

THE SPHINX AND THE BOOKS



Information.

Barry Han:
Music and Sound Design.

Ben Phillips:
Director.

Katerina Radeva:
Stage Designer.

Lorena Rivero de Beer.

Mark Loudon:
Photo and video documentation.

The Sphinx and the Books is an autobiographical solo performance that explores the relationship Lorena Rivero de Beer establishes as a performer with the audience through books and their associative echoes. She uses her imaginary immortal alter ego the Sphinx to enact a rich narrative of power, desire, fragile human links and books as fetishised objects.

Barry is a musician, sound designer and musical director for theatre, video and sound installations. He has worked for Periplum Theatre, Fools Proof Theatre, Tmesis Theatre, Knutkhut, Tuebrook Transnational, Roger Hill and his alter ego Mandy Ramirez and Physical Fest in Liverpool.

Ben is a theatre director, actor and community activist living in North Liverpool. Ben is the cofounder and co-artistic director of the international touring theatre company Fools Proof Theatre and Tuebrook Transnational.

www.foolprooftheatre.com
tuebrooktransnational.com

Katerina is a performance maker and a scenographer. She designs set and costumes for performance, contemporary dance, theatre and site specific events. Her performance work tours nationally and is supported by Arts Council England.

www.katherinaradeva.co.uk
www.twodestinationlangauge.com

Lorena Rivero de Beer is a performance artist, writer, activist and producer living in North Liverpool. Her performance practice explores the gap between theory and practice and focuses mainly on issues around subjectivity, history, belonging and power relationships. She co-founded Tuebrook Transnational and The Free University of Liverpool.

www.tuebrooktransnational.com
thefreeuniversityofliverpool.wordpress.com
*Lorena is a member of Factory Floor
a creative network for women solo
artists/writers/performers.*

Mark is a freelance photographer and community activist living and working in North Liverpool. Previously he has worked as a technician in the performing arts, and toured with dance and theatre companies. He has run away with the circus at least three times so far.

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#1

Oedipus, the Sphinx and the Books by Christopher Madden.

On his journey to Thebes Oedipus confronts the Sphinx, a creature with a lion's body, a human head, and the wings of a bird. Time and again she has lured passing travellers into answering one of her impossible riddles. Her power lies in defeating others, but Oedipus gives the correct answer. Astounded, she screams and throws herself into the sea and dies. 'The riddle of the Sphinx', shrouded in mystery, refers to something the mind struggles to know. This something is *meaning*. But while Oedipus answers the riddle, the irony of his situation is that he does not know the meaning of his own life: he has yet to learn that he murdered his father and slept with his mother. His journey delivers him to the fatal knowledge of his situation. Such facts have troubled Oedipus all along without him knowing it; he can never escape the terrible reality of his past. In the nineteenth century Sigmund Freud used the Oedipus myth to describe how disturbing events from the past lurk in the unconscious until

psychoanalytic treatment puts the patient on the road to health. We could say that the Sphinx is like the unconscious, the unknowable region that bars us from fulfilling the Ancient Greek demand to *know thyself*. And like the citizens of Thebes, we too are under the spell of the all-knowing Sphinx.



The image of hundreds of books scattered around the performance space of *The Sphinx and the Books* is a metaphor for infinite meaning in all the world's texts. This particular Sphinx pads her way alluringly through millions of printed words and images. At points she tells the audience what the books mean to her, or rather what the books *could* mean to her if only she allows the words to flow into the events of her life. Words are inescapable; life is meaningless without them. The tall pile of books behind which she hides and eventually mounts as if conquering it evokes the Tower of Babel, the immense Babylonian structure built to reach the heavens and in which a single language was spoken and protected. In the Bible we are told that God destroyed the Tower to confuse the world's languages, scattering and jumbling them forever. All reading attempts to reverse this destruction and create meaning between ourselves and others. The Sphinx is troubled by confusion. She craves meaning.



Each book and each word within that book is the bridge across the chasm between us and her, and she flirts with the possibility of meeting us on the other side. In the Oedipus myth, the Sphinx apparently chose death rather than surrendering her omnipotence. Reading from Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* at the end of her performance, the

Sphinx signals that relating to others is problematic, perhaps entailing all kinds of surrender. Skimming the surface of her library with leonine gloves, she ponders what is at stake by touching us. Books build the fortress or the bridge in that uneasy encounter.

#2

A personal perspective on difference and multiplicity by Lorena Rivero de Beer.

There are three types of books in my island

The books that have shaped who I am, I love them and hate them and they are present every time I speak or move. These books are my precious possessions and my heart labels them...

