

**UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX**

**DEPARTMENT OF LITERATURE, FILM, AND THEATRE STUDIES**

*LEAH COUSINS - THE FOURTH WALL AS A SEMI-PERMEABLE MEMBRANE*

By

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of degree of MA in *Playwriting*  
(LT981-7-FY-CO)

I certify that I have acknowledged any assistance or use of the work of others in my dissertation for  
the MA in *Playwriting* (LT981-7-FY-CO)

(Signed) 9/9/18

Academic Year ..2017-18..

# Leah Cousins

An original play for solo performer and her guests  
Followed by a critical commentary entitled

## The Fourth Wall as a Semi-Permeable Membrane



## Leah Cousins and The Fourth Wall as a Semi-Permeable Membrane

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## THE CREATIVE PIECE.

### LEAH COUSINS - A PLAY FOR SOLO PERFORMER AND HER GUESTS

#### PERFORMANCE NOTES

*Leah Cousins is a midwife from the 1780s. On occasions throughout the piece, she talks to the audience, her guests, and expects an answer. In her world, they are really there to talk to, even if she is not clear about why or who they are. She wants to make things clear before she dies. The performer should encourage the guests to answer on such occasions and should improvise her own responses whilst remaining in character. Answers should neither break the convention that Leah is in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, nor that the audience is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not meta-theatrical - Leah does not step out of her fictional world although the performer will need to step outside of her **circle of concentration** to engage fully with the audience's responses.*

*For example, when she asks about a guest's father, if the answer is compatible with 18<sup>th</sup> Century life this could be simple - for example: 'Oh, thass right - a school teacher. I hope he don't use his cane too often'; However, if the job is NOT something Leah would understand the performer will need to deflect the dilemma. 'I.T.? - we don't have High-Tea. I'm strictly a dinner and supper woman although I once got offered more pie than I could handle.' The performer should try not to let such an exchange go on too long or let the participant take control of the conversation. It is worth preparing a few possible 'escape' route conversations in advance. Just as a comedian might for hecklers.*

*NOTE about Glibb's letter prop for page 16. This should be on a scrap of paper or in a little notebook given to the reader and be written in pencil as follows:*

*(You say) "It's not a rule of MY making, Mistress Cousins. It is a simple fact that women have no capacity for using instruments.*

*(Then I speak a bit)*

*(You say)* But, with respect, not the same *brain* capacity as a man, to have the proper judgement to know what action is required and when. It is a simple, commonly known fact of truth. The gentler sex cannot be burdened with the responsibility of making life-or death decisions.

*(Then I speak a bit)*

*(You say)* That's very good, Mistress Cousins. I am indeed twenty-four - I wonder who told you?"

Part 1 The Laying-in-chamber

*(The audience enters the room - it is darkened with a lamp or candles burning. The time of the fiction is around 1780. There is a chair and table and possibly a bed strewn with covers and with gauze draped around it hitched up. Leah Cousins is in her mid 50s and is dressed in a nightgown and nightcap from the late 1700s. It is not clean. As the audience enter to take their seats which should be in a semi-circle around her she speaks to them.*

*Leah is generally cheery and lucid but gets confused occasionally. She is unwell - suffering from cancer of the bladder. She is also getting drunker as the play proceeds.)*

LEAH

*(Brightly at first)*

Come on in my lovelies. My God-Sibs. Let's get comfortable. That's it. It won't be long now. It won't be long...now...She hasn't got long... Every time is a struggle.

This is a struggle, this story.

This staying alive is a struggle. I'm struggling.

This making...

This making a new life is a struggle. Just an hour to say goodbye to the old life.

How much longer?

*(She rallies a little)*

Sit down, have a drink. You got a drink?

Thass not long now. Not long I reckon.

Glad you all got my invitations. I been nidgetin' round to get you all here for this.

All in? All sat down?

You'll see here I got this nice little lying-in chamber all ready for us. The curtains is pulled and I've stuffed paper into the keyholes. We don't want the outside world coming in to bring its vapours with it, do we? I've lit a few candles here, look and I've lit a fire for us.

And all them what should be banished from the room have been.

You here what are men, this will be the only time you ever get to see this. For this is my territory. Woman's territory. This is a privilege, this is.

Though I suppose...

This is the only time any of us will get to see this...

Or to know it....

Always a privilege....

Anyway!

This is the first part.

### Part 2 – First pains

*(Improvising with different guests - along the lines of: )*

This bit don't hurt much, do it. You can keep pottering all through this. Keep talking. I suggest you also keep breathing! That helps. In between the painful bits. Get comfortable. Thass right, you – get yourself in a comfy position Don't mind me. I'm not going anywhere. You're looking lovely and radiant, you are. In't she? You got a lovely glow about you.

*(In the next part, selects a guest to address – preferably a man. It will show Leah as rather confused but also indicate that the audience will not be cast ‘to type’ in any way.)*

So, how's it been with you? As if I can't tell by the look on your ghostly pale face. Have you been drinking the ginger tea in the morning? Have you?

*(To a neighbouring guest) Have they?*

How's it affected the sickness? Better? Worse?

*(Elicits an answer - improvises a short appropriate response.)*

*To another guest):*

And I know you've been licking the coal in the scuttle, haven't you? Been taking a little sneaky lick while no-one's looking?

*(Again, improvises with the answer as appropriate)*

I can always tell the coal-nibblers. You got a smell about you. It was pickles with me when I was big with my first one. Pickled onions, pickled walnuts. Still can't get...can't...

*(She's drifting a little - getting a bit vague – fighting off a little pain).*

I had a smell about me too.

This is the first part. This is.

This is the first part.

Don't hurt much.

Please - I hope it don't...don't.

A new start today. New...life...



*(a pain in her abdomen)*

This in here has finally got me beaten. Today is my new start, I reckon. And new is always terrifying.

*(to the audience)*

You're the last one of mine now. You'll be my last.

You hardly need me though now. You got proper care now.

A medical man.

Trained and everything.

He'll come with his metalwork - his tongs - his blades and straps.

A hero. Even when you don't need a hero.

What I got to offer, eh?

What's left for me to do?

Who am I? Who am I?

*(Perks up a bit to ask a guest:)*

Go on, I'm really asking. Somebody help her - say my name.

*(Elicits the answer 'Leah Cousins' even if she has to point it out on the programme!)*

Thass right. Leah Cousins. I like hearing it. Mistress Cousins to you. And madam to you. And plain old Leah to you.

*(to an individual guest)*

You'll remember me for I birthed you. Or maybe your memory ain't so good as that. At least your mother will remember me.

And your mother....and yours...all of you...all of you... I birthed you.

Perhaps that's why you're here. Is it? Have you all come to see me because I birthed you? Or your mother. Did I birth her? Or your grand...grand...gran'ma

*(Confused for a moment - like she's realised she's not in the same world/time)*

And you're not...are you?

There was a time when the whole village could say that, you know. When folks come to see me regular with a tear of gratitude in their eye and a handful of flowers or a basket of plums along with my two shillings.

And I was invited to pay visits, you know. Oh yes - I've sat in many a tidy parlour with a glass of negus and a macaroon.

*(to one guest)*

You must remember? How old were you, eight? Nine?

*(elicits answer improvises a response, for example 'Clearly a long time ago' or 'You don't look much more than that now'.)*

And do you remember that peg-dolly I brought round, yes? You gave it such a funny name, you remember? What was it you called it?

*(elicits answer)*

Thass right!

*(Improvises regarding the doll and its name)*

And you weren't the richest family I passed an afternoon with, I tell you! Although your father done alright for himself. What your father do for a living? What his job?

*(She elicits an answer and improvises.)*

Any how - until THAT day - the day when Doctor Glibb came, I was in the front row of all the very best baptisms on the Christening pew. Wrapping the very best quality lace shawls around the very best quality babies. Just where a midwife should be. Front row. Right there under Reverend Crabbe's pulpit.

All those God Parents sitting round in their finery but it's ME - me the midwife that gets pride of place...or at least I used to.

