



The Fabularium: a reflective case study of practice-as-research into outdoor performance training and graduate enterprise delivered at Coventry University 2010–2017

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This article documents the formation and development an outdoor performance company that has emerged from pedagogical research and practice undertaken since 2010. The semi-formal training of (initially undergraduate) performers has focused upon popular outdoor performance skillsets, including half and full mask work; puppetry; acrobatics; stilt walking; fooling; walkabouts; drum processions; story-telling vignettes and songs. The work has explicitly drawn upon historical traditions, reinterpreting the mummers' bestiary and *Commedia dell'Arte*, as well as other twentieth-century approaches to mask performance. Training models have emerged which bear comparison to historical models for training in popular performance. There is a sense of a journeyman's approach to training and skills acquisition, as older performers pass on personal repertoires of physical routines, sight gags and tricks, audience interaction and patter etc. Students also work as 'apprentices' alongside professional puppet and mask makers and peer-to-peer training is discussed whereby previously trained Fabularium performers pass on the repertoire to new performers. The apparent continuity of approach is examined as traditional popular forms are assimilated and passed on via these teaching and training methods.

Keywords: acrobatics, masks, jongleurs, repertoire, graduate enterprise

This article provides a detailed case study of the Fabularium, an outdoor performance company that has emerged from practice-as-research undertaken at Coventry University. It offers a narrative of practice and explores issues of training and the transmission of skills and techniques from one generation of performers to the next. The body of the article is written

as an insider's account of a particular set of practices. It documents, from a first-person perspective, the formation and development of the initiative over time, examining the rationale and methods behind the skills training.

The focus of the research and making of related performance work has been on the training and development of a pool of undergraduate and graduate performers in a range of popular theatre forms suitable for outdoor contexts. The catalyst for the Fabularium project was a call for proposals to create work that, it was hoped, would assist in a re-establishment of the Coventry Mysteries as an annual festival. As a consequence, the research and performance work has explicitly drawn upon historical traditions, reinterpreting the mummers' bestiary and *Commedia dell'arte*, as well as other twentieth-century approaches to mask performance. This has included the research and development of devising and adaptation methodologies to produce a 'medievaesque house style' as a performance aesthetic for the company. The Fabularium 'style' employs a hybridised use of a pageant wagon and farm cart stages, various mask types, puppetry, acrobatics, stilted walkabouts, comic vignettes and narrative songs: all popular forms that have medieval or older antecedents. The practice has resulted in a rolling repertoire of material, from which new performance packages are created each year.

As the work has developed, training models have emerged which bear comparison to historical models for training in popular performance, and the article will reflect upon the apparent continuity of approach behind a form of 'apprenticeship' with the Fabularium. There is a certain sense of a journeyman's approach to training and skills acquisition, as older performers pass on personal repertoires of physical routines, sight gags and tricks, audience interaction and patter, for example. Student performers also work as 'apprentices' alongside professional puppet- and mask-makers. This allows them to develop skills that support their own animation of their masks, and enables them to diversify into production-making areas. After year one of the initiative, peer-to-peer training was also instigated, whereby previously trained Fabularium performers began passing on the repertoire (initially acrobatic sequences, songs and short vignettes) to new performers.

There is a certain 'rhizomatic network' aspect to the varied range of professional performers and theatre makers who have contributed to, and influenced the informal training undertaken (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 12). Some of this has been directly through the transmission of skills via masterclasses, but for others it is indirect as their work is reflected in the passing on of tricks, songs and training and advice given to those 'older artists' engaged in the project as facilitators and directors. The particularities of the development of this graduate company requires a certain amount of unpicking of the theatre-making associate circles and informal networks in order to understand how the 'up-skilling' and mentoring of the young apprentice performers has come about. This is where the operation of the rhizomatic metaphor will offer an alternative model of the informal training structure (i.e. tree v. network). The personalities and particularity of practices of the network engaged with the company has offered a roughly coherent training regime over time, that chimes with the 'machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another ... the circus machine' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 88).

