

Minutiae, Mysteries and Magic: A Conversation with Little Bulb Theatre Company

BY EMER O'TOOLE

Introduction

Little Bulb is a fringe theatre company dedicated to illuminating the minute human details of life through movement, song, and storytelling. Founded in 2007, the company is currently comprised of Alex Scott, Clare Beresford, Shamira Turner, Eugénie Pastor and Dominic Conway. They started performing at the University of Kent with their first show, *Crocoshmia*, a gently poignant and funny tale of three orphaned children, which went on to win an Edinburgh Fringe First and a Total Theatre Award in 2008. Eugénie joined Little Bulb in 2009. Since then, they have produced *Sporadical*, a fantastical folk opera performed to the 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'cousins' assembled in the audience for an ostensible family reunion. Little Bulb also produce cabaret and scratch pieces, such as *Edible Mistakes*, which played at Shunt in 2009. They are currently working on *Operation Greenfield*, a musical piece about four teenagers in middle England striving for success at a local talent competition, which is due to premiere at the 2010 Edinburgh Festival. Little Bulb is an increasingly accomplished fringe theatre company who enjoy great critical success. In this interview they give an insight into their creative process and the thoughts, feelings and impulses which inform their work. Dominic and Shamira were unavailable on the day of the interview. Emer O'Toole met Alex, Clare and Eugénie in their dressing room at the Battersea Arts Centre.

EMER: On your website it says 'Little Bulb create theatre performances which explore the minute human details which, in a world so big, are easily swallowed up.' Could you talk to me about this concept, which it seems to me represents a kind of

transformation of the invisible into the visible, the irrelevant into the important?

ALEX: *Crocospia* is very character based, involving lots of close observations of characters. When we were making it we were excited by little human moments. It is quite a funny show, hopefully, but not necessarily a comedy. It's to do with humorous situations that arise out of little human foibles. I think as a company we got into translating little truisms about people, finding what makes people tick. By putting those moments within a structure and connecting them you get an emotional look at people and how they operate.

CLARE: While I'm not necessarily anti-technology and commercialism, I am interested in the effort of real things – like writing a letter, or hand-making something. We really love theatre that concentrates on the things that are real in life. It's like - if you get out at any tube stop you find exactly the same shops. I love little hidden shops with individuality. Our theatre tries to concentrate on things that are a bit different. And I think people appreciate that, because so much that is individual can be glossed over.

EUGÉNIE: It's not a question of whether or not we paint a big picture or make a big statement, because in theatre there's always a statement. What we do in *Operation Greenfield*, for example, is focus on specific characters and what happens in their normal, average lives. Through focusing on the existence of one specific character and how his or her existence changes, you get an idea of what the work is trying say. The microscopic things in real life can be hilarious or heartbreaking, just as they are in any café or at any bus stop. That's why we pay such attention to detail.

ALEX: That's especially true for *Operation Greenfield*. While it cuts quite an epic shape, what gets discussed by the characters is very minute.

CIARE: All the characters are teenagers so the talk is a bit awkward anyway. But it's funny, if you listen to what people talk about sometimes, it *is* really mundane. Like, although it's a cliché, the weather. When I was in year nine in school my class was asked to write a biography. And everyone was trying to think of someone really interesting – Jamie Redknapp or Brian Harvey or whoever -



Fig. 1. *Sporadical* (2009). Photo courtesy of Little Bulb Theatre Company

and I said to the teacher 'I thought I'd do my grandmother, but I don't know, maybe I should do someone with a more exciting life.' And the teacher said 'everyone's life is exciting; you've just got to research it.' I think that's true. It's more fascinating to learn about the life of someone who isn't famous. If you just watch any person and write about what he or she does, that can be amazing.

ALEX: That attention to small or seemingly unimportant things helps us to form environments – which we're really into. In pretty much all the shows there's the idea that the audience comes in and is immediately involved in some kind of environment that's radically different from what's outside.

