

We will chronicle the development of the 3-part work “Calling Home!”, created in 2008 using UpStage. We will describe our collaborative process, the challenges encountered and how we addressed them, how our diverse backgrounds influenced our processes, the development of the story and characters, the specificities of the three parts and ways in which we tried to engage audiences and challenge the mediums used.

Cherry Truluck:

Coming from a background in architecture and (later) set and costume design for theatre, I indulged my love of theatre and performance by completing an MA in the Visual Language of Performance. I am interested in the spaces in which performances occur – whether actual or virtual – and how the performer interacts with and responds to these spaces

Liz Bryce:

Kia Ora. I'm Liz. I am a visual artist and live in Kawerau. At the time of this work I was in Dunedin and working in the design department at the Otago Polytechnic. For me the exciting part of this project was creating ‘something’ from nothing - no theme, no reference – just the commitment to devise a show with other artists.

Suzon Fuks:

I am an multi/inter-media artist. I was born in Brussels and now live in Australia. I come from performing & visual art background. Co-artistic director of Igneous, I created the projections and directed all its productions. I am the initiator & co-founder of Waterwheel. We decided to become ActiveLayers when we started working on this project. I was excited by each one bringing different skills, and artistic and cultural perspectives – adding layers to our collaboration.

James Cunningham:

I have a background in contemporary dance, having completed an advanced certificate and working with various professional companies. My longest collaboration has been with Suzon, creating stage shows, site-specific performances, video-dances and online works. I've been a "go-between" for a number of Tap events, linking online and onsite artists and presenters. My current interests are audience engagement and performative presence in non-performance spaces or situations.

We first met on Skype. This is where we talked about how we were going to approach this work. To generate ideas we spent many sessions brainstorming, discussing and playing. We experimented with the idea of ‘booth’ – a restricted space, a functional and intimate booth – maybe like a confessional.

In January 2008, Cherry emailed this provocation about "home" to the other three, “So I started thinking about us working together and being so far apart – and the things to do with identity and memory that we were talking about. Where I finally rested was the idea of 'home' and specifically calling home, that moment of contact. If everyone could

put together about 30 secs worth of something – audio/video/animation/whatever as long as it is time-based. The provocation is 'calling home' – perhaps this is about being far from home or about home as a concept rather than a place – made of memories, people, conversations etc.”

All of us made movie clips of some sort. We then swapped them with each other – to make a new character. Cherry’s ticking pendulum became Suzon’s Great Uncle character. James calling home on his mobile phone, became Cherry’s Michael Finch. Liz’s green bush and family laughter became James’ Heather Smith, and Suzon’s photos of family, disrupted and traumatized by war, were the basis of Liz’s elusive Esmé.

We each wrote a character outline for our newly formed characters.

We decided to have a roster at preparing a session or two... each one had their own agendas but was quite interesting how it fed the group. A kind of agreed format evolved for meetings, with an established focus for each director followed by an evaluation of each session. In James’ directed session he used the improvisation technique Theatre Of The Ordinary as taught by Al Wunder. There are three main components to the process – improvised play on specific “scores” (for example "make sentences of only 5 words), articulating taste through Positive Feedback, and open improvised performances.

We periodically reflected on what we were doing, providing feedback immediately – or writing them by email. We watched rehearsal recordings and took some screengrabs in order to share strong moments which defined our aesthetic.

James used an online software for amalgamating faces at faceresearch.org to create the unique fictional faces of the characters. We were intending to draw live during the show, because we observed that the act of drawing was compelling for audience to watch. We wanted to have a continuity of aesthetic. We chose to use the UpStage drawing tool, and to give the drawings a uniform “look” we created avatars and objects by outlining photographs. We found that the sound and tone of digital voices was annoying for many people so we added pre-recorded sounds, and clips of speech for our characters.

The immediacy of being in the same space, face to face, showing what you think, is pretty important in collaborative work. It gives a dynamic. Here on cyberspace, it has to bend to patience – because of lag, technical difficulties, differences of places, environments... sometimes the dynamic is really scattered...toilet break, accident in the courtyard, bad news phone calls, visitors....

“Calling Home!” was created in three parts. The first part, “Calling Home: Getting to Know One Another” was made to be included in the Mediatised Sites Festival in Newcastle UK in April 2008. Part two, “Calling Home: Staying in Touch” spanned the time between April and August in which we attempted to build audience relationships, and Part 3, “Calling Home: The Big Get-together” was presented in the 080808 Upstage Festival in August.

Let's look more closely to the three parts.

Part 1: "Calling Home: Getting to Know One Another"

An early version of the script shows each character having a column and rows to indicate simultaneous actions.

In the foyer of the main Mediatised Sites festival site were four computers and monitors next to each other, each one logged in as audience to a different UpStage stage dedicated to one of the four "Calling Home!" characters. Online audiences elsewhere were instructed at the beginning of the show to open four windows in their browsers to follow the action across these stages simultaneously.

Having four stages operating simultaneously was a challenge ... we as performers could not see the other stages except if we opened them in tabs, but we could hear the progress of uncle's show and adjust our own stage performance accordingly. Those voices guided or conducted the audience between the four stages.

Part 2: "Calling home: Staying in Touch"

Over a period of three months we used a range of methods to build audience for the final part, as well as developing the story and intrigue. Cherry created Finch's blog along with a scenario of fictitious drawings that were supposedly found in various places around the UK. Heather, an eight year old girl from New Zealand, had a blog too and a gmail account. She would have had a Facebook page but she was too young.

Each character developed by itself with its own creator. For example, Liz supported Esmé character with an imagined family, based in European countries over decades of war. It was based on Suzon's video clip, my in laws, friends' stories, war books, films, research, and oral histories. But Esmé was so elusive that even I could not see her and so she began to exist through her sister Gisela's search for her on her blog.

Doug Leonard, a theatre director/performer from Brisbane took on the role of Grand Uncle. We were literally on the back deck working together James, Doug and I. Doug read some info about Jimi Hendrix that I had gathered. We organised some interviews on Skype with Grand Uncle on the deck, and some people who were relating or not to our characters. Interviews influenced the overall story and other characters influenced the interviews. They were improvising on the score that they were fans of Grand Uncle's talk show radio FAQ. It was lots of fun. The editing of the interviews influenced all characters & the overall story.

Part 3, "Calling Home: The Big Get-Together"

This part was presented on one UpStage stage. We will re-perform it for the Walking Backwards to The Future Festival, in Dec 2012, as an homage to Doug, who has since passed away.

How do we conclude this? Probably Cherry's comments sum it up:

"I was wondering about geographical distance. I guess the question is, how would our collaboration be different if we were sitting in the same room together each time we met? Why is it so valuable? Because slowly, slowly, we are building up some new kind of idea of community, collaboration, communication."