

Performance Responses

Do you know a love song...? Action Hero's *Oh Europa*

Created by Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero. Nyon, Switzerland. 21 August 2020.

By Olivia Lamont Bishop



Fig. 1: Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero with their caravan. Photo by Paul Blakemore.

I sit in my living room, surrounded by the objects that form the composite pieces of my life. Settling onto the sofa with my well-worn headphones, I type in the URL for a Swiss radio station—an activity that has begun to feel increasingly familiar over the last few months of 2020. My environment, cluttered with personal artefacts, has formed the backdrop to numerous performances, artworks, and talks which I have made pains to continue to engage with. Thanks to this ‘new normal’, I am starting to become very much used to my home being inhabited by these works.

What I hear when the 30-minute programme starts enhances this feeling of familiarity. The show begins with two voices singing to me, reminiscent of friends that have recorded and sent me audio messages; their delivery shaky but full of life. Their names are Olivier and Martine, and the song they have chosen to sing together—the song that represents their love story—is *Salut les Amoureux* by Joe Dassin.

Recorded a few days before this radio broadcast in Nyon, Switzerland, Olivier and Martine took part in Action Hero's *Oh Europa*. I learn that Olivier and Martine have been together for one year but are rekindling a relationship they began as teenagers. They hope to get married soon. As I listen, my ears lead my eyes to draw a picture of them and I imagine them sitting in Action Hero's touring van across from the performance makers Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse (see Figure 1); maybe they are nervously embracing the moment to share a personal interpretation of the soundtrack that has accompanied their love story.

Olivier and Martine's song is featured in day four of *Oh Europa*, which took place as part of Far Festival in Nyon during late August 2020. Action Hero's journey of 42,800km (at least until the date of broadcast), has collected 940 recordings of love songs spanning the continent of Europe. They are seeking to find a shared space through the medium of music and a unified understanding with the sounds of love songs. These songs might be recorded by anyone the duo encounters on their journey. The featured singers in the show I listened to were full of contrasts, such as confident Matty in Finland and shy Samir in Lille (who returned several times before finding the courage to perform).

This is a truly pan-European project and I encounter this span of place and experience during the short, 30-minute broadcast in my living room. The voices in this particular show—drawn from those collected by Paintin and Stenhouse since 2018—include other singers from London, Leeds and the Netherlands alongside Olivier, Martine, Samir and Matty. *Oh Europa's* conception and early life aligned with the fracturing relationship between the UK and Europe and with national and European identities appearing to splinter. Action Hero's intention became to investigate how it was possible for people to connect in a way divergent to discussing national politics and cultural identities.

It is also possible to tune into the project via one of the 41 'beacons' that have been rooted across Europe, all accessible through *Oh Europa's* app. As I look on the app, I see there is a 'beacon' about 15 minutes away from me in Bristol, and it strikes me that there are numerous formats and environments that afford me the chance to

experience this work. At a time when Brexit seems to have lost its primacy in our thoughts and become just one of many challenges that face us in 2020, *Oh Europa* affords us a rare opportunity to capitalise on the solitude and introspectiveness of the last few months and to explore this inherently connected work by listening to something as simple as a love song. This gives a chance to privilege the auditory as the primary tool for perception. Perhaps it is in the opportunity to experience this work in my own living room that the greatest shift of personal changes of perspective has occurred.

It is also in fragility and gentle human error that this performance builds a connection of humanity across borders. Listening to Olivier and Martine's version of *Salut les Amoureux*, I witness the moments of imperfection in a meaningful performance between the two lovers. I glimpse into the idiosyncrasies of a relationship to which I am made privy through this performance; I see the secret moments that resonate with my own relationships. Olivier talks as they sing, tenderly cajoling Martine about forgetting the lyrics. Their audible breathing punctuates the singing; these breaths taken out of time engenders a sense of authenticity. The pauses are filled with a giggle or a clearing of the throat; though made public, these moments make the listening experience feel intimate.