CLARE: Like you're entering a world.

ALEX: You enter a different space. In *Crocoscopia* you come in and there's the sound of rain and the lighting effects are all very blue. In *Sporadical* you're coming into a party.

CLARE: For productions like *Operation Greenfield* and *Crocoscopia*, Alex forms a world, and then it's great for us, because we get to enter it. We start with little strands - say with *Crocoscopia* there was a record player and toys, and with *Operation Greenfields* we've started with musical instruments - and then more and more things are

built into the world. We live in the world shown in the finished show from the get-go. By the time we get to performance, we've gotten so used to being in the world with all its subtleties that it's complete when the audience gets to enter into it. I think that's important – it's part of what makes the experience feel special.

EMER: Tell me more about that moment when the audience is introduced to the world you've created. It feels to me as a spectator that you put a lot of trust in your audience. There's an element of risk. In *Crocospmia* you're asking an audience to believe that you are all in fact children – you're bringing them through adult bodies into that child's world. Do you always trust your audience to come along with you, or are you ever afraid that it's not going to work – that your world will seem too alien?

CLARE: *Crocospmia* was first performed at the Central School of Speech and Drama a week before our show at university. We tried to open by showing the audience our toys when they came in. And it did *not* work. If it's too much too soon an audience can hate you from the get-go and they won't invest. But what I love about doing *Crocospmia* is just sticking to my guns. You have to stay in the world. If the audience saw that you didn't believe it, it would be terrible. Any hint of acknowledgement that we are in fact adults would shatter what we have created. It feels really lovely if, at the end of the hour, people have bought into it, because at the end of the day we *are* twenty-five year olds. It's a dangerous idea in ways, and yes there was a time when it didn't work.

ALEX: The opening is really tricky actually. We were doing a show here at the BAC recently, and the sound levels weren't right. For the opening montage the sound was too high. It sounded really loud and raucous and the audience took ages to settle into the show. *Crocospmia* has to have quite a gentle start, because the kids can be annoying. We even found that in rehearsal – the kids are so rambunctious that there actually needs to be quite a strict structure in the show to keep them in order. Otherwise they can be too much and the audience won't like them. So it starts really gently – it's late at night, you just get one of them. Then the other two come out and they're being a bit sheepish. They set up the space quietly; they're not really that chatty. There's just enough of that for the audience to get used to them.

CLARE: When we were rehearsing poor Alex really did have to deal with three children. It was helpful for us to stay in character constantly, and get any silliness out of our heads at lunchtime.

EUGÉNIE: I know how involved you are when you enter the world of *Crocoshmia* because I suddenly become Marie-Clare the French au-pair! It can be quite unnerving because you're so into it. I don't see Clare anymore – I see a seven and three quarter year old kid. I think the reason the world you create is so inclusive is because of that absolute commitment. For *Sporadical* that kind of commitment was definitely a strategy too. I found it really reassuring as a performer. When an audience member entered the space, one of us might run up and say 'Hi Great-Uncle!' By the end of the awkward Great Uncle moment you had the audience member in your pocket. Some people are reluctant to enter the world, but most are on board by the time the show starts. I see *Sporadical* as an event rather than a show, and I think *Crocoshmia* has a similar texture to it.



Fig. 2. *Operation Greenfield*.
Photo courtesy of Little Bulb
Theatre Company

CLARE: With *Sporadical*, even if the audience are a bit reluctant, you can 'wink-wink nudge-nudge' them. You can say 'don't be so grumpy cousin.' You can work with whatever someone brings to the table. If you just believe that everyone is family, you can handle any reaction. So if someone says 'I'm not your auntie,' you can say 'oh you always say that auntie Jane.' We are more ourselves in *Sporadical*, and it's a different show in that respect. But we're still creating an environment, a world.