For the first four years of this initiative the resulting work culminated solely at the end of each academic cycle in performances as part of the Coventry Mysteries Festival. This 'out of hours' work was framed for undergraduate participants as an annual work-experience performance opportunity, but there has been a discreet research focus (an ambition) behind the establishment of the Fabularium. The hope was that a sort of Deleuzian 'ligne de fuite', in the form of an independent performance company 'may emerge' from this practice, when provided with both physical resources (pageant wagon, masks, puppets, stilts, instruments, costumes etc.) and the performance repertoire that will shortly be discussed. This was made feasible by the particular evolving circumstances and funding opportunities encountered along the way.

This article will conclude by drawing the 'apprentice to journeyman' frame to a close, and detailing how the company is now, to all intents and purposes, 'independent' from the university. Since 2014, graduates and former 'apprentices' Gareth Price-Baghurst and Joshua Patel have run the Fabularium as a professional company. They function as both co-directors and core performers with former student Lou Lomas, now operating as a creative producer, while the original project director and practitioner/researcher continues to offer mentorship and deviser/director input on various aspects of the work (<http://fabularium.co.uk>).

A background in popular performance skills development

In spring term 2010, eight first year students¹ from the Dance and Theatre programmes at Coventry University approached me with a desire to

¹ Rosalyn Lesurf, Alice Parkinson, Charlotte Hale, Vicky Adams, James Kitney, Mike Ward, Asnate Rikse and Gareth Price-Baghurst.



Figure 1 The Fabularium, 2012. Photo Gabrielle Mir-Husseini.



Figure 2 Nate Clarke dive roll over triple headstand. Photo Gabrielle Mir-Husseini.

develop a piece of work to respond to a call for proposals from the Higgs Trust offering a funding opportunity focused upon the re-establishment of The Coventry Mysteries as an annual festival in the city. The students requested a substantial project in order to develop physical performance skills and to provide them with a professional work-experience opportunity during June of that year.

At the point that this group of students approached me, I had only recently started as a full-time lecturer (in September 2009), having previously been Artistic Director of Spike Theatre, a company that had itself emerged in 1993 from the Drama and Theatre Studies department of Liverpool Institute of Higher Education (now Liverpool Hope University). I had gratefully received mentorship after my degree from tutors Claire Binyon, Dr Tom Maguire and Dr John Bennett in starting to make work for outdoor performance. Their influence upon all of my subsequent work is reflected in their own specialisms: physical performance and devised practice; storytelling; and popular theatre respectively. All of these areas defined the work of Spike Theatre during its lifetime (1993–2014). Reflecting upon the popular performance style of the company, Maguire states that,

the work fits the popular definition that John McGrath sets out in *A Good Night Out* (1981), it comes out of the same culture and class as the audience it wants to reach. The shows have musical numbers, acrobatics and physical tricks, puppetry, ranges of accessible styles built around routines to structure the narratives. This corresponds to what he calls for in variety for popular audiences, a range of different moments that help maintain attention, and also the fact that it plays to audiences on the streets, in village halls, community centres, schools as well as small scale venues. (Maguire 2008 cited in Noble 2010, p. 32)

This definition is equally attributable to the work that the Fabularium now also produces.

Spike was initially focused upon making short acrobatic storytelling pieces for street and festival performance. The company learned as it went along, engaging in a wide variety of workshops and short informal training courses around the UK. It took these experiences and ‘moved indoors’, formalising as a small-scale touring company in 1998. The company became an annually funded client of the Arts Council in 2002. Significantly, in 2004 Spike also began developing ‘Theatre in the Parks, Merseyside’, with an annual large-scale outdoor performance event as part of the city’s Capital of Culture bid and as a core activity within the subsequent programme in 2008. Over the five years leading into this ‘Culture Year’ Spike nurtured a troupe of outdoor performers, ranging from professional actors, local university graduates and community performers and provided structured training experiences in popular outdoor performance skills.

During this time, I was also a performer/participant and later programme coordinator and tutor for the Physical Theatre Programme (PTP), a vocational training initiative at Hope Street Ltd in Liverpool (<http://www.hope-street.org>). In this role, I employed a wide range of contemporary practitioners and companies (including mask specialist Joff Chafer of Trestle Theatre Company, with whom I now work at Coventry University) to deliver Masterclasses and short devising residencies to programme participants. The teaching and assimilation of performance skills and approaches led to a wide variety of hybridised work coming out of Hope Street Ltd during this period and a number of companies emerged from this melting pot during this time.