The last singer on the show is Chloe, who performs a warm and passionate version of Adele's *Make You Feel My Love*. This momentarily feels transporative, as I remember this sung at my sister's wedding some ten years ago. I am taken aback at how the sound resonates through my ears and into the space around me, interpenetrating through space and time into memories and shared experience. Paintin and Stenhouse state in a review that contemporary viewpoints on Europe are flooded with opinion, and that through *Oh Europa* they wanted to garner less opinion, and more feeling (Simpson). In Chloe's song, I reminiscence on a time of togetherness, a stream of personal and collective consciousness tuning into focus instead of the stream of news usually feeding through my radio, even if just for half an hour.

These polyphonic micro-biographies of relationships cross

boundaries and borders and pin new coordinates of personal experiences on maps through these ‘beacons’. *Oh Europa* sees the artistic work of Paintin and Stenhouse become a roving cartographic practice, offering new possibilities for roaming creations and reception in the comfort of one’s own living room. This therefore traces Europe on a dual corporeal and intangible stage: a ‘really existing’ Europe and a shared cultural imagining. As I listen, I reflect that I am experiencing the labour of forging connections through an archive of personal networks that mirrors the global as well as experiencing the chance to connect with people locally in their own homes. Perhaps an unplanned silver lining of the crippling issues faced by the theatre sector with audiences unable or struggling to visit public spaces is that—hopefully—such inventive new works can thrive.

Works Cited

Simpson, David. ‘731 love songs for Europe: the couple who drove 20,000 miles to unite the continent’. *The Guardian*. 26 April 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/apr/26/a-love-song-for-europe-couple-drove-20000-miles-record-731-tunes>>, 26.04.2019> Accessed 25 August 2020.

Alice – A Virtual Theme Park

Directed by Zoë Seaton. Creation Theatre and Big Telly Theatre, via Zoom. 1-30 August 2020. Watched on 12 August 2020.

By Heidi Łucja Liedke

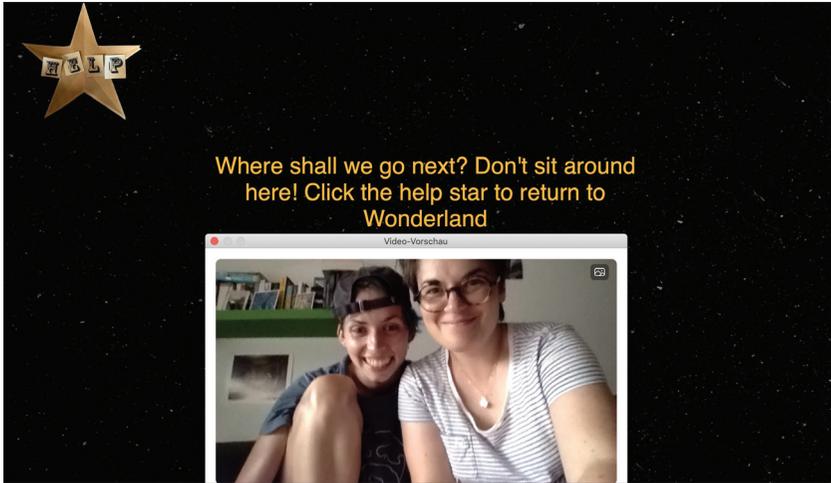


Fig. 1: Screen shot taken during the show of author and her partner.
Photo: by the author.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both forced and inspired theatre companies around the world to leave their traditional theatrical sites and bring their shows into audiences' living rooms: this is not the time to 'play it safe'. The resulting collaborations between the Oxford-based company Creation Theatre and Belfast's Big Telly Theatre have resulted in pioneering work in this regard, with their *The Tempest* being one of the first shows to be performed via Zoom in April and May 2020. For their summer production (or rather, summer adventure) they teamed up with Charisma.ai, a company that specializes in turning graphic novels into interactive experiences and creating interactive drama through virtual reality technologies. In *Alice – A Virtual Theme Park*—a Covidian Zoom adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—audiences were catapulted from their living room sofas out of lockdown and into a tea party with the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse. As is

typical for Creation Theatre's productions, spectators were encouraged (but in no way obliged) to leave their web cameras on so that they were visible to other ticket holders in the 'gallery view'. 30 minutes before the show we were emailed 'A Guide to Wonderland', which included practical information and the encouragement to: '[e]njoy your journey and mind your head!'