There are other very special books that come from a request I made to friends to send me the title of a book that links us together in the world. I labelled them with your name...

Then there are the rest of the books, the unlabelled ones, over 700. I bought them from a charity shop in Tuebrook where I live; each book costs less than 20p. The owners of the charity shop were very happy to get rid of them...



The Sphinx and the Books is part of an ongoing exploration about knowledge, power and inter-subjectivity. The autobiographical nature of the piece exists in direct response to the mainly collaborative nature of my artistic, social and political work. Through autobiographical performance I found a space in which I can look at the position I occupy in the world while using it as vehicle through which to explore and challenge issues of difference and multiplicity.

I started developing the ideas for this performance almost four years ago when I was finishing a theory based PhD looking at political performance. At that time the highly theoretical and utopian nature of the knowledge I acquired through my university education was making me feel paralysed. After finishing my PhD I moved to live with my partner at his house in Tuebrook, North Liverpool, an area described by the council as highly deprived and with complex social problems. Living in Tuebrook posed complex questions about belonging and how to cross the social and cultural barriers that I experienced when trying to define my relationship to others.

That made me acutely aware of the elitist and potentially divisive nature of academic knowledge but also its great potential to support social change if applied in the right way. As a response to those issues and the general political climate in the UK regarding HE I, along with other friends, co-founded two projects: The Free University of Liverpool, a protest against the instrumentalisation of HE and a project to explore alternative pedagogies; and Tuebrook Transnational, a performance company that produces collaborative site-specific cultural projects with residents of Tuebrook.

The Sphinx and the Books is a performance that exists within those activist and artistic networks. The performance explores the rich, complex and sometimes contradictory forms through which I relate with the people and forms of knowledge that populate my life in Liverpool. The autobiographical form allows me to see what is specific to me within the social networks I belong to. It is a way of claiming the uniqueness of my existence and the uniqueness of everybody around me while supporting awareness of the multiplicity of voices that form them.



#3

A written conversation about The Sphinx and the Books by Britt Jurgensen and Tim Jeeves.

TJ. I remember another conversation we had about books. We were talking about buying books; about having too many; about finding the time to read them; about finding the energy to read them; and about not having enough bookcases on which to put them all.

I can't remember the number of books that the Sphinx says the average person reads in their life, but it didn't seem that many. Four thousand?

There were hundreds of books alongside her in this performance; books she used, moved, crawled on and read. They weren't like the books in a library that, as I heard someone say the other day, find themselves with their life denied, forgotten on shelves, always with their covers closed. We were only shown the inside of some of the books in the performance, yet all were alive in some way. I found myself wondering at the thoughts they held, the hours of life they had captured, the places they could take us if we let them.

Casting my mind back, I'm struck by how much even the most boring of those books must contain, and it makes me wonder again, how many books are too many?



One? Eight hundred? Four thousand? Twenty thousand?

BJ. It makes me think of the Sphinx crawling around on an endless amount of ideas, opening some of the books at random (was it at random, you think?) and how each book just let out a fraction of an idea, like a little burp. It made me laugh then and just now it reminded me of the hopelessly chaotic mix of book-burps I carry in my mind, all competing with each other for attention. Love me! Choose me! Use me!

I have always imagined the immortals as quite aloof and distant, but the Sphinx was somehow different. Mysterious, yes and powerful but also trashy and rather mundane, I would even use the word ridiculous. I liked that. I felt she was a bit like me - or you. I remember her crouching on an island of books

right in front of us, so close I could have touched her if I wanted to (I kind of did and didn't dare) and while she was reading I looked at her skin and I thought how much more alive and mortal she seemed than the books surrounding her.

TJ. Yes. she was more alive than the books, though, to me, they were also alive; even if their life was more subdued, their immortality aloof and distant. They needed an invitation - an incantation - in order to become active.

But even when dormant, words are immortal. A closed book is only hibernating. Words on a page often outlive their authors. Words in a song can do the same. Apparently - so the Internet tells me - 'I' is one of the oldest English words. The fact that over millennia this word has been awarded greater longevity

than others seems particularly appropriate. I wonder what the Sphinx said before the word 'I' was spoken for the first time.

BJ. When I was a child I could read in total surrender - to the point of being a real safety hazard, walking through the house, up and down the stairs, with a book glued to my face, not being aware of the 'I' or the others, utterly soaked in the world that book proposed. Do you still sometimes experience that onslaught of abandonment after turning the last page? I have never been very good at differentiating fact from fiction or reality from dream. All those characters I have read throughout my life are just as real or dreamlike as the people I have met. And so is the Sphinx. I imagine her clambering over her books right now mumbling to herself those words that came before 'I' and which only she knows the meaning of.