*(She suddenly doubles in pain)*

Ow! Quick. Sit me down. Where's me chair? Get me in the chair. Give us a hand there.

*(She asks a guest to help her.)*

Thank you. Thank you. It's this...This you see...it...I can't always...

Glibb. Glibb! The bastard! See, even his name....ow!...I got to...even his name make me...Get me the glass will you?

*(makes guest get up to help her get the glass)*

Any time today you like, come on now!

*(When she's got the glass, she dismisses the guest back to her/his seat. Raises the glass before drinking)*

There's a nice little drop of jollop. Mothers' ruin.

*(drinks)*

There's a kind of joke in there if you look.

A joke of sorts. Me drinking Mothers' Ruin. Like a snake eating its own tail.

*(Drains the glass. Closes her eyes. Holds the pain at bay for a second)*

As I always say - as I ALWAYS say... 'Every little pain gets you nearer'. The mothers often say to me 'I want this to stop, I can't do it, Leah. Make it stop'. But I says to them – Well if nothing else is certain, this is: that baby's only got one way out and if you can't do it, nobody else can - so get pushing. Aint no-one else can help!'

I suppose Doctor Glibb would maybe say different. But I don't know. It's not right. Not nice. Some other man's hands in there where only a husband should be allowed. It's not quite nice I don't think.

And here's a thing...I wouldn't think it was so nasty, if he were ugly and old. But he's a young buck and a charmer and he shouldn't be allowed down there. That shouldn't make a difference but it do to me.

Old Doctor Last he only came when he was called for.

Do you remember him? Old Doctor Last?

He have a shroud of sadness around him when he walk in a room. For he only ever come when there's not much hope. He only ever there for the 'either-or'.

Not many times in my life I had to call for him to crack a skull. That's what the doctor's usually called for - to crack the skull of a baby what's stuck in the passage. I can do the rest but that bit I ain't allowed to do.

But not many's still too many. And who's to say that that life-what-don't-know-it's-a-life is worth more than its mother's what might be already loved? But it's 'either-or' some of the time. Either or. That's God for you.

*(Mumbling)*

God... I sometimes think you must be...Nah, I'll get struck down...blasphemer...  
Leah, shut your big trap. Ain't that big mouth of your'n got you in enough trouble?

*(Suddenly aggressive)*

You better hope that ain't a girl you got coming, lady. This world don't treasure girls.  
She'll grow up to be nothing. Women count for nothing.

*(Once again, she doubles in pain. Slumps down into the chair)*

Oooh I tell you this damn well hurts. I want it to stop. STOP damn you....only....I've  
only got....stop!...only one way out.

*(The pain seems to pass).*

Course, your little Jacko were the last one I birthed - if you don't count that waif what  
Reverend found in the yard back of the Crown and Cockerel. But that poor little sack of  
skin & bone didn't stand a chance. Not from this parish, so we shouldn't have helped her  
but the girl had been tramping across the country in that big old October storm couple of  
years back, nothing to eat. Sleeping out in the rain. We did our best to get her to rest up  
awhile, but she'd scurried away by the morning. Still bleeding, by the look of the blanket  
she left behind. I never heard what became of her. She could have taken that blanket  
with her. It was only an old thing of my making.

It...she were just a tiny thing no bigger than a child herself...it broke my heart she didn't  
think she might take that blanket with her. Where is she now? And does she ever  
wonder if...if...that little...her...if...

*(Takes a drink)*

Part 3 The waters break

I'm not in the best of health. A fair bit peaky. You probably guessed - this is medicinal.

*(Laughs a little)*

That's what my old mum always say! It's medicine!

Medicine for the soul.

I recall, that after that waif had gone, Widow Goe had a quiet word with me & Reverend when she found out.

*(A harridan's voice)*

"Why a girl can't learn to say no is beyond me! Surely any man can understand plain English. No means no!

Not a single man to whom I ever said 'no' would dare go against me"

Reverend Crabbe and I laughed quite a lot at the thought of anyone propositioning Old Gossip Goe!

Still, she is a widow, which means brave Mr Goe must have 'had a go' sometime - though no-one under a hundred might remember him alive.

And you, Zekiel. You there in your *(blue or whatever)* coat so fine.

I remember when your mother, were in the throes of having you.

Now, since you've grow'd up a bit, your head don't seem so big on your body but *(to the audience)* oh you should have seen him at first. His head were three times the size of the rest of him. No wonder his poor mother were screaming.

But what didn't help was the fear on her. The poor young thing's cunny - 'scuse me, Zekiel talking like that about your mother, but - her little cunny was squeezed up that tight along with the rest of her that even if Zekiel here had been a little flat fish from the islands he wouldn't have pushed his way out of there. I give her a little piece of amber in

her hand - thass good luck, that - and I say in a slow voice 'You hold onto this my girl. Centuries long this amber has been keeping mothers safe from harm. Look close into it. There hold it up to the light. They say that if you look hard enough you will see the face of Jesus and you and your baby will be well.'

Now listen up all of you. I got to tell you two things. One, no piece of amber can change what happen to a baby. Two, if you look at ANY mottled thing for long enough you will see the face of Jesus. Clouds in the sky - face of Jesus; a spillage of milk - face of Jesus; the way a piece of silk falls - face of Jesus or hang on, no that one is more like Mary, mother of Jesus. Unless you look at it from this direction when...yes! There we go! Face of Jesus.

No, the magic what happens, the magic...thass in the soft of my talking. Just nonsense talking calm and low and sure or just keeping quiet for a bit and while she's busy scanning the amber for a sign from our lord, her fanny relaxes and you, Zekiel, has the chance to stick your giant head down the hole without her clamping your ears off.

And if that's magic then I suppose I'm guilty of what you suggest, Doctor Glibb. And you shoulda had me done for a witch.

There. It's not hurting too much now is it. See, if we all keep busy and keep chatting and you hardly notice the pain. Keep walking around, keep gossiping. With you all. My God Sibs.

Ow! See - only a little pain. And thass a good pain.

Thass a good pain.

Thass a good pain - I think.

*(Another sharp pain and suddenly she wets herself)*

Oh! Well will you look at me? I'm a mess now, aren't I?

*(She gets a messy rag and gets down on her knees to wipe the floor)*

There's no surprise. That's not the first time.

I hope it don't smell too bad.

Here, *(To guest)* hold my hand and help me up.

*(She holds out her hand for them)*

It's alright. I've wiped it. There. That's better...that's better in't it? Thank you my darling one. No. It's fashion. You see.

#### Section 4 The Shouting Time

It's fashion to have the 'medical' man in.

To my mind, thass like calling in a cobbler to tie your bootlace.

To my mind.

Having a doctor for a birthing.

Thass not, like, a medical matter unless you realise there's something amiss and your boot hooks have all fallen off or suchlike.

*(Choosing what looks like a couple - or improvising until a couple is located)*

You didn't call the doctor when you fell in love, did you?

*(Audience may respond – improvise as appropriate)*

Perhaps you called him to certify you as insane! But on the whole, it's not a medical matter, is it? Falling in love? Some things need medicine, and some don't. Falling in love don't need a doctor.

Although sometimes falling OUT of love needs medicine.



I know many who take a dose of this when love gone wrong.

Well the same applies. The same applies.

You only need a doctor when things go wrong.

No, this is all only fashion. All the fashionable ladies in town say that to be attended by an 'accoucheur' like Glibb is the *height* of modernity.

Why is having a man-midwife suddenly so fashionable? Cos he claims he's got special knowledge...science knowledge. And suddenly science is more important than good sense.

Well *I* got knowledge, an'all. I got plenty of knowledge that little scrinclin' couldn't possibly know.

Like what it's like to be a woman and what it's like to have a baby for a start. And I picked up a fair bit of knowledge over the span of thirty years or so - I must have delivered some three hundred odd babies. You can't say that ain't nothing!

And who ever would have thought that people would use bearing a child as a thing to be swayed by fashion. Women been dropping babies since time began. Old Mistress cave-woman didn't need to follow a fashion, now - did she? Didn't grunt to her neighbours about how much more important she was for wearing a fancy bear-skin hat while she bore her pains, did she? Or for having, I don't know, *wolves* instead of hares around her as her gossips. I don't know. I bet she didn't think of fashion.