The rhizomatic network aspect to this training transmission and dispersal can be illustrated by discussing the passing on of particular routines and performance material. A useful example of such practice is Gooseberry Fools. This ‘company’ comprised the double act of Jamie Woods and Nick Chee Ping Kellington, who completed the PTP at Hope Street in 1998 and 2000 respectively. They set up as an absurd acrobatic street act. Although this example was relatively short-lived, Dymphna Callery (2001, p. 136) cites them in *Through the Body* and recounts an exercise that they taught (or passed on) from Philippe Gaulier’s ‘*Le Jeu*’ short course. Prior to this, I had taught Nick at Liverpool Hope University, working as a visiting lecturer and collaborated with him in 1996 for an extracurricular project that the University had commissioned from Spike Theatre entitled *The Ship of Fools* (more on this shortly). This process involved the passing on of a wide range of acrobatic tricks including lifts, flips and balances, and also stilt walking skills and the animation of large overhead puppets. On leaving Liverpool Hope University, Nick enrolled on the PTP at Hope Street Ltd, where I provided further skills development, particularly in acrobatics. Subsequently, on completion of the PTP, I employed Nick within Spike Theatre to be rehearsed into a previously devised show entitled *B.L.T.* (2000), which required the learning of a wide range of acrobatic and music-hall hoofing routines.² It is pertinent to explain that many of these set pieces had, in fact, been developed following a week-long informal skills-sharing platform with Nola Rae at a Total Theatre Network event entitled ‘Real Action’ (1999) at Unity Theatre in Liverpool. (And by my scrutinising of the Arts Archive record of the *Acrobatic and*

2 A video record of this show is available at <https://glennharveynoble.wordpress.com/b-l-t/>

Vaudeville Routines (Hutch 1994) masterclass delivered by Johnny Hutch at the London Studios in the mid-1990s.) I had also drawn upon acrobatic set pieces taught by Hutch from a filmed-for-television version of *The Kosh's A Matter of Chance* (1988). I hope that I have captured both the informal and non-linearity of this 'training'. Much of this 'up-skilling' was a case of Nick picking up additional tricks as he went along and, furthermore, I had assimilated a great deal of this material directly via similar teaching (Rae) or via video (Hutch), from even more seasoned performers.

This sort of exposure to the informal training opportunities of 'workshops', which in reality could often be described as masterclasses, and to intensive training periods with more experienced artists, amounts to a passing on of 'the tricks of the trade'. This approach is something that continues to be a significant influence to my own teaching and theatre making. I believe that there is a particular 'journeyman approach' to contemporary actor training that is relatively unexplored in academic research (Noble 2010) and this is partially due to the rhizomatic systems of influences reflected in the kind of name-checking witnessed above.

When relocating to Coventry and finding myself within a higher education theatre department alongside Trestle's Joff Chafer, I took up the opportunity to explore the methodologies of intensive skills training, and masterclasses outside of the established curriculum, with the further aim of encouraging a new enterprise to emerge. Trestle Theatre Company offers another useful example of a group of higher education graduates being mentored and trained by a more senior professional theatre practitioner and tutor. Trestle developed out of Middlesex Polytechnic in 1981 under the mentorship and direction of their course tutor, John Wright, to become one of the UK's leading mask theatre companies of the last 35 years. Where Trestle had originally planned, as Chafer (2016) puts it: 'to pitch up to marketplaces and festivals and put up our portable wooden [trestle] stage, as the Commedia troupes had done', we decided to build a pageant wagon for the same purpose.

