

These two brief sets of words set me thinking about the journey from the city to the country, from Leeds to Bridlington to Bempton Cliffs, and why someone might make that journey, and how it might change them. I thought of getting there by public transport: a bus or a walk, the slow train to Brid and then a bus out to Flamborough or Bempton and another walk...and maybe a dive and a swim. All moving, all exercise...all steps on a journey, and maybe – metaphorically – a walking towards flight.

The kinetic question behind the project is **How can we fly without leaving the ground?** and I've been thinking of a central character who needs to learn to 'take off' in her life, and who sees all sorts of different experiences of 'flying on the ground' and actual flying on her journey towards her own 'flight'. Running, leaping, jumping into the sea from a cliff ledge, swimming underwater, throwing yourself into the long grass in a cliff meadow and rolling, dancing on the beach, walking into pitch darkness – all these are kinds of 'flying' in physical movement. They're all about 'leaving the ground' in some way.

**25/9/2010**

Wrestling with **STRUCTURE** (the second stage) and looking at seemingly contradictory sources and guidelines to achieve this. It is the really difficult part of the process, especially when it is an original story (so much of my script work is adaptation, either stated or 'secret' and disguised). This isn't, so for help with **structure** I'm looking at -

*The Hero's Journey* or Quest Structure (a la Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler). This is actually what I started with to make some sense of some very disparate material.

Robert McKee's understanding of the conventional 3 Act Structure but with a nod to 2 Act Structures, which are really a condensation and slight simplification of the two act structure.

A seemingly contradictory source: Maya Deren's films, which are what McKee calls 'anti-structure', especially *At Land*. This source is a bridge between structure and content.

The nature of the space for the main performances, the huge domed ballroom of The Spa, Bridlington where different parts of the audience will see things from below and above – multiple and differing audience perspectives

For **content** (which is, in essence, my **COLLECTION**) this is the eccentric list I am drawing on so far:

The site itself. The drama will take place over a period from around 9.30am in the morning to twilight in the area between Bempton Cliffs and the South Landing at Flamborough, a distance of 11 miles. This is a sort of conforming to the dramatic unities and both digital and drawn/painted images will illustrate and counterpoint this journey. I'm exploring all dimensions: the sky above, the cliffs, the meadows, the path and under the sea. I need to go and walk these 11 miles as soon as possible. There is a photographic diary of this walk on the net, and a series of Google Earth images on the same route contributed by different people.

The history of aviation in the area, especially RAF Bempton and the Air Transport Auxiliary in the Second World War (some of whom were women). This may mean some research through interviews as well as the web, to bring what I need from the story to life. Sherburn-in-Elmet between Leeds and York was one of the 'ferry' airports for delivery.

Online videos about 'tombstoning' (jumping off cliffs) at Flamborough. Articles about the same and the posh version – 'Coasteering'.

Doug Johnstone's 2006 novel, *Tombstoning*, which only touches on the world of tombstoners but is a useful and gripping piece of plotting around small bleak seaside town hopes and aspirations, and the threat and availability of a huge cliff for murder and suicide. Reading this also persuaded me to keep away from the ex-soldier motif which, with Iraq and Afghanistan, is all too tempting.

Photographs and films of the birds at Bempton and Flamborough.

Natural history books on seabirds and the area.

The information board at South Landing about the underwater life.

An early film from the Yorkshire Film Archive of the 'climbers' at Jubilee Corner at Bempton Cliffs (1913).

The fruits of a writing workshop for adults and children in August 2010 – short poems and 'found' pieces based on magnetic poetry.

My own exploratory poems about seabirds and climbing at Bempton, written since the August workshop day. The poems link urban imagery with the birds.

Local musical traditions: Jim Eldon, fiddler and singer, on the boat out from Bridlington every summer and the Flamborough Longsword Dancers.

The song *Shoals of Herring*.

Web stuff on the 'Flamborough Trolls' and the temporary 'pagan' sculptures in the area.

The Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Seafarer*.

Other short poems, like Norman MacCaig's on a puffin and Mary Oliver's on gannets.

The local bus timetable from Bridlington to the coast.

The project publicity image: a young woman disappearing into the sea next to Bempton Cliffs.

John Burnside's GRANTA article 'How to Fly', about learning to fly as a child and all the pilots who vanished in the early history of aviation right up to the Second World War.

Noel Coward songs – for the ATA woman character.

The Yorkshire Birdman, and other birdmen.

Maya Deren's dance films.

Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, especially the general concept of 'The Zone'. The Zone grants the deepest innermost wishes of anyone who steps inside. Perhaps the whole site is a 'zone' and 'time is not there' as Helen Matthews wrote in her poem.

The philosophical, meditative poetry used in *Stalker*, by Fyodor Tyutchev.

The main character's attempts to fly in Lorrie Moore's novel *A Gate at the Stairs*.

David Nash's sculpture – especially the larger sets of three forms, and the exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2010 – 11.

The ability to use **Impossible Theatre's** LightWeight 4m x 4m projection 'globe' installation for constant still and animated contemporary and archive images to counterpoint the action.

Being at the edge of things – a description from A S Byatt's *The Children's Book* of how we see the world as a globe where sea meets land.

A performance I saw in Dartington Great Hall, South Devon, many years ago when the only set was the huge wooden table.

Older people – really old (88+) being able to dance, and a film I saw a long time ago about a group of old men dancing in Canada which was very moving.

The relentless, weight-dragging circular journeys with baggage around the stage, accompanied by repetitive waltzes, in some of Tadeusz Kantor's theatre work – a parallel to the relentless attempts of man to fly with all sorts of different devices.

J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* – one of the most beautiful and perceptive wildlife books ever, about one type of bird in one location.

Staying in 'B&Bs' in Bridlington, especially the small single rooms.

What I already have of Steve Kilpatrick's previous music and talking with him about the raucousness of the seabirds at Bempton Cliffs, how there is no sweetness in their calls.

'Doing an Amy' i.e. flying around the school playground with your arms out.

Images from the film *The Last Tightrope Dancers of Armenia*.