Yes, Glibb comes swanning in from who-knows-where, the far side of Ipswich. He got his little green baize bag full of secret tools. Tools! I ask you. Tools for having a baby! Not in my wildest imaginings should that much steel be in the same area as all that soft flesh. All icy cold on your poor cunny.

And even....even...well...

I know what you're thinking...even if that new-fangled instrumentation might be useful... Even if that IS the right thing....well why isn't it put into the hands of us what KNOW how all those soft parts work? If them tools are so good - and they may well be...I don't know cos I've never been allowed to touch them...but if they are so good, why does it have to be a man what wields them? Where is THAT written in the great book?

Here, you look at this

*(She unravels a tatty little note book or scrap of paper which has the script for Glibb written on it in pencil and gives it to a guest, preferably a man. During this next exchange, Leah may chip in with small congratulations on how well he is doing with his reading; or words of encouragement. The prop script should be written out as per the note at the start of the play)*

This is what passed between us. I wrote it down because I ain't got no husband to tell nor no friend who would understand. I used a pencil to tell the paper. Now you all can listen as well. Will you read the part of Glibb for me? You contented to read out loud? You're good looking enough to be an actor on the stage.

*(If not, the performer should recruit someone else - improvising as required)*

Go on there, you speak first look...

GUEST/GLIBB

It's not a rule...

*(Leah interrupts him)*

LEAH

That's it, nice and loud.....start again. You're like a young David Garrick. He is, isn't he!!

GUEST/GLIBB

It's not a rule of MY making, Mistress Cousins. It is a simple fact that women have no capacity for using instruments.

LEAH

*(To the audience generally)*

I shall be taking the part of my own self in this bit.

(to Glibb)

Say that last line again.

GUEST/GLIBB

It is a simple fact that women have no capacity for using instruments.

LEAH

What, like a needle and thimble and scissors, you mean, Doctor Glibb? Or a spoon and a egg beater? We got hands, in't we? We can hold the things. We got eyes to see what needs doing plain enough.

GUEST/GLIBB

But, with respect, not the same *brain* capacity as a man, to have the proper judgement to know what action is required and when. It is a simple, commonly known fact of truth. The gentler sex cannot be burdened with the responsibility of making life-or death decisions.

LEAH

With respect, look at your soft rich-boy's skin. Your pale smooth hands. Have you ever seen death? In your twenty-four years - have you once seen a dead person?

GUEST/GLIBB

That's very good, Mistress Cousins. I am indeed twenty-four - I wonder who told you?

LEAH

Ooh that'll be a bit of that witchery you think I got. I don't need no-one to tell me. Shall I reveal my skill? Bah! You foolish, foolish little kite! In my time I seen a thousand boys what's twenty-three turn into twenty-four and twenty-five and on and on. You think I han't learnt how to tell? By the straight of your back and the speed of your speech and the way you look at Reverend Crabbe's middle daughter on a Sunday and your hair all brushed down in the fashion.

I'd be hard pressed NOT to know your age.

Perhaps that's the pay-back for having only a woman's incapacity with using cutlery, eh?

God's given us women plenty of skills you'll never master. Boy. Besides bearing a baby of course. Though no doubt that day will sometime come if you scientists get your way. Or if fashion demands it.

And you say I haven't got the wit to wield a knife?

*(Taking the paper from the guest)*

He was good wasn't he! You paid attention in your reading lessons at Widow Goe's dame school and that's for sure. Got the voice to a tee. I could have believed Doctor Glibb was right here in the room with us.

But Glibb, he never did answer my question. How many times he ever looked death in the face?

Well done you! Sounded like Glibb was here in the room with us!

I was going to invite him, but I know he thinks the curtains should be open and the fire kept down right low. He don't approve of drinking in the lying in chamber either, so you'd all be in trouble! He wouldn't have turned up in real life. Not to this little hovel. He don't talk to me now. He wouldn't want to see this.

He wouldn't want to go through this. This would be distasteful to him and his cronies.

But you did a very, very good version of him - JUST as if he were in the room. So now you got the feel of him a bit - his smooth talk and his charm and his oh-so-rational answers - well, answer me this in his voice if you can - why is it... Doctor Glibb... why is it what we women aren't allowed to go and train in the use of these instruments of yours? Don't try and find the answer in some script. I'm asking you for real, Glibb! If you have a good way of helping a stuck baby into this world without crushing it, why am I not allowed to know how to use it?

*(See if he answers, encourage him to answer as Glibb not as himself - if he flounders, open it up to the floor)*

Anyone?

*(Improvise a little with the answer)*

Do you know, if I lived in Paris - there's a college I could go to. But I've never been any further nor Halesworth, so I don't reckon Paris would have been on the cards. Besides I couldn't go now even if I could go...I've not got...I've...It's too late...I've ...I've...

I've lost the point. What was I talking about?

I've lost the point.

Well here I am. Don't worry, it won't be long now.

*(gets a little medicine bottle of reddish-brown liquid out of a drawer or her bag)*

Don't you worry. Look what I got here.

Here now, here's my special drops to help the pain.

Work quick.

Come, bitter conduct. Come, unsavoury guide.

Thass a bit of my learning that is. That's Romeo and Juliet. Just like David Garrick.

*Refers to the guest who read Glibb*

Nearly as good as you!

See how much knowledge I've got stored in my old brain.

There's many women who won't take this, of course for their birth pains. Or more to the point - whose husbands forbid it. They say women are *meant* to feel the pain. What's good enough for Eve, they say, is good enough for Mistress Greene or Mistress Smith apparently. There's parsons and priests who'll say the same. It's against the will of the Lord to kill the pain.

And yet each of them, they'll howl with pain when they've a shit stuck in their arse.  
Won't even *imagine* the pain of a hard, little skull with big ears like yours, Zekiel  
making its way out!

I say anything I've got that might get you through, is fair enough. Wouldn't you say?  
And so would they if they had an idea of the pain  
Bit of amber,  
Little chice of poppy juice.

*(She is creased with a pain)*

It's coming. I can...yes there. Oh Christ. Yes...no...  
It's coming now. It's surely the time.  
Time's coming...

*(Switches suddenly from her suffering to role-playing a delivery. She does all the  
characters)*

...It's coming - you're doing such a good job. That's a girl. Such a good job.

Stay with me. Hear my old voice.

I can see baby's head

He's not a baldy, he's got curly locks, curly locks.  
Wilt thou be mine

*(Direct to audience)*

I can't see the baby's head at all but I'm not telling her that.

Come on mother.

Come on. Keep on pushing.

*“I’m finished.” She says. “I can’t push any more. I’m so tired.”*

Well I can tell you this much, my good woman. That little curly fella in’t going back in.

*“I want to sleep. I… I’m so tired. I must sleep.*

*Get it out of there. Get it out of me. I’m split in two.”*

Well my fine lady, I’m doing MY part, so let’s have a last effort on yours, shall we?

There’s one gossip in the room for the girl and she voices the problem quietly to me.

*“She’s just too small. She says. That head ain’t coming out of that hole no way. No piece of amber is going to mend that. You’ve got to call Doctor Glibb. The baby will do for her. She’s almost gone.”*

I hisses back to her:

*“I can’t do that. I’m sure that baby’s still alive. If we call Doctor, we’ll have to call the Reverend and all and you know what that means.. If Glibb’s going to use the crotchet and crush that baby’s head in, he’ll be murdering it for sure and he can’t do that without the Reverend saying so.”*

Gossip says:

*“She’s been heaving and straining for nearly two days. The baby will be long gone by now. I’ll run and fetch him. He’s waiting in the Crown and Cockerel just in case.”*

Then I says:

*“NO! Stop. This isn’t the end yet. We can save them both. I just need to get my hand in far enough to grab hold of baby’s chin.”*

I try this but the mother screams loud and then stops screaming very sudden and she slumps forward from where she's kneeling on the big sheet we've spread on the bed. Her forehead makes a thud as she hits the head-board and then she tips over onto her side.