By the way there were many words the Sphinx said I did not understand. But I didn't mind. She never made me feel stupid, just curious.

TJ. I like that image of the Sphinx clambering over her books, climbing over all those hundreds

of thousand of words, muttering away to herself with words that existed before words. I imagine that she's there now, whilst we have this conversation; that she has spent eternity there by herself, reading and devouring the books, occasionally sharing her thoughts with those that have chosen to join her for a short time.

How could someone not be curious about such a magical creature? How could someone hope to understand all of her? That's what we call magic, isn't it? Something we can't understand but that still intrigues us.

BJ. Sometimes it intrigues us and sometimes it intimidates us, just like certain texts do, just like anything we don't fully understand. I am sometimes intimidated by the words of big thinkers. Aren't you? But the Sphinx didn't worry about me not understanding her or the words she read. She didn't explain or simplify, she trusted me. So I did as well. I trusted and joined her for a short time, wondering what it would be like to be as immortal and yet entirely as fleeting as words. And maybe we are.

#4

Extracts from a broadcasted VIVA (oral examination) about the Sphinx. By Gary Anderson and Lorena Rivero de Beer both students and lecturers at the Free University of Liverpool.

G. ... Ok, so can we go back to the beginning of this project, what was it like? Two years ago I saw a performative image you made within a performance by the group La Pocha Nostra in which you were naked and tied up in black tights full of really heavy books, one could feel the strain, the gravity was really oppressive... How far back does your work with books go?

L. When I was finishing my PhD almost four years ago I started developing work with books as a way of dealing with/exploring the feeling that I could not act in real life because I had too much theory in my head; theories that were supposedly liberating but actually felt quite oppressive because of their impossible utopian character. So I started developing performances with those books that dealt with the contradictory task of being in my body, the body of a migrant woman living in Liverpool with a particular history and upbringing, and coexisting with forms of knowledge that do not necessarily give space to the psychic and physic realities of that body.

The first performances I created were very aggressive, like the one you saw, the images in it were of pure oppression... Then, as time passed I realized or to use a better word remembered, that my relationship with books was also very nurturing and complex...very connected with love. I realized how desperately I was holding onto books and how they were closely linked with the construction of my own history ...they were tools through which I could exist somewhere, although it was almost as if I was held suspended by theory...

G. In terms of the development of the work from three years ago to now... you said you are developing a more nuanced relationship with the books themselves...Could you tell us how that relationship with the books has changed and how the books themselves have changed? And, is there a correlation between the self-liberatory exercise of making performance and the actual books that feature in that performance? ... So in the first performances the books were very carefully chosen but then in the last performance you handed the choosing of books

to other things, friends, colleges, random charity shop books... that suggest you don't care so much about the books anymore but I think you'll frame that you have a more liberatory relationship with those books...

L. Yes, I realized that those 'good' theory and philosophy books I invested with so much power in my first performances were only a fragment of my self, quite insignificant if you look at the whole... and that was really liberatory.

G. ... I wonder what is oppressive about these 'good' books, is it the content of the books themselves, their nature? Or is it the fact that these cultural artifacts are fetishised so much with people in our field, the critical theory/performance/activism pool?... and then, in this latter performance you ask people to condemn themselves by sending you a title. What is the sort of meaning you are searching for in asking other people to select books themselves?

L. Well, it has to do more with my own desires than with them, I first started thinking about specific books that linked me with others.

I was interested in exploring how those people that populated my mind access me through different discourses that were already inside me... but that was also a dead end in terms of the liberatory process, how far could I go with that? That was all about my projection into people. By asking people to give me titles of books that links us together in the world, I wanted to shake my assumptions... and they did shake, the titles they sent me were different from my expectation. I felt it was a way of making a step towards the other and enriching my world in that way... and therefore sharing with others that process...



G. I think if I would do that, I would feel overwhelmed by the excess... but you seem to be fine...

L. I haven't read all those books, that is the reason why I am not overwhelmed. They are a reminder of something ... It is a way of knowing that I have access to that person, no matter how far away they are. I will always have something precious from them, words that have shaped them and which I can use as a way of accessing their mind ... I wonder if there is a dark fantasy lurking underneath, as if I am embodying the character of the devil and through those books I imagine I have access to a bit of their souls... This Sphinx is not a necessarily positive thing... I think that the path towards liberation is connected with our ability to assume and explore our controlling desires towards the other ...The Sphinx is a contradictory character, a distortion of the self through the patriarchal and neoliberal prism, a being that is trying to reach others and overcome its omnipotent fantasies and desires; fantasies that she can't escape within the social reality we are part of...