



The Worst Gig in the World

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Read at Storytails on 28th November, 2010

The day after I got thrown out of one of Britain's most prestigious drama schools I phoned my friend Bradley and we decided to start the theatre company that we'd always talked about. Not only would we immediately instigate a worldwide cultural revolution, it was also the only conceivable way I would get to appear on a public stage now that everyone else agreed I shouldn't be allowed to. Bradley came to Bristol, and the Crystal Theatre of the Saint was born. We were an experimental multimedia performance group - which could mean almost anything. And that's exactly what we did: almost anything, just as long as it wasn't anything anyone else was doing.

Right from the start we were lucky enough to receive state subsidy. But that was only because most of us were on the dole. When it came to funding from the Arts Council - it didn't. They were reluctant to give us any money because they thought we were undisciplined, erratic, wilfully obscure, and on drugs - which was unfair. We were never *wilfully* obscure.

Then we did some shows in Holland, and it was a different story. The Dutch arts establishment thought we were doing pioneering, cutting-edge, avant garde work. Perhaps they were as stoned as we were. There was a lot of money for the arts in Holland at that time, and this was a period when Amsterdam city council was giving a cultural foundation grant to the local chapter of the Hell's Angels. So, in about 1976, the Crystal Theatre finds itself living in Rotterdam, where the nice Dutch people give us a house to live in and some money to develop a new show.

It's the middle of December and a young Dutch guy we know, who fancies himself as a promoter, tells us that he's scored us a college gig in Utrecht. Great, we say, what kind of college? Well, he says, it's a butchers' college. The biggest butchers' college in Europe. And the students' Christmas party is coming up, and usually they have a

band, but this year the college social secretary has agreed that the students should be exposed to something a bit more adventurous, like the cutting-edge multimedia show we're still in the process of devising, and the gig is in three weeks.

At the time we had a pretty radical approach to rehearsal. We didn't do any. Why waste time laboriously practicing things in a cold rehearsal space and ruin the spontaneity of doing everything for the very first time in front of a paying crowd? But that doesn't mean we didn't do any preparation for the show. No, we put a lot of energy into building a very large and elaborate set, like a giant triptych, with big revolving panels that also acted as screens for the light show projections we used. It was a very ambitious construction, and we were looking forward to getting the whole thing up and working. Maybe we should have done that before the first gig, but that would have been a startling departure from our usual working methods.

The gig was on a Saturday night. I'd been in Amsterdam for a couple of days, and I'd arranged to go straight to Utrecht, while the others would drive from Rotterdam in our bus, and we'd all meet at the gig. I got there quite early and I was met by the social secretary, who gave me a guided tour. He informed me that this was the most modern butchers' college in the world, with nearly three hundred students, two of whom were women. He then led me into a large room completely covered in white tiles. Three hulking figures dressed in full-body orange bio-hazard suits were clustered in the middle of the room, hosing blood off the walls. My host was very disappointed. Oh, he said, They have just finished the slaughtering! Damn, I said, we've missed all the fun.

The next stop was even more disturbing. It was a replica butchers' shop. Here, in this quaint little fantasia, the students were practising role play. One would enter the shop, in the guise of a customer and address another student, standing behind the counter, twirling a meat cleaver with a merry twinkle in his eye. Good day, Mr Butcher, may I have five kilos of offal, please? Certainly, Mrs Customer, would you like me wrap it, or will you eat it on the way home? Something like that. Whenever I want an example of what "surreal" means, I think of that little imaginary butchers' shop.

But now it was down to business. My host began to explain the arrangements for the evening. First, he said, we will be having the great Christmas feast. We start with some cold sliced meats of salami, and ham, and that kind of thing. Then is served a type of big meat pudding, made of minced sheep inside a fresh intestine. Then there is turkey, which is coming with smaller sausages, and bacon. And then some beef. And all the time a whole wild pig is roasting, and we eat him. Then we have coffee. Sounds good, I said, but there are nine of us, and five are vegetarians. Yes, he said, there will also be some vegetables with the meat. No, I said, these people don't eat any meat at all. He looked at me for a long time in stunned silence. Finally he said: How is it possible? He simply didn't understand the concept of not eating meat. After that, things began to go downhill.