The gossip starts to whimper.

The mother's still breathing but she's knocked out cold with the exhaustion.

The gossip woman is in a panic - she hisses at me:

*“Let me go to fetch him. Let him save Janet at least. Let them not both die.”*

All of a sudden, the mother opens her mouth and shouts again with breath from out of nowhere:

*“Get that murdering baby out of my body!”*

Her voice is low and growling. She sounds like an animal. Or like some kind of demon. It's not her own voice.

*“Get that foul lump of murdering baby out of my body!”*

But I still got faith in that baby and I think it's still alive and I don't want Glibb to come in here and crush the life from it with his fire-irons.

I'm still up to my elbow inside her passage trying to get a hold of the baby's chin – an ankle - anything.

I'm crying.

The gossip is tearing at my apron for the key to the chamber and her face is down close to mine, so with my free hand I punch her hard on the cheek and she falls over onto the floor. She shouts at me:

*“Let the baby go - let it go. There will be others. Let it go and give Janet a chance.”*



Her voice seems to come out of the bed-sheets and the drapes, not out of her mouth at all.

In that moment though, it's strange. I feel like some kind of wizard.

I'm sure I can do anything.

I can save Janet and I can let the baby live.

*“Janet! Janet! Push. Please push. Don’t give up. Push the damned thing out of there.”*

I'm willing the words into her. I starts muttering.

In my head I want it to be a prayer.

Or really. I think I'm making a spell. A good spell. I think my words can help. I'm making a spell. Out loud.

The gossip is hampering herself by climbing up the inside of her skirts as she gets up from the floor and staggering. She starts to make a strange noise. It's like an owl hooting or a pigeon. But I realise she is sobbing out the word 'No'.

Ohhhh... this hurts me so to tell you.

Oh...It hurts me so.

I flick my eyes up from my work - I've got both hands inside the mother and I'm trying to stretch her cunny open and I see the gossip woman is afraid of me. Not because I punched her, not that sort of afraid. But because of the spell.

*She chants or sings a few lines of 'King Willie' - getting more desperate as she does.*

King Willie he's gone down to the market place  
And he has bought him a loaf of wax

And he has shaped it as a babe that is to nurse  
And he has made two eyes of glass

King Willie he's gone down to the market place  
And he has bought him a loaf of wax

And he has shaped it as a babe that is to nurse  
And he has made two eyes of glass

*She stops - exhausted*

Thass not a spell, of course. Thass a song. Just an old song. I didn't even think what the words were. My old mouth just done them.

But when I see that woman looking at me. And I look down at Janet slumped completely senseless on the bed and I look at my hands, bloodied and useless, I take the key from my pocket and the gossip woman takes it gingerly from me in case I punch her again. She pulls the rag out of the keyhole where we'd sealed it up to keep the vapours out, and she opens the door - turns quickly and rushes out and leaves the door gaping wide. I notice that it's bright sunshine outside. I get up and push it closed again. Not that it matters now.

Doctor Glibb come of course. He lifted up his big green baize bag full of instruments and as he loosened the pull-string at the top of it he looked at me and waited. He was waiting for help - for my advice, I suppose. He wanted me to say something.

*"I think mother's still breathing."* I say.

I winced as he put his hand inside Janet. I couldn't move - couldn't say anything. Call me old-fashioned, it still don't seem quite right to me him touching her there without her say-so. But Janet don't know so I suppose she don't care.

He says:

*"Bring the bag over here."*

I stare at him. I want to hate him the cocky little bastard. I don't feel like I can move. But I do move.

A spark of resented hope has risen in me that he might be able to do something.

I want to swallow it back down.

But I fetch the bag. His bag of tools.

He takes out what looks like a big pair of pincers. Not the deadly crotchet hook. But still look like something from a smithy.

They are loopy scissors, kind of - but huge.

I'm just standing there. Staring.

He goes to the business end of Janet, lying on her side with her knees tucked up.

The next thing I know I hear a whimper. I'm not sure if the sound comes from my own throat.

But then I see him lift up the baby by the feet and slap it hard on the backside. And a cry comes from it.

Still dangling it like a plucked goose, he says:

*"Here, you can tie the cord and take care of this however you please."*

He says.

*"You'll need sal volatile for Janet. You can deal with the afterbirth."*

I'm useless. I stammer out

*"What is it?"*

He just looks at me with his eyebrows knitted in a puzzlement.

A croaky voice I recognise as mine says:

*"Girl or boy?"*

He shrugs.

*"I didn't look. Take it."*

I lift the baby up from his goose-grip and look down at the red-faced little thing what's making little hiccupping cries. It's a girl.

*To a guest*

She's you. That little baby. She's you. Or your grand-mother or more like your 6 times great-grandmother. And I nearly let death get her. And that bastard charming clever silky-voiced fellow - Glibb by name and glib by nature - he saved her...saved you. (*To the guest who played Glibb*) Didn't you? You saved her.

You didn't know if Janet was alive or dead and you didn't know if the baby was a girl, a boy or a baboon from the Indes. But oh, what a hero you were.

And he was.

Well, after that you can imagine what the village said. That old gossip soon let the word spread that the dark bruise on her cheekbone matched the shape of my knuckles.

And Janet - well she heard the whole story once her lying in month was over and she was grateful to us both for the lives saved. And part of me is tortured by that. Grateful to both of us.

I wasn't allowed near the house during her lying in, though.

And the day that Janet was churched - I sat at the back in the shadows and tried to ignore the shitty whispers of the parish.

*(She sits down, exhausted by telling the story. Defeated.)*

Janet's mother got to carry the baby to the Christening. Sat there in the front pew, she was. So I was told afterwards. I wasn't there.

### Section 5 Calmer

Word spreads fast in a small town, don't you find? Your greaty-greaty gran and yours and yours - all women who had already had two, three healthy babies suddenly wanted Doctor Glibb and his magic wand pincers.

Yours wouldn't go near him though. Still thought of him as Doctor of Death. She stayed with me. And yours did and yours did - for the twins.

*(Smiles and perks up a bit as she remembers a story)*

That was a good day, that was. That was a VERY good day! Reverend Crabbe chastised me a good deal for drinking so much that day. But it'd take more'n a drop of caudle to blunt my wits.

Caudle. So much of that watery winey stuff has passed my lips over the years it don't really stop off at all on the path to the piss-pot now.

That particular day, by time Susan Lacy had finished her work, there were more gossips in Lacy's parlour than the bible has apostles - we must have drunk nigh on a bucket-full of caudle between us all. For the first three hours, lovely Missus Granty, Susan's own

mother took it in turns to mop Sue's forehead along with with the vicar's wife and me. Just the three of us keeping sweet Susan quiet & cheery when she got to the shouty time.

Mid-morning, Baby Laura makes her appearance & all seems well despite Susan having damned the entire race of men-kind to a darker place. We call for Martha to go over to Grammer Lacy's and tell Joe that he has another fine baby daughter.

Grammer Lacy comes along and she brings a couple of bottles of elderflower wine to celebrate. We mixes it up in a bucket with some water and some sugar and a bit of spice and we're on our second swig when Sue starts yelling all over again and she's grunting & groaning and, would you believe it, but there's another little head squeezing its way down. It's twins!

Well I can tell you, it didn't take a minute for word to spread.

Joe's at outside the chamber door but he don't stand a chance of getting in to see what was happening.

Widow Goe elbows him out the way, Sue's sister Peggy has arrived downstairs with her two strapping lasses, Missus Elphick has heard the rumpus, shut the shop and is banging on the window to be let in. And, if we'd have opened the door, I reckon Reverend Crabbe himself would have barged his way up them stairs. That parlour were so frackfull none of us could hardly move to lift a cup to our lips.