EUGÉNIE: I think the environments of our shows make the audience and the performers feel quite safe. Obviously as a performer you are never completely safe. But still, I feel much more relaxed starting a show after getting to know the audience. Some



Fig. 3. *Operation Greenfield*. Photo courtesy of Little Bulb Theatre Company

people tell you that they hate audience participation – but then these are the ones you find screaming the sea shanty in *Sporadical* with us. As a performer I feel like I'm at some sort of party. I'm asking 'hey audience member, will you have fun with me?'

Crocsmia does something similar in a different way. You're still asking the audience to come on board.

EMER: Can I ask you a question Eugénie? The others inhabited a world that you, as a new member, perhaps had to walk into. How did you find the devising process in this already established theatrical situation?

EUGÉNIE: Funnily enough, I met Alex in Kent when we were both cast in a devised show. I knew how to devise a show, and loads of the shows I had done in France were devised. But what I really like about working with Little Bulb, and I felt this even with our cabaret piece *Edible Mistakes*, is that you are entering a world in which you are simultaneously creating. You have proactive responsibility. You have creative space, but you have to take opportunities. I never feel judged, so I can try out awful bits of music or speech. I have a space where I can exist as a performer, as an artist. I'm the kind of person who is terrified by the blank page. But you can't be afraid in this process, because there's a pragmatics to it. You either write a poem in the time allowed and it's included, or you don't, and it's not. Working on *Operation Greenfield* is

strange, because everything I expected is happening in a way that I couldn't have foreseen. Everything is new and surprising, but at the same time I'm being led through the process by Alex in a really natural way.

ALEX: Well that's a relief.

EUGÉNIE: As a performer with Little Bulb you have a good idea of what the process is going to include. Very early in the process, you're given a box and there are objects in it with which you are asked to engage. So in building a character, the creativity is coming from you, but you have an already established space.

ALEX: There's kind of a valve system isn't there? I see it as the actors' jobs to come up with the characters. I maybe nudge them in certain directions, but they can work against the nudging. I gave Dom a whole load of football magazines recently, and he could have taken that and run with it, but he just rejected it. So there are no football references at all in *Operation Greenfield*. That's cool that you see it like that Eugénie. I suppose the actors have the space to do all the creation. And then what's really nice about what I do is I can just sit back and tie it together, think about how one bit can fit in with another, and that ultimately directs where the story's going. And because the actors don't know about the story, they're free to experiment.

CLARE: It's really nice, because Alex obviously has a grand design, but you don't see it as a performer. It's very clever.

ALEX: Sometimes *I* don't see it. It's a stalling technique.

CLARE: For instance, I might have forgotten a key factor about a character, and then Alex brings it up again in relation to something that happens later in the devising process, and I think: 'Of course! Of course that's what this character would do. Of course, that's what would happen.'

ALEX: I view a show as a kind of a mystery that's there to be solved. And it normally begins with a title. So with the current project, *Operation Greenfield* was the title, and I knew that it would involve religion. I thought maybe the characters would be a bit older. I knew there would be music. Everything else in the show has involved working backwards to find different layers. But

essentially it's like a mystery. How will the story end? What will happen to the characters after all the emotional ups and downs?

EMER: Was it a similar process with *Crocospia* and *Sporadical*?

ALEX: Definitely with *Crocospia*, but *Sporadical* didn't have a director. It had five minds just going at it. That was really fun. It's a different way of working, and it produces a different style of theatre. It's much more rough and ready. It has a structure, but the structure leans towards cabaret, improvisation, and bantering with audience. The story was just hammered out over, oh I don't know, drinking sessions. 'No thish is going to happen to the mermaid.' 'No thish is going to happen!'

EUGÉNIE: With *Sporadical* we had the material and we just needed to fit it into a story that could accommodate it.

CLARE: Devising where everyone is equal is a really good experience, but it means that, because five minds are different, every point is minutely discussed. It can go on for ages. At one point we were debating whether the dead mermaid was a mermaid ghost or a mermaid zombie. For ages! And no one watching *Sporadical* is ever going to care or know. But then that's one of the nice things about our theatre. We care about and debate the minute details. Words too. We're really particular about jokes, timing, which word is funnier. No one in the audience will be able to tell the difference between a strategically placed 'this' or 'that,' but all these tiny things come together. Our shows are comprised of everything added up.