The Ship of Fools v.2

When the brief and call for proposals for the Coventry Mysteries Festival was released, there was a distinct sense of 'worthiness' behind the ethos, and condescension at play in the steering of this new festival. The yet-to-be-named Fabularium performers were 'summoned' to present the proposal to what was termed a 'proto-leet', a selection panel including 'the Lords of the Manor' or, in modern terms, the Chair of the Alan Higgs Trust and university managers, in order to explain how the new work would align with the 2010 Festival's rather pious theme of 'Forgiveness'. (This correspondence both sent us to our medieval dictionaries and communicated the possible status at which the Higgs Trust's Chair viewed himself.) Arguably, there were certain contradictions represented in over-emphasising this theme as a signifier of the historical Christian origins of the now all but lost Coventry Mysteries, and the historical contexts of the performance traditions that I had in mind for the project. As Bim Mason (1992, p. 16) points out:

The rise of the Christian Church ended the encouragement of these 'frivolous' activities, which the church actively suppressed at various stages of its history. Forced outside the main centres of civilisation, the individuals and families formed themselves into troupes that travelled around Europe.

However, this contradiction assisted in both the choice of source material from which to make the new work, and provided the impetus to create a touring pageant wagon and company of travelling 'jongleurs', as Mason goes on to call them. (It would be remiss not to mention Mason's own street company Mummerandada, as an influential antecedent and rhizomatic relative in the shaping of the Fabularium style.)

I decided to revisit material that I had first adapted in 1996 for Spike Theatre as a commission to launch Liverpool Hope University (working with Nick Kellington). This was a subverting romp through Sebastian Brant's moralising *The Ship of Fools* ([1494] 1962). This material provided us with a titular ensemble and a clear narrative frame that we would turn on its head – we would unleash the exiled fools upon Brant himself along with the pious society that had exiled them. This symbolic revolution echoed the 'Feast of Fools' traditions that we would draw upon, and allowed a certain sardonic attitude to permeate the research and planning. This particular oppositional position proved great fuel for the students' aspirations, and from which to steer the adaptation and devising.

The particular skillset associated with the contemporary popular outdoor performer that I was envisaging is much the same as that of the Medieval artisan player, as defined by Glynne Wickham (1974, p. 189) and the versatility and robustness required is something other than the perhaps reductive concept of today's 'actor'. More recently, Carl Heap (2014), founder of the influential Medieval Players, writing in the *Guardian* frames the type of performer as:

one who was at ease with talking directly and informally to an audience that wasn't hidden in the dark; who could turn his hand to puppetry, masks, circus skills, music, dance; and who had the fitness and energy of an acrobat. It was the theatre of storytelling, and it was fun. Twentieth-century norms did not apply.

Interestingly Heap's current company Beggar's Belief defines itself as: 'the natural son and heir of The Medieval Players' (<http://beggarsbelief.org.uk>), echoing the passing on of performance traditions that this discussion is concerned with. Another specific reference point for the 'compendium' approach to the repertoire for the Fabularium was fellow Medieval Player John Ballanger's later 'company' Fool's Paradise. The express aim of both the Fabularium and Fool's Paradise was the presentation of an itinerant troupe of jongleurs for 'A Medieval Extravaganza' (Rudlin and Crick 2001, p. 120).

The first Fabularium project represented a 'pilot' for the larger initiative of establishing a new company that followed and began generating a repertoire of work that has continued to be developed over the last six years. Utilising a successful funding bid to the Higgs Trust we employed Russell Dean of Strangeface Theatre Co., an independent touring company specialising in



Figure 3 The Fabularium wagon in situ at Coventry War Memorial Park, 2010. Photo Glenn Noble.

mask and puppetry (<http://www.strangeface.co.uk>), to work alongside the core group of students, Joff and myself.

During the early research and planning stages a pageant wagon was designed and built on the back of a large flatbed trailer. This incorporated a drop-down side to create an extended thrust stage with trapdoor, transforming the wagon into a static outdoor theatre venue with extended access ramps to the stage, internal hatch access to the roof, and interchangeable backdrops. This bespoke resource was designed to provide the raised platform setting ideal for outdoor performance to be the centrepiece of the 2010 production (Figure 3). It was ‘future proofed’ in order to serve a variety of further projects.

Mask sets were also developed as both half-mask and full-face characters to support a multi-role playing style for the piece and to explore styles and traditions associated with masked performance including Chorus, Commedia and, as I will discuss shortly, naive masks originating from Basel Fasnacht. Russell taught mask-making methods to the student company while Joff contributed mask performance skills training. I led on daily intensive acrobatic training sessions and these up-skilling elements were a key part of the rehearsal stage for the production, as was puppetry, stilt walking, percussion/drumming and the development of music and singing skills. For this first project we prioritised passing on practices, routines and previously written songs.