The chattering and squealing was getting on poor Sue's nerves, so I yelled down the stairs for them to hush up and let Susan & Mother Nature finish their job. I suggested they partook of a little caudle themselves and to make sure there was plenty for me & Mrs Crabbe and Mother Granty & Sue once twinny had made herself known. And by the time the quarter chimed, there was Baby Daphne lying next to Laura in Sue's arms, each sucking on a dug and with a happy red wrinkled face on. They was like two happy little skinned rabbits.

A pair of milk-drunken babies and a house full of drunken gossips. What a day!

That's what a birthing should be.

That's what a birthing should be.

## Section 6 The Final Push

*(Pause while she thinks)*

Time's coming now. Nearly there. Nearly there.

*(She drinks from her medicine bottle - she's clearly fighting off pain. Suddenly bright again she says to a guest:)*

How old do you think I am?

*(Doesn't let her/him answer. Opens it to the whole audience)*

Old people always ask that don't they? Thass a terrible question.

No-one knows what to answer. If you say too high, you're in terrible trouble. 'Do I LOOK' sixty three?'

If you say too low, that old person just says  
"Hoo! Now you're just taking the piss. So, GUESS AGAIN!"

But still

*(returns pointedly to the same guest)*

How old do you think I am? Go on take a guess. Be very careful, I'm warning you...but have a guess. You can say what you like cos I ain't following you out of here into your life to torment you with the answer. I really ain't.

For many many reasons, I ain't!

*(Perhaps improvises here with their answer or their reluctance to answer)*

Well I'm going to tell you and put you out of your misery.

I'm fifty-seven.

I've been a midwife since I was twenty-seven. I'd had my own three childers by then and I trained for the job with my mother who was the midwife before me. Her aunt was the midwife before that. You get the idea.

So we brought nigh-on a century's worth of babies into this village between us. That's funny, in't it. That sound like a long time.

And the world is still turning. Fashions have come and gone. Our bonnets have changed shape and our songs are different songs now and yours are different again. But still the world is turning.

Who here is a married person....and how long you been married?

*(Improvises with them briefly about how old they were when they met, etc)*

Who here lives with someone over the broom and have never had a proper godly wedding?

*(Finds someone)*

Not married. Well now...that's *certainly* different from when I was a girl. You'd have been hounded out of the village for being so sinful!

You'd have had the Rough Music treatment and we'd have banged our pots and pans outside your bed chamber and beaten on your door with sticks!

Reverend Crabbe would have shook his head at you good and proper, wouldn't he! How can that be such a hoo-hah at one time, and so acceptable at another?

See.

Fashions come and go.

One minute all the men have beards Have you noticed a lot of beards around at the moment? The next minute - only a sea-captain or a Musselman has a beard and then... turn around and every man is whiskered again.



And some of the women too.

One minute we're all wearing fine wool and the next we're decked out in silk or sprigged muslin and then we're back in wool again.

One minute, old Leah will serve you very well in your lying-in chamber - the next we all want Doctor Glibb and his bag of magic metal.

Ladies all suddenly like the drama of being ill, when all they are is pregnant.

And, Leah shut your old mouth... the world... is still turning...

Isn't it??

*(Laughs to herself)*

You silly old fool.

You've talked yourself out of an argument. Like a snake eating its own tail.

That reminds me.

*(she takes a drink - with some drops in it).*

I can't think straight.

Get you gone, Leah Cousins.

Get you gone and leave the world to the new.

Nothing of what you've got is any use.

Your sealed-up windows and keyholes.

Your smoky fire and your burning candles.

Your dark chamber and your singing.

The fine ladies don't object to a strange man's hands on their privates and if their husbands do object, we'll just call them old-fashioned fuddy-duddies.

They'll be wanting to stay and watch the birthing themselves before we know where we are! Can you imagine it! As if!

Women will say they want their husband to tie off the chord and they won't let their god-sib women friends come in to hold them up and cheer their souls when it's painful.

Can you imagine.

And that'll be progress.

I ain't trained no follow-on you know. I got three sons; and no-one else's daughter wants my knowledge now. My soft spell-words and my warm and darkly chamber and my invitations to go nidgetin' around and summon the mother's friends- all these must go into a big, sealed box which I have labelled 'Currently out of Fashion' but Doctor Glibb thinks is called 'Redundant'. I'll tell him where the box is kept, though - because there may just come a time, there may just... when he'll find himself putting away his cold and impersonal instruments in there along with his cold and impersonal manner.

When the lights are dimmed again and the distaff side take back birthing with their soft songs and their gentle words and their stroking of hands and mopping of sweating foreheads and their sharing of that good and awful pain.

I'm going to sit here with you now because it's nearly all done. I'm nearly all done now. It's all over for me.

*(She sits in an empty seat or brings a stool to sit near a guest)*

Here, *(she gives the guest her hand)* I'll ask you to stroke my hand please. Because that's what I know helps the pain.

And all my pains...pains of all sorts have sort of overcome me, I'm afraid.

I was there for all your new beginnings.

And now you're here for mine. The most important new beginning of all.

I'd ask you to stay with me until it's over.

When I fall asleep, you can let go my hand and leave me quiet, will you?

You can go after that.

*(to them all)*

Go and top up your glasses. Raise a toast to the midwife, will you? And to the world that changed around her. And keep alive the hope for this silly old hag that one day, her old box of traditions will be found and opened and them ideas and traditions will be seen to be more than just an old woman's nonsense after all. That'd be funny, now, wouldn't it?

*(She starts to falter)*

Keep hold of her for a little bit longer if you don't mind. Then let her have her quiet time, preparing for her new life.

Finally quiet.

Thank you all.

All my lovely children.

*She slumps, silent. She's gone*

*The end.*

**(7935 words)**

## A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *LEAH COUSINS*

### INTRODUCTION - The fourth wall as a semi-permeable membrane

**Preamble:** Once, at a Tudor re-enactment event at a large country house, I heard a fellow visitor ask one of the re-enactors (a member of a Tudor musical band) if she could take a photograph. "What do you mean, mistress?" asked the enactor. "Take a picture" said the woman, holding her camera aloft. "Get over here boys", yelled the enactor to his colleagues - "this woman is going to make a picture of us with her little black box". As the band moved away after the photo was taken, one Tudor character muttered audibly to another, and to the amusement of the woman and all us other 21<sup>st</sup> century visitors - "Quite mad, clearly!"

Whilst the woman got her photograph, the re-enactor's use of the word 'make' rather than 'take' had allowed his character to stay within the vocabulary and understanding of the era he was portraying. His fellow re-enactor's pronouncement on the woman's sanity, suggested to the audience that whatever she'd done with her 'little black box' it was clearly beyond their understanding – which, of course, historically it would have been.

The performer had crossed the boundary between the fiction and the audience - what is generally known as the fourth wall. In character, he spoke directly to a member of the audience but carefully avoided any anachronism which might force him out of character. The woman had offered a difficult challenge by hinting at technology not known by the Tudors, but the re-enactor exercised what improvisation specialist Alison Goldie calls 'The Number One Rule of Improvisation: Say Yes'<sup>1</sup>. He did not avoid the challenge but engaged with the audience and found a way to answer. The satisfaction of the audience was not just in watching the Tudor characters, the impact was increased by our shared delight in how the performer had manipulated the language of his answer to avert a dilemma. We could see the performer as well as the character.

The re-enactor's quick-thinking improvisation had allowed the fourth wall to be flexible enough to keep the authenticity of both centuries intact.

**This dissertation:** This tiny encounter inspired me to examine more closely the opening-up of the relationships between characters, performers and audiences, especially across the

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Goldie *The Improv Book* (London: Oberon Books, 2015) p78

barrier of ‘history’. It will look briefly at the history of theatre-performance work which has allowed for the audience to participate actively in the drama. Different ways in which the audience can be invited to participate and share agency with the performer will be examined. It will also address to what extent these invitations might impact on the response of the audience, and therefore, in turn, alter the content of the play and its delivery by a performer required to improvise accordingly.

It asks why active participation by the audience might increase their involvement and enjoyment.