ALEX: What's great with *Sporadical* is that, because there's no script and no endpoint, we see it as an ongoing choreography. It's like we're obsessively getting to the best choreography possible. Towards the end of *Sporadical* I felt we were getting closer to exactly the right things to say. We were being a lot more concise.

CLARE: We still change lines in *Crocospia* too.

ALEX: We do. And there are still things that aren't right. For instance, there's a bit where Freya puts on a French record, and the line to introduce it is kind of filler, because we haven't found the right line yet. It's an ongoing mission. We'll find the line. We're still working backwards. We're at a much more tender stage of

Operation Greenfield, so all the big things rather than the little things are in play.

CLARE: The constant development of our shows keeps them alive.

EMER: In all your productions you maintain an attention to detail and a focus on little things. I've really enjoyed hearing you describe your process, because now I can recognise elements of it in the performances I've seen. It was interesting to hear Eugénie say that she was given a box of objects and had to interact with them. One of my favourite moments in *Crocoscopia* was when the foster parents were suggested, or evoked, by a puffy perfume bottle and a runner shoe. It's a really interesting use of puppetry - simple objects are given life and become characters in your performances. Can you tell me more about how you transform everyday objects into complex human beings?

CLARE: Well first you should know that those were not the only foster parents. We interviewed a lot of potential foster parents for the Brakenburg children. The kids would sit down and we tried out different objects and characters. Again, it's this whole mystery thing: we didn't know what the foster parents would be like; we didn't know that we'd find Mick and Christine. We had lots of couples come to visit. We acted them out in real time, and then after rehearsal we discussed them and decided that Mick and Christine were the ones who would get it. But there were other candidates.

ALEX: The good thing about the unusual puppetry or poor puppetry is – and this also applies to *Sporadical* where we used bad, old fashioned two dimensional puppets as opposed to the objects in *Crocoscopia* – it's more magical when you can see that a puppet is not quite what it should be, but you're convinced anyway. That's the ultimate magic. If you can see exactly how the trick is being done, but are still convinced by it on some level. We use a lot of objects when we're creating a show, so the puppetry is almost a natural extension of that. When pre-planning I'll go to charity shops and suss out what might be an interesting object to have in the show. That object has already been owned by someone. It already has a history that we don't know about. So if we just do a bit of mental ju-jitsu we can believe that it really belongs to a character in the show, and then it has a history to tell in the logic of the story. Hopefully that's helpful for the performers. There are all

these real objects, and real people did own them. Objects store up little messages that they communicate to us. The perfume bottle, however, suffered a misfortune.

CLARE: I killed her

ALEX: Foster parent one died, and we had to get a replacement. And they're actually quite difficult to find, those puffy perfume bottles.

CLARE: It was an awful moment

ALEX: And when you've done the show with a particular object, it seems really wrong to replace it with a different object. But then we just had increasing bad luck – all the foster mums started dying. So we've ended up with a plastic water sprayer now because it's really robust, which is a bit of a cheat really.

CLARE: I felt terrible about that. I'm the worst for this sort of thing because I hate change, and I'm a bit superstitious. But the more the show goes on the more you realise that it has to survive the same way humans survive – things break, things do change. So over the last two years we have had to get a new button, or a new candle, or replace things that get covered in cake. But, like in life, things don't change all at once.

EMER: We've talked throughout this conversation about finding the individuality in things. You don't want to come out of a tube stop and see all the same shops - you're more interested in the oddities of a little local shop. We've talked about the attention to detail that creates your environments or worlds. We've talked about your very simple yet effective puppets, and how object's histories create stories for you. There's also the simple yet effective visual effects that you use. In *Sporadical*, for example, Eugénie as the Bride swims across a dark stage supported by a bar stool at her belly, her white dress lit up by strobe lights, and it's very effective. Although you can see the bar stool and you're aware it's a simple strobe light, what you experience is a charming vignette of a bride swimming at night. Little Bulb is getting a good deal of critical attention at the moment. The critics love you; you've won awards.