The immersive nature of the event quickly made Alice's adventures our adventures. After following Alice (Leda Douglas) down the rabbit hole, the performance became a game rather than a play. Every few minutes a symbol on the screen was available to click (see Figure 1), which would lead to one of several different Zoom rooms in which the Mad Hatter (Dharmesh Patel), Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Tom Richardson played both of them with the help of a mirror and an iPhone), the Queen of Hearts (Vera Chok), or the Queen's Italian Cook (Annabelle Terry) were waiting. The Queen of Hearts in particular displayed a sadistic enjoyment of a kind of—fortunately not lethal—pop version of Russian roulette. Different pop songs were played to which both she and the spectators were supposed to show their best dance moves. Every time the music stopped, an audience member was selected at random and shouted at (if she could have, she would have certainly pushed the selected person to the wall) to tell her why she was the best, the most beautiful, or another such narcissistic question. If one failed to provide a satisfactory answer (which, in fact, was the case for everybody except one extravagantly dressed and well-prepared audience member), the Queen replied curtly with a shrill '[o]ff with your head!!!' Clearly inspired by her malignance, the Queen's Italian Cook stirred an especially disgusting mixture in a big pot trying to convince the audience that it was indeed her who made the best jam tarts.

I had earlier read a tweet about the show where a participant described playing croquet with hedgehogs; though bizarre, this indeed turned out to be true as spectators were prompted to take out their smartphones and go to the website 'hedgehog.land' (possibly an allusion to the musical version of *Alice* by Damon Albarn, Moira Buffini, and Rufus Norris that was staged at the National Theatre in

2016 and called 'wonder.land'). Here, they could create an avatar in the shape of a hedgehog with which they could take part in a croquet match (accompanied by the screams of the Queen of Hearts). Despite the childish curiosity that this brought about, I felt a certain reluctance creeping up: had I wanted to play a pixelated multi-player game on my smartphone, I would have done just that and not bought a £20 ticket for a theatre play. But this was the only bump in an otherwise positively chaotic and unruly 80 minute-long virtual adventure.

While the show was a VR performance, it never felt overwhelmed by technology. Even more than with *The Tempest* there was an impression that audience members had 'shown up' (or, one must say, popped up on the screen) for their own sake. More precisely: the show was characterized by an awareness that the most important person in the room—in people's own rooms, but also in the virtual room created by the theatre company—was the spectator. As director Zoë Seaton told me in a personal interview on 17 August 2020, this has been her approach to making theatre for the past three decades: creating theatre for audiences, devising shows that leave room for the unexpected, and shifting focus to the group that is traditionally 'merely' watching. Of course, with Zoom theatre, one cannot make things or people crash through ceilings or hide notes under people's chairs, but the dizzying array of choices that *Alice* offered gave spectators a considerable amount of agency: it made them somehow responsible, not for the outcome of the show, but for their own enjoyment. Were you willing to give everything you had during the dance-off with the Queen of Hearts? Were you quick enough to hand the cook a handkerchief? On the latter, I wasn't, and my 'smelly old rug' was belittled accordingly.

At the end of the show, the exhaustion one felt as an audience member was, on the one hand, a confused one: what had just happened? Why had one of the butterflies appearing on the screen during the tea party been called Brexitfly? On the other hand, this was the exhaustion of theatrical labour: we had been in a relay race down and back up again a rabbit hole and we gladly took up the baton that had been passed to us. The notions of space—the private and the public—and the potential

of actors' and spectators' agencies had been suspended and shifted temporarily. In the same way that the Mad Hatter—taking out different cardboard sets in his paper maché hat depicting a stage—mumbled '[o] ops, took out the wrong one... The magic of live theatre!', this switching between Zoom rooms, hedgehog races, and strangers' faces was both dizzying and magical: a theatrical somersault and virtual spin on a 155 year-old labyrinth of a story.

Works Cited

Alice – A Virtual Theme Park. Programme notes, 2020.

Seaton, Zoë. Personal interview. Via Zoom. 17 August 2020.