**The creative piece** is a 50-minute solo play called *Leah Cousins* – which characterises an 18<sup>th</sup> century midwife. Her name and a snippet of her history are taken from a section of George Crabbe’s 1807 poem, *The Parish Register* <sup>2</sup>. Leah is thwarted in her career by the arrival of a fashionable man-midwife into her village, a young man by the name of Dr Glibb. The topic came to my notice after listening to an episode of BBC radio’s ‘In Our Time’ about Sterne’s novel *Tristram Shandy*, in which the character of a man-midwife, Dr Slop, features.<sup>3</sup> In following up my interest, I happened upon the Crabbe poem.

I envisaged the play as a conversation between Leah and a group of guests – as whom the audience would be cast. It is the relationship between the performer, Leah and her guests, that will test the theories of the dissertation.

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<sup>2</sup> George Crabbe *The Parish Register* <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5208> Last accessed June 2018 - See appendix 1 for a transcription of the section on Leah Cousins.

<sup>3</sup>*In Our Time* Radio 4 podcast series <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0418phf> accessed September 2017

## CHAPTER 1 - CONTEXT

- Terminology
- Historical context

### Terminology

The term 'Fourth Wall' was first coined, in his original French, by the playwright and critic Jean Jullien in his essay 'Le Théâtre Vivant' in 1892<sup>4</sup>. He used it to describe the imaginary barrier not just between the actors and the audience but between the world of the fiction of the drama and the non-fictional world of the audience.

The relationships between the participants in a theatrical performance are complex and to imagine the fourth wall as a straight-forward dividing-line, over simplistic. The world on the stage is a 'real' world in the sense that the actors, the set, the auditorium etc. are all physical entities. Equally the audience is not separable from the fiction in that, as Roland Barthes suggests in his 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author'<sup>5</sup>, they bring to it their own knowledge, ideas and interpretation. Two performances can never be the same – the audience is always having an effect - is always in some way participating.

Even when not invited to participate *directly*, the audience express their reactions – as Gareth White describes in his detailed work on participatory theatre:

Of course, all audiences are participatory. Without participation performance would be nothing but action happening in the presence of other people.

Audiences laugh, clap, cry, fidget, and occasionally heckle; they pay for tickets, they turn up at the theatre, they stay to the end of the performance or they walk out<sup>6</sup>

- all of which can have an effect both on the performers and also on the rest of the audience. However, for the purposes of this dissertation I will subscribe to White's simple definition of audience participation:

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Jullien *Le Theatre Vivant* [1892] <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5742598v> p11 accessed 25th June 2018

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf) Accessed 20th June 2018

<sup>6</sup> Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p3

The participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the *action* of a performance (*my italics*)<sup>7</sup>

The idea of the philosophical position of the spectator as passive is challenged by French philosopher Jacques Rancière. He says, in *The Emancipated Spectator*,

What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs<sup>8</sup>

although this seems to express ideas and ambitions for a popular voice; an engaged and un-blinkered response, rather than the *fact* of people taking an active part in a theatre production.

Political theatre practitioner Augusto Boal shared this ambition for those in his native South America to whom he wished to offer a means of expression against political regimes but Boal created a way of producing theatre which *did* facilitate this active audience to participate in the action of a show by stopping it and re-writing it for actors to improvise. I can find no reference in his book to any reluctance to participate on the part of people who have hitherto been denied a means of expression.<sup>9</sup>

White confirms:

Audience participation has always been important in applied and social theatre, where the aim to engage audience members in social activism and personal development has often been achieved through direct involvement in drama<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding the examples above, a difference between the world of the fiction and the world of the audience at a theatrical drama is conventionally recognised – a difference in expectation and in behaviour – and the imaginary line that divides them is customarily known as the Fourth Wall. The dissertation will use this term to describe as such since its aim is to

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<sup>7</sup> Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p4

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière *The Emancipated Spectator* trans Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso 2009) p4

<sup>9</sup> Augusto Boal *Theatre of the Oppressed* Trans Emily Fryer. (London: Pluto Press, New edition 2008)

<sup>10</sup> Gareth White *Audience Participation* Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p3

test the permeability and flexibility of that very division by inviting the audience to participate directly and actively in the play.

Creating a play wherein the audience is called upon to participate in a range of ways leads to a dilemma in what to call them – spectators, participants, members-of-the-audience? Theatre director Gary Izzo in ‘The Art of Play – the New Genre of Interactive Theatre’, suggests that the term ‘audience’ not the right word in a performance event where people are invited to participate directly in the drama, since it “implies a group of aloof watchers”. I agree and feel the same about the word ‘spectators’ so will, when discussing those who experienced or might experience *Leah Cousins*, use Izzo’s suggestion of the word ‘guests’. In *Leah Cousins* this is precisely the role given to the people who are assembled, so it seems most appropriate.

Interactive theatre:

It is also interesting to look at chapter 2 of Izzo’s book for his definitions of the degree to which the guests can be included into the participatory drama ranging from ‘intimate’ (where the characters can address the audience but expect no response and the pre-planned order of the production is not disturbed) through to ‘interactive’ where the guests are

‘endowed with a role to play...(and) the outcome of any scene may change completely depending upon the nature of the...response of the guest.’

This dissertation will test the use of a range of different interactions and techniques in order to include the guests in the drama but with the ultimate aim of retaining the ‘pre-planned’ narrative. *Leah Cousins* will tend more towards the idea of ‘a play’ rather than ‘play’.

### **Historical context:**

The convention of those gathered to witness a theatrical performance being observers of the fictional world, but with *no* means to actively participate in it, really only occurs in a small window of theatre history. Audiences throughout theatre history have often had the opportunity to engage not only with the ideas and story of the drama before them, but also actively with the performers.

In the introduction to her book *Theatre Audiences* under the heading ‘Historical Approaches’, theatre-academic professor Susan Bennett describes how ancient Greek audiences shared



with their actors the same light and the same physical space - as did medieval and sixteenth century spectators <sup>11</sup> and did not consider themselves separate.

Later, a soliloquy from Shakespeare or an aside from a Restoration comedy will quickly reveal that the audiences in those eras were, at that moment, no more inaccessible to the actors than the actors were to the audiences although in other parts of the scripts the world of the fiction may be contained within the characters. The Chorus in Henry V talks directly to the audience, inviting them to use their imaginations to plug the gaps in the players' version of the story:

Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth<sup>12</sup>

In popular entertainment this direct connection has prevailed. In Britain, music hall, variety, pantomime, circus and stand-up comedy have all encouraged active participation and White points out that direct participation has in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century been a tool for social and applied theatre-making.<sup>13</sup>

However, running alongside this comfortable communication with those outside of the fiction, there were certain changes that were encouraging the separation of the performance space from the spectators' space and consequently the characters from the audience – particularly in dramatic theatre.

In Elizabeth Burns' book 'Theatricality' she closes chapter 3 with this statement on the metamorphosis of ritual, (where everyone involved had/has some part to play) into drama, where some are actors, and some are spectators:

...the separation of audience from actors which accompanied the development of drama gradually produced changes in the nature of acting. The actor was required not only to realise an imagined character but also to present this character to

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Bennett *Theatre Audiences* second edition (Oxford Routledge 1997) p2

<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Henry V. Prologue lines 26-27* <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/henryv/full.html> accessed 24th June 2018

<sup>13</sup> Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p3

spectators who did not feel themselves compelled to believe in its existence outside the special occasion of performance (...) Spectators and actors were learning to assume different, though at times, interchangeable roles.<sup>14</sup>

This separation, she says was complete in England by 1576 when James Burbage built the first full-time theatre.

Susan Bennett states that during the sixteen-hundreds, as theatre moved into private houses and admission prices rose, the audiences became more 'increasingly passive and more bourgeois'<sup>15</sup> implying that this made them less likely to join in.

Changes to the shapes and configurations of theatres also emphasised the separation. Individual seats or stalls in neat rows replaced the standing room or benches of the old pits, for example and started to detract from the communal nature of the audience<sup>16</sup> making them, as Bennet says, 'more sedate'.