Looking back, that first project really set the tone and ethic by which the performers would be trained each year and for those that stuck with it across the shows, it felt like a company intelligence started to develop. It was an incredibly intensive period for them – and for us. It was like ‘raiding the cupboard’ for material to pass on. (Chafer 2016)



Figure 4 Brant and Genteel Society half-masks from *Ship of Fools*, 2010. Photo Glenn Noble.

The 2010 Fabularium troupe presented a satirical storytelling piece structured around musical interludes, broad ‘knockabout’ humour, dance, puppetry and acrobatic spectacle. The bold adaptation affectionately conflated the original framing text with redemptive narratives drawn from Greek classics and Biblical stories (following traditions from the ‘Mummer’s tales’ utilising *The Odyssey*, *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *Jonah and the Whale* – amongst others). Our fools forgave ‘Genteel society’ for its hypocrisy (Figure 4).

The work opened the new Coventry Mysteries Festival and toured to a number of locations around the city (Cathedral Square, the War Memorial Park and Coombe Abbey Country Park) during the week of 14 June 2010. A public platform lecture followed the show’s premiere, which focused upon the development of the Mysteries as a contemporary civic event in Coventry. During this lecture Professor Pamela King, Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies at Bristol University, described the *Ship of Fools* as an ‘excellent example of how the spirit and traditions of the Mysteries [could] be drawn upon to help establish a vibrant new festival’ (King, 2010). Supporting commentary from her REF2014 submission documentation further reflects upon the festival’s re-imagining of the lost Mysteries:

The present project that appropriates their name does not aim to reconstruct the medieval festival, but has been re-inventing a summer festival of street theatre empowering multi-cultural neighbourhoods in a project directed at fostering civic identity and social cohesion. These connections, and further envisaged work, guarantee a range of social and cultural benefits with economic spin-out. (King 2014, p. 3)

For us, the economic ‘spin-out’ suggested here was a commitment from the funders in late 2010 for three further years of funding to develop the Fabularium, and to sustain a cycle of new work development over the period.

To mark this success, Joff and I organised a field trip in March 2011, taking 20 students including the original Fabularium players to experience Basel Fasnacht. The reasons behind this choice were manifold: the unbroken longevity of this traditional Swiss carnival might offer some sense of the depth of traditions actually lost to Coventry. The mixture of politicised lantern processions, drumming, music and anarchic masked characters would demonstrate the popular performance atmosphere that I hoped students would develop a taste for. The 'Larven' or naive masks originating in Basel are directly linked via training traditions and performance from Jacques Lecoq inspiring the Moving Picture Mime Show and in turn inspiring Trestle and, via Joff, the students at Coventry. I wished to draw the students' attention to a form of 'baton passing' of traditions and influences, in order to inform the work of the Fabularium in moving forward. My aim was to develop a walkabout element for the project inspired by these masks. As John Wright (2002, p. 79) states, 'The larval mask discovers the world but does not necessarily make any sense of it ... [it] can be mercurial and potentially anarchic in a most endearing way'. This led to the development of a new set of Larval masks for the Fabularium and an additional set piece that will be discussed shortly entitled 'The Fossils'.

The medieval bestiary

Between 2011 and 2012, the research focus of the Fabularium prioritised the selection and adaptation of folklore and myths that would have been popular within the medieval period, and that could lend themselves (in the absence of the Coventry Mysteries cycle), for performance at the annual festival. The Trickster character of 'Sir Rossel the Fox' that appears in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* led me to the earlier Reynard Cycle for the portmanteau show *The Tale of Reynard the Fox* (2011) and for this we began developing a particular set of archetypal characters, centred around 12 from the anthropomorphised cast.