First of all, the others turned up. They were only a couple of hours late, and while there was nothing unusual in that, it did create a small problem. The big hall, where we were due to perform after the meal, was now being prepared for the meal itself, which was also taking place there. This meant we couldn't set up before the meal. We'd just have to do it afterwards, as quickly as we could. This put everyone in a pretty bad mood. All except Mort. He seemed quite perky. You're looking happy, I said. Yes, he said, this acid I've taken seems to be pretty strong. Shit, I said, is everyone tripping? No, Mort said, just the three of us. Well, I thought, look on the bright side: at least they didn't get the abattoir and the imaginary butchers' shop. That might have freaked them out a bit.

As it happened, there was enough to freak us out anyway. The meal went on for a very long time. Everyone was very polite to us, but they were obviously a bit offended that some of us wouldn't eat meat, and that even those of us that did refused to eat more than twenty or thirty kilos of it. But finally the meal was over, and it was time for us to set up. We waited for the students to leave. They didn't. There was nowhere for them to go, we were told. So, for the next hour three hundred Dutch trainee butchers sat in silence, watching nine sweating, stumbling, cursing English people trying to erect a very large, very complicated set - for the very first time. They might have enjoyed the spectacle a bit more if they'd known that this was going to be possibly the most entertaining activity they were going to see all night, and certainly the most comprehensible.

Finally we were ready to begin the show. And if the preparations had bewildered the audience, it was nothing compared to their bafflement at the performance itself. It didn't help that unlike most of the Dutch audiences we'd played to these people spoke very little English. It also didn't help that we didn't know what the fuck we were doing, and we were doing it very slowly. The show was meant to last just over an hour. After two hours I calculated we were about half way through. The going was slow but it wasn't uneventful. At a certain point I gave Mort his cue to enter from stage right. It was a big moment because he was meant to come on carrying a blazing sword. Which he did. But this was the first time he'd attempted the costume change that was involved, and he was only half way through it. However, he believed it would have been unprofessional to miss his cue, so he marched on to the stage, holding a blazing sword, naked except for a pair of Wellington boots. He said later that he thought it would enhance the dramatic impact for the audience. He was right, but not in a good way.

Various other things happened, and some of them were even meant to happen. But one of them definitely wasn't the set falling down. It collapsed slowly and rather beautifully. The audience remained completely silent, as they had been all the time, but I sensed a momentary change in the quality of the silence, from profound hostility to grim satisfaction. They continued to sit and watch us, still in complete silence, as we gathered the pieces of the set together and started trying to pack everything up. Then, like bystanders at a gruesome accident accepting that the carnage is finally over and there is nothing more to see, they stood up and filed out.

After they'd gone we were told that we weren't going to get paid. You may think we didn't deserve to be paid, but even though we had bored, baffled and alienated these people quite mercilessly, we had actually worked very hard at it. We remonstrated with the social secretary, but to no avail. But he was needlessly unpleasant about it. He even sneered as he told us that there was nothing we could do about it, because our "stupid hippie" promoter had settled for a handshake instead of a written contract. With that he marched off, leaving us to pack up and get out. But he wasn't quite right when he said there was nothing we could do about it.

The only way we could get the set in and out of the building was through an adjoining room. This was a smaller space which the students used as a kind of social club.

Somewhere to relax after a hard day of frenzied butchery and demented role play, and swap a few amusing yarns about intestines. And in the middle of this room was a kind of wooden shed festooned with padlocks. It was the bar. It was a good arrangement - once the shutters were up, thirsty students, eager to wash away the stench of slaughtered animals, could cluster around on four sides and be served efficiently.

And although this edifice was very well secured, it was still, basically, a shed, and a shed is nothing more than several pieces of wood screwed together. And what is screwed together can be unscrewed. Especially by people who always travelled with a plentiful supply of heavy duty tools on account of the ridiculously large and complex sets they were always building, and who had a powerful grievance. And there were nine of us.

Without touching any of the padlocks we dismantled that shed, piece by piece. It took about twenty minutes. We didn't take all of the drinks. We took all of the vodka, and all of the whiskey, and all of the gin, and all of the tequila, and all of the beer, but we left some of the soft drinks. And then we rebuilt the shed, so that it looked, from the outside, as if it had never been touched. And then we loaded up, and drove into the night, drinking quite heavily to destroy the evidence.

Every word of this story is completely true.