Director Richard Schechman describes how the development of the proscenium arch theatre continued this division:

The stage is architecturally separated from the house by the proscenium arch (...) a framed wall with its centre portion removed so that literally the audience is in one room and looking into another.<sup>17</sup>

Advances in available technology meant that stage lighting also featured as a way to define the fictional world as different from the auditorium.<sup>18</sup>

As the swing towards a naturalistic theatre gained a hold in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian theatre-maker Stanislavski was devising a training method for actors that encouraged performers to be entirely held within the fictional world. He called it 'solitude in public' where the performer would be confining herself to 'a circle of attention.' He describes it thus:

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Burns *Theatricality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks. 1973) pp 27, 28

<sup>15</sup> Susan Bennett *Theatre Audiences* second edition (Oxford: Routledge 1997) p3

<sup>16</sup> Author unknown <http://www.stagebeauty.net/th-frames.html?http&&www.stagebeauty.net/th-frompit.html> last accessed 27th August 2018

<sup>17</sup> Richard Schechner *Performance Theory* (Taylor and Francis e-library 2004) p182

<sup>18</sup> Author unknown *A Brief Outline of the History of Stage Lighting* <http://www3.northern.edu/wild/LiteDes/ldhist.htm> last accessed 27th August 2018

During a performance before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle like a snail in its shell. <sup>19</sup>

This technique is still extensively taught in British and American actor training and is particularly suited the naturalistic style required of the film industry.

Of interest to me in the writing of *Leah Cousins*, was his statement which instructs:

An actor must have a point of attention and this point of attention must *not* be in the auditorium.<sup>20</sup> (*my italics*)

This is the very convention that this dissertation seeks to explore. That the ‘shell’ that Stanislavski put around the actor – the wall that is built between her and the spectators - can be as flexible and permeable for an actor in character-based drama as for a comedian or a pantomime dame.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries theatre-makers have explored many ways of breaking the fourth wall. Immersive theatre ranges from surrounding the audience with the environment of the play but with no active input (as in Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson’s *The Jungle*) - to Bond and Lloyd’s *You Me Bum Bum Train* which cast individual guests as the ‘lead’ in dramatic scenarios, without any prior preparation. No discussion of participatory performance is complete without mention of the immersive theatre of Punchdrunk and the performance art works of Marina Abramovic or Yoko Ono.

Schechner describes what he calls ‘the open-theatre movement’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “attempting to restore the shared playing and viewing space.”<sup>21</sup>

With this as the background, I felt I could examine the degree to which the guests could be invited to participate in *Leah Cousins* - of how I could ensure the performer could allow the audience to feel that they were invited to contribute actively to the story and to play the characters to which they were cast whilst keeping control of the narrative. Leah, herself

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<sup>19</sup> Constantin Stanislavski *An Actor Prepares*, [1936] trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. (London: Methuen, 1988) p82

<sup>20</sup> Constantin Stanislavski *An Actor Prepares*, [1936] trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. (London: Methuen, 1988) P74

<sup>21</sup> Richard Schechner *Performance Theory* (Taylor and Francis e-library 2004) p182

should be performed as a naturalistic character – she shouldn't refer in any way to the meta-theatre of the performance but believe that the guests are part of her 18<sup>th</sup> century world – for her they are real friends and she can interact with them as such. This meant that the *performer* must be prepared to improvise in character. She must work out, in the instant, how to respond as Leah would respond. As a script writer I needed to provide situations and lines of dialogue to invite these moments of improvisation.

## CHAPTER 2 - PARTICIPATION

- The triangle of relationships between the performer, the character and the guests.
- What effect the willingness (or otherwise) of the guests to participate, might have on the performance.

### Who am I?

I posed a question to some professional actor colleagues – ‘when you are engaging with the audience, who are you?’ Playwright/performer Shaun Prendergast wrote of playing Dame in a Pantomime:

It's a strange mixture because you are plying four realities at once. There's the comic performer, trying to find gold in audience interaction. There's the actor character - and you want the interaction to be consistent with that character's emotional make up - and there's the actor trying to play both other parts. That's three. To do that he had to subdue his own meta-reality, the gas bill and the health scare etc. It's like three layers of mask on a real face.<sup>22</sup>

Having worked as a professional actor myself, I can attest to the fact that most actors have no problem with the practical aspect of ‘who am I?’ They are accustomed to layers or degrees of ‘reality’.

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<sup>22</sup> Shaun Prendergast in interview with the author by email July 2018

Another actor/writer, Paul Rider says

‘Personally, I believe I’m always more ‘myself’ when I break the fourth wall because I’m more exposed and sensitive to the unpredictability of the audience (...) Whatever status my character possesses within the play, I have to be in control of the situation.

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Both Rider and Prendergast clearly understand what is happening but struggle to describe it in terms a layman might grasp.

Robert Schechner in his essay *Magnitudes of Performance* examines some ways to explain this duality. Equating acting, not unreasonably, with lying, he talks of Paul Eckman’s work on facial expressions and lying and concludes:

Lying is a very complicated business, in which the skilled liar (...) *knows* he is lying but *feels* he is telling the truth (...) The half actor who ‘does not forget’ himself is the knower, the half who ‘becomes the character itself’ is the feeler... This would suggest, even, that a skilled performer has ‘three halves’. Both the ergotropic and trophotropic systems are aroused while the ‘center’ of the performer, the ‘I’, stands outside observing and to some degree controlling both the knower and the feeler.<sup>24</sup>

However close to Rider’s ‘myself’ a theatre performer may feel, a persona, or character, or liar is always in place. Unless an emergency requires a performer to speak or act entirely out of character (to announce an evacuation or because of a backstage accident for example), there is always an element of the ‘fake’ however close to their own voice or character the performer might come. The corpsing between on-stage pantomime performers is acceptable because the audiences enjoy seeing what they consider to be the ‘real’ world – the meta-theatrical world - seeping through into the fiction. Since it increases their enjoyment it is just as much part of the show as the story, songs and jokes. It is both real and performed. The genre of pantomime allows for the breaking of the fourth wall by tradition.

The work of playwright Tim Crouch revels in the multiplicity of layers that can be achieved in a theatre performance. In his disturbing play from 2009, *The Author* he has actors playing

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Rider in interview with the author by email July 2018

<sup>24</sup> Richard Schechner *Performance Theory* (Taylor and Francis e-library 2004) p316 – the essay explains these neurological distinctions very clearly.

characters who are actors and one who plays the part of the author. The notes at the start of the play say that the actor/characters should take the names of the actor/performers – but the author must always be called Tim Crouch. Even when not played by the actual Tim Crouch, the name forces us to equate the name of *The Author* with the name of the playwright. When at the end of the play The Author character describes a despicable act he has committed, we are doubly shocked, since the character has already been presented to us as somehow less than entirely fictional. He's Tim Crouch, the author.<sup>25</sup>

On the meta-theatrical layer, we know that the *actual* Tim Crouch has committed no such act, or he would not be a free-man.

Critic and academic Catherine Love here describes another one of Crouch's plays, *An Oak Tree* but could be describing several others:

A fresco or palimpsest is a useful way of thinking about *An Oak Tree*. It's theatre of multiple layers, sometimes visible, sometimes not.<sup>26</sup>

In *An Oak Tree* The only other performer in the piece apart from Crouch (playing a stage hypnotist) has not seen or read the script prior to the performance and in his play *I Malvolio* members of the audience are invited onto the stage to help humiliate the eponymous character. However, Crouch scripts the framework tightly – even what seem like ad libs are written in and the invited guests are firmly under instruction.

It was seeing both of these plays and having the good fortune to meet with Tim Crouch in person, that encouraged me to risk the opening up of the drama of *Leah Cousins* to a *direct* invitation to the audience to participate and contribute verbally – which would therefore be partially unscripted – un-scriptable.

This requires of the performer that she is prepared improvise appropriate responses and a note to the performer at the start of *Leah Cousins* articulates this.