Working alongside Russell Dean once again, we researched and discussed the options around different types of mask designs and their 'animation' for our apprentice performers, many of whom would be experiencing both mask work and outdoor performance for the first time. We also considered the broad age range of the audience, and particularly the younger members of the audience with regard to the sometimes disturbing/distancing effect that masks covering either half or all of the face can have. Eventually, we agreed on headpiece masks that would situate the face of the animal character above the brow line and allow the full face of the performer to be seen below, akin to Julie Taymor's masks for Disney's musical *The Lion King* (1997). In practice this allowed us to emphasise the animal character by dropping the chin and leading from the forehead, or return to the performer (sometimes self-reflexively if operating as both character and narrator) by raising the head, in both aspects there would be no restriction to the voice for the performer.

Mask-maker Richard Johnson made the first 12 masks for the Reynard show (Russell added a further six in 2012), and Joff and myself undertook working with the performers to develop and present these animal characters



Figure 5 Libby Morris as Lop the Hare and Josh Patel as Reynard the Fox. Photo Gabrielle Mir-Husseini.

visually, emphasising the physical accents of the heads and the range of personality contained within each archetype. This is something now that the core Fabularium performers have led upon since 2012 and as a result many of the archetypal qualities found in the first iteration of the character performances are maintained and passed on to whoever should be playing this particular animal (Figure 5).

Jes Rowe (Fabularium 2012 to present) reflects upon this kind of continuity:

What is lovely about moving between playing the different animals is that you definitely feel that you can channel the best bits of what someone else has done with the part. I know when I am playing Lop [the hare], that much of what I do has its foundations in Libby Morris's first performance [in 2011 and 2012] of the part, and then also what Steph [Lovegrove in 2013] did with it before me. (Rowe 2016)

While animal characteristic work has a long-established tradition within actor training, I believe what Rowe is relating to is led both by the particular characteristics crafted into the facial expression of the mask by the makers, and by the physical definitions, holds, rhythms and idiosyncrasies used to inhabit the mask by the previous performers. It is this that can be shared,



Figure 6 Dan Moseley as Sowerby the Pig, Gareth Price-Baghurst as King Noble Lion and Rosalyn Lesurf as Cornelius the Crow, 2012. Photo Glenn Noble.

emulated and assimilated by the next generation of performer. This is the case for all of the 18 animal characters (Figure 6).

The focus of the training methodology had clarified itself during the second year of the project as the developing repertoire provided the context for the training to take place. Morning sessions were the longest part of the day and focused upon ball games as warm-ups, preparatory exercises to develop core strength, flexibility and the taking and shifting of weight in pairs. This led onto the guided demonstration and practising of progressively complicated acrobatic skills: from rolls, cartwheels and round-offs through balances and lifts to flips and pairs and group builds. The walls were covered in check-lists and stick-figure drawings as 'aide memoires' so that across the group set pieces and combinations could be practised with 'spotters' and myself moving around the groups attempting different tricks. The teaching and practice of songs followed this and then the final hour of the morning was used for developing mask work, building familiarity with improvised grammelot and punctuation in action phrasing, clocking, passing focus and receiving/taking focus. The masks were both full-face (archetypes, character and naive 'Larven') and half masks – character and commedia stock.

Through subsequent years of the project there was the additional implementation of ensemble improvisation exercises drawn from long-form improvisation practice, much of which has similar characteristics to the Action Theatre: 'In an ensemble, performers constantly pass cues back and forth. To see and hear these cues, the performers require clear attention' (Zaporah 1995, p. 5). The aim of this work was to develop the performers' awareness of listening and responding from 'inside' the improvisation or scenario, and to build spontaneity and reflexivity within the whole ensemble. The performers maintained a focus upon 'physical agreement' with actions, proposals and situations, thereby echoing, developing and heightening agreed contexts and situations. The imperative of seeing and hearing with regard to outdoor performance was communicated as a key rationale for the work, but the responsiveness that was fostered was of fundamental importance to



Figure 7 The Incredible Moving Trees, 2011. Photo Glenn Noble.

the ensemble aesthetic. This was taken into the devising and development of scene work, musical scoring and support and the 'troupe' culture of supporting and amplifying every aspect of the performance repertoire.

Each individual element was produced/assisted/facilitated by the professional team with additional up-skilling then starting to take place from the original Ship of Fools troupe. In this way, I was able to ensure that a sense of artistic synergy was maintained, resulting in a coherent event. This approach has been replicated as the project has moved into successive years.