ALEX: Just look at this dressing room Emer. We've made it.

EMER: The charm of your aesthetic comes from tiny details that you imbue with so much meaning, these suddenly gigantic little things. If you did get to the point where you had more resources, where you were offered a stage at The National, or a funding body threw a lot of money behind one of your shows, do you think that your aesthetic would survive it – or is Little Bulb by its very nature theatre for the fringe?

ALEX: It's tricky isn't it? I do think that's a problem. A lot of theatre companies get to a point where they're just too polished. It's a terrible cliché, but I think you have to stay true to yourself. Also, you have to stay true to the situation in which you're working. So if you're making a show for The National, you have to do something that's going to work for their audience.

CLARE: But then that's dangerous. If we were asked to do *Crocospia* in the wrong space at the wrong time, and we made it bigger with loads of projection, that would destroy the show. It would be like selling out.

ALEX: Big shows work well in big spaces. We prefer being in smaller venues. We did have a really lovely one off in a big venue, but that was a venue we knew very well and there was a great atmosphere. I think you have to stick to your guns when it comes to the venues you choose.

CLARE: We make work that we're passionate about at the time. *Operation Greenfield* is a more technical show than the others. We usually control all the music and lights from onstage, but in *Operation Greenfield* we play teenagers and teenagers have gadgets, so the amount of tech doesn't affect our aesthetic. In fact it reflects our world, which is becoming more technical. I suppose if we wanted to make a show about, say, a massive rock gig, we could probably get speakers and tech and fancy lights. And if that were appropriate for that show, fine. But grafting that kind of stuff onto *Crocospia* would be really wrong. There's lots of mixed reports on *Operation Greenfield*, but we can't think about whether they're right or wrong: we just have to make this piece of work, put it out there in the ether and see what happens. And I'd rather do that than something tailored to an audience - something overproduced, polished and commercial.

EUGÉNIE: I'm really inspired by Improbable's approach to 'big' staging. Say with *Satyagraha*, where they're on a massive Opera stage: they devised a show for opera-goers while sticking to their aesthetic. Everything looks like cardboard and they use huge puppets of Shiva. They use sellotape to create puppets and scenic images, when they could use all sorts of fancier materials. It's amazing. At the same time, they have people flying through the air, because they're in an opera hall, and they can do that. I found that really inspiring. It's in line with Clare and Alex's thoughts about adapting your work to where you perform it and to whom you perform it, while staying true to yourself.

ALEX: You're right. *Satyagraha's* really appropriate for the stage it's on, yet it maintains Improbable's aesthetic. Perhaps that's got something to do with staying strong against outside pressures too. We certainly felt like people were expecting *Crocsmia 2*, another sweet show, when we made *Sporadical*, which is more adult and frivolous and moves away from tight structures. Now with *Operation Greenfield* we're moving back to a structured kind of show. I think it's a little kindness to the people who follow us, who come to see all our shows, to shake things up a little too. You wouldn't want the Little Bulb hit to wear thin.

CLARE: We're still finding out who we are as people and a company. What people know in terms of critical reviews are *Crocsmia* and *Sporadical*. But we've made so many shows over the past year - *Angel and Devil*, *Soul Funk*, *Edible Mistakes*, *Extraordinary Ordinary*. We do kids shows sometimes, like *Fran at University*. We've done some stuff that we've been commissioned to make, and we all have our individual projects as well. We're so eager to make and create. We're learning all the time - like for *Operation Greenfield* we're all re-learning instruments that we used to play as teenagers. It's so great to be making theatre, because it makes you do these things. It's exciting. It feels like you can do anything you want. It's like being a kid.