The possibility of this sprung from my own experience as a performer. I had the great fortune to be taught by the late John Hodgson, a passionate exponent of improvisation in theatre (and co-author with Ernest Richards of a book on the subject<sup>27</sup>) and much later was taught

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Crouch *The Author* from the collection *Plays One*. (London: Oberon Books, 2011)

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Love – article in Exeunt Magazine June 26th 2015 <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/an-oak-tree/> accessed July 2018

<sup>27</sup> John Hodgson and Ernest Richard *Improvisation Revised edition* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974)

storytelling skills at the National Theatre by the dynamic Jan Blake. In the time between, I worked as a jobbing professional actress across the whole gamut of performance styles from naturalism to pantomime. This meant I knew that as a performer moving between scripted dialogue and improvised dialogue would be possible – commonly in comedy and pantomime; more rarely in a drama - but the task of the dissertation would be to test different *kinds* of interaction and how to write these into a script. I shall cover this in detail in Chapter 3.

With the script of *Leah Cousins*, although the performer may be required to improvise in character and not as a version of her actual self, the audience is aware that this is equally part of the performance. Reactions to this from a test-run of the play are discussed in detail here in Chapters 3 and 4.

Gareth White's second chapter of *Audience Participation* covers this theatrical duality. Early in the chapter he states:

Real and actual things can happen to characters in interactive plays, insofar as participants can in some cases change the characters' destinies. But the characters we watch most closely in audience participatory performance are often the people who perform, rather than the characters they portray.<sup>28</sup>

His chapter is subtitled 'Risk in performance' and it is clear that White is indicating the risk to a performer's reputation in opening up their own fallibility to the audience. It was this very risk that I particularly wanted to expose and utilise in *Leah Cousins*. In a situation where the pre-planned order of a play is disrupted by the comments of the guests, the performer might fail to solve the problem - which is the very jeopardy that attracts us to the danger of the circus or the open-mic comedy night. It's live; it might go wrong!

White again:

The payoff for this risk is that a performance is produced that is even more ephemeral and unique than most live performance, and that is demonstrably a product of the people who are present at the event.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gareth White *Audience Participation* Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p73

<sup>29</sup> Gareth White *Audience Participation* Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p 74

However, the subject of risk brings us to the potential fear of audience participation that many spectators might feel – the risk demanded of the guests – especially, as in the case of *Leah Cousins*, when they aren't *expecting* to have to join in.

Without having conducted a survey, I would imagine that not many people who embarked on *You Me Bum Bum Train* were unaware of the style of the event. The form of the show was the primary attraction.

The test audience for *Leah Cousins* had no such prior knowledge and, in the feed-back it can be seen that the discovery that the character was going to speak to them and that they might have to participate sent a chill through many of the guests.<sup>30</sup>

White opens his book with the words:

There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation. The prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it on their audiences.<sup>31</sup>

And the majority of my 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, having not specifically booked for an interactive performance and not (as yet) in search of a unifying political voice were nervous participants.

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<sup>30</sup> See appendix 2

<sup>31</sup> Gareth White *Audience Participation* Gareth White. *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p 1



## CHAPTER 3 – THE WRITING PROCESS

- The discovery and development of the story and themes:
- Creating and developing the character
- The forms of the invitation to participate – casting and engaging the guests
- Writing to invite improvisation within the script
- How the subject matter affected the structure of the play.

### The story

Finding myself intrigued by the idea of the man-midwife, it was clear that much more research was required to flesh out the character of Leah and ensure that her story was historically accurate.

Crabbe's original poem recounts only Leah's fall from popularity and her clash with Dr Glibb.<sup>32</sup> The poet is not specific about the skills and techniques of either Leah or Glibb, so the details of 18<sup>th</sup> century childbirth were found from two books 'The Making of Man-midwifery – Childbirth in England 1660-1770' by Adrian Wilson<sup>33</sup> and 'Midwives and Medical Men – A History of the Struggle for the Control of Childbirth' by Jean Donnison.<sup>34</sup>

Both source books very quickly revealed how the post Renaissance thirst for knowledge and scientific discovery led to an interest in childbirth which had previously been entirely the preserve of women and considered a social rather than a medical matter.

A doctor might be called to a birth, but only in case of emergency and usually only when all else had failed.

Donnison then explains that by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, scientific interest in anatomy had led to the processes of childbirth being of interest to medics – a profession not open to women.<sup>35</sup> By the 18<sup>th</sup> century this rise of the scientific and medical interest started to impact

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<sup>32</sup> See appendix 1 – extract from George Crabbe's 'Parish Register'.

<sup>33</sup> Adrian Wilson *The Making of Man Midwifery – Childbirth in England 1660-1770* Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1995

<sup>34</sup> Jean Donnison *Midwives and Medical Men – A History of the Struggle for the Control of Childbirth* Historical Publications Ltd, London, 1988 reprinted 1999

<sup>35</sup> Jean Donnison *Midwives and Medical Men – A History of the Struggle for the Control of Childbirth* Historical Publications Ltd, London, 1988 reprinted 1999, p23

on even remote village midwives like Leah Cousins, who were armed only with experience, common-sense and tradition. Crabbe has Glibb aim the following tirade at Leah:

Nay," said the Doctor, "dare you trust your wives,  
The joy, the pride, the solace of your lives,  
To one who acts and knows no reason why,  
But trusts, poor hag! to luck for an ally? -  
Who, on experience, can her claims advance,  
And own the powers of accident and chance?  
A whining dame, who prays in danger's view,  
(A proof she knows not what beside to do;)"<sup>36</sup>

The customs and traditions of which Glibb and his non-fictional fellows were so dismissive had formed, unchallenged, part of the childbirth ritual in the western world for centuries and as will be shown, many such customs came back into fashion in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This formed the theme of my play. *Leah Cousins* would not only tell the story of one midwife from 200 years ago but would also indicate the fluctuating fashions surrounding childbirth and also the age-old story of women's knowledge and experience being belittled by men.

The dramatic irony of the play rests upon the guests realising that there are current trends in the preparation for childbirth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world which are re-workings of traditions from before medicalisation. On page 31 of the script I gave Leah a speech to indicate she could only *hope* that a time would come:

When the lights are dimmed again, and the distaff side take back birthing

Certain points in the midwifery research stood out to me as worthy of inclusion in the play to really emphasise this point to the guests.

A comparison of Wilson's description of old birthing traditions with a childbirth-advice website from 2012 called *Babycentre* shows something of this resurgence. Wilson writes:

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<sup>36</sup> Appendix 1 Extract from *The Parish Register* Lines 41 - 48

The birth was (...) physically and symbolically enclosed. Air was excluded by blocking up the keyholes; daylight was shut out but curtains; and the darkness within was illuminated by means of candles <sup>37</sup>

and the website advises:

**Adjust the heating and lighting**

At home use candles, tea lights, dimmer switches and fairy lights to make soft, calm, ambient lighting. <sup>38</sup>

Wilson again, discussing the customary invitation for supportive friends to comfort the mother during the birth:

The invited women were known as “gossips” (...) a corruption of “god-sib” or “god-sibling”. (...they) were her close female friends <sup>39</sup>

The website suggests:

**Have someone with you who you trust**

Your supporter could be your partner, a close friend or relative, or a doula. You could have two supporters lined up so that one can take over from the other as your labour progresses.

However, it is also interesting to note that despite, on the one hand, these returning old fashions being suggested by Babycentre – there has, on the other, been much interest the subject of *elective* (rather than emergency) caesarean section births in the last two decades. This choice would have been unthinkable in Leah’s time, but equates to the fashion for the ‘new technology’ of childbirth in the form of the man-midwife. The phrase ‘too posh to push’

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<sup>37</sup> Adrian Wilson *The Making of Man Midwifery – Childbirth in England 1660-1770* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995) p26

<sup>38</sup> Author unknown <https://www.babycentre.co.uk/a1028257/creating-the-perfect-environment-for-giving-birth> accessed most recently 24th August 2018

<sup>39</sup> Adrian Wilson *The Making of Man Midwifery – Childbirth in England 1660-1770* (Massachusetts Harvard University Press 1995) p26

gained currency – especially in the UK when elective caesarean births became available on the NHS in 2011. This goes against World Health Organisation directions which, as can be seen