Acts including our three stilted trees and a chorus of three helmet masked walkabouts (*The Incredible Moving Trees* and *The Terrifying Plague Doctors*) acted as satellite animations throughout the city centre precinct and other open spaces (Figure 7). As such they operated as independent performances for chance audiences before becoming integrated within the main production.

As the wagon was brought into place, opened and set up, the location was filled with the entire troupe and dressed with banners and bunting, an acrobatic spectacle supported by music and song linked the procession to the opening of the 'main' *narrative story upon the wagon*. The full company flanked the side of the wagon, producing a half circle set-up for the audience to fill in. The wider company acted as animal puppeteers, additional character walk-ons and supported all of the songs and music scoring of the piece. The effect of a large ensemble of 35 performers focusing upon and supporting the storytelling greatly added to the sense of scale and spectacle.

A mini-festival within a festival

In 2012, the Coventry Mysteries company and new funding partners Coventry City Council moved the location focus of the festival from the outer



Figure 8 The Fossils in Coventry shopping precinct. Photo Glenn Noble.

boundaries of the city, and hence the parks that we had been animating, with the aim of specifically ‘animating and transforming Coventry’s urban space’ – largely meaning the shopping precinct and Broadgate, the large open square in the city that itself dates back to the time of the Mysteries.

With this remit, it was not practical to create a storytelling piece that lasted any longer than 10 minutes. In response, we created an entire programme of city-centre animations entitled *The Carnival of Animals* (2012) from the growing repertoire and added 12 short animal-fable storytelling pieces, drawing upon and expanding the episodes within the Reynard cycle, but also utilising Aesop’s Fables. We added to the range of animal headpieces with six further characters also found within the medieval bestiary to allow us to create an entire afternoon’s programming containing various elements of Aesop’s Fables. I termed the short storytelling pieces ‘vignettes’ to emphasise the need for brevity, and each was staged with a range of visual devices, including masks and puppetry, and enhanced by songs and live music from a strolling musician player. These were self-contained 5–8-minute pieces, devised so that they could be effectively performed anywhere in the precinct and hold a small group before moving on. A storytelling trail map enabling audiences to search the city to find and ‘collect’ further stories supported this.

The whole *Carnival of Animals* event was framed by a chorus of comic characters drawn from the Mechanicals in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that operated as inept Masters of Ceremonies, staging the animal events as a type of carnival cabaret. A range of new and existing repertoire songs and knockabout sketches from the Mechanicals linked each element. These were initiated on or in front of the wagon, which acted as a permanent installation on Broadgate, before the performance spread out into the wider city centre. The programme consisted of a rolling schedule of 38 separate pieces, which were performed between midday and five o’clock

and included other repertoire elements such as the procession, acrobatic spectacle and walkabouts of the moving trees and the plague doctors. A grammelot-speaking, half-masked chorus of medieval peasants was added plus a new anarchic walkabout spectacle, the stilted, helmet-masked Cyclops character from *Ship of Fools*. Entitled *The Peaceful Shepherd and his Naughty Sheep* (2012), this new act was made by Russell Dean passing on further making techniques, working with students to create 15 sheep headpieces from a generic 'vac-formed' base, which were then individualised by the performers who would wear them. The apprentice performers experienced and explored a playful and often provocateur-style performance intervention as the resulting flock was given free rein to move about the precinct, climbing onto street furniture, roaming into shops, 'borrowing' bicycles and shopping trolleys and bleating at their discoveries.

Another new piece was also developed for the 2012 programme entitled *The Fossils* (alluding to Saint-Saëns' suite that we appropriated for our title), incorporating five specially commissioned 'larval' body suits, which together created a living 'Henge' (Figure 8). The development of the Fossils responded to a desire to examine a larger version of the larval masks and explore a similar range of aesthetics to those attributed to Mummenschanz, who has 'taken the spirit of Lecoq's original larval masks and invested it in the eclectic range of materials and constructions created since 1972' (Murray 2003, p. 119). This particular set piece was a very different performance intervention within the city precinct and required a training preparation based upon a very simple set of movement phrases and responses framed by a low rumbling underscore from a bass drum in order for the enclosed performers to hear and synchronise the piece.

Overall, the aim was to draw upon the strength of work undertaken by the Fabularium since 2010 and to utilise many of the key elements from this to present a compendium of stand-alone performances, genuinely animating and enlivening Coventry city centre.

Journeyman and women

Since 2014, Gareth Price Baghurst, Joshua Patel and Lou Lomas have taken over the running of the Fabularium as an enterprise and have put together a rolling action plan to develop the company into a sustainable independent entity. Several elements from the repertoire are continuously available to promoters, and three new full-length pieces of work have been created with Arts Council of England project funding support: *The Town Band of Bremen* (2014), *The Predator's Challenge* (2015) and a three-hander *Reynard the Fox* (2016). All of the work is marketed to festivals and other outdoor promoters and the trio of graduates has made very firm links with a number of national umbrella organisations and networks for outdoor and street arts. These include: ISAN (UK Independent Street Arts Network), leading to the company presenting at their national event in 2015; they have also performed at PILOT sites at the RSC in 2015, XTrax at the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival street arts fair, leading to them performing Reynard at the 'Out There' international showcase in autumn 2016.

The focus for the company is now marketing the current shows and repertoire works for touring and over the past two years the Fabularium has performed at many festivals in the UK, Ireland and Lithuania (the range of nationalities within the pool of performers beginning to be reflected in destinations). Positive links have also been made in Poland via Patel's employment with Teatr Biuro Podróży, reflecting his experience of and specialism within outdoor performance. In 2016, he was cast in their production of *A Winter's Tale* (2015) in Coventry and *Silence* (2016) for performances in Poland and London. Significantly, Biuro Podróży itself staged *The Millennium Mysteries* (2000) in the Coventry cathedral ruins, a collaboration with the city's Belgrade Theatre, in an earlier attempt to resurrect the traditional event.

As it has moved from being a university-contained initiative, there are two important aspects to the character of the Fabularium that have been maintained. Firstly, the continuing professional development of the pool of performers via masterclasses and the learning of 'the tricks of the trade' from a range of professionals who are further on in their careers. Secondly, the up-skilling and teaching of the existing repertoire to a new generation of Fabularium performers, broadening the range of performers available for freelance contracts with the company. These areas of activity are undertaken at least once a year in January as a formalised contract between Coventry University and the Fabularium. This period coincides with the UK's Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey that measures the kind of employment, further training or other activities that graduates are engaged in six months after completing their degree programmes. Over the last two years between 10 and 15 recent graduates have taken part each year in a two-week residency, training with the Fabularium and also participating along with the wider pool in masterclasses with three different companies or practitioners to develop the collective skillset. This has meant sessions with outdoor performance specialists including Richard Heaton of the Desperate Men, Barny White from Acrojou, Andrew Kim from Thingumajig and Beka Haig from Frolicked. In this way, the rhizomatic network continues to grow.

The DLHE training period has also fostered an important ongoing relationship with Sonia Ritter from the Lionspart (<http://www.thelionspart.co.uk>). Fabularium performers and repertoire material have been incorporated into the Lionspart seasonal festival events *October Plenty* and *Twelfth Night* at the Borough Market and the Globe, on the London Southbank, since 2014. Ritter has passed on a great deal of performance material including traditional mummers tales and business, and folk songs that have assisted in further extending the company's informal training in popular forms.

In 2015, Wild Rumpus, the organisers of the Just So Festival, booked *The Town Band of Bremen* and the positive reception that this received led to an invitation to run an entire section (or glade) at the 2016 Just So Festival at Rode Hall Park (<http://www.justsofestival.org.uk>) with a programme entitled *Tales of Animalia* (2016) (<https://vimeo.com/184217896/8aa3f65e43>). The remit was to maintain a varied performance programme from 10.00am to 7.30pm. Thankfully, the repertoire built across the previous six years saved the day, and the company was able to provide 20 trained performers, across a number of different pieces and acts, to fill the nine and a half hours each



Figure 9 Jes Rowe as Lady Lupin, Gareth Price Baghurst as Noble King Lion and Joshua Patel as Reynard the Fox at Just So Festival, 2016. Photo Joseph Carroll.

day(Figure 9). Much of this has been baton-passed between Fabularium performers since its inception in 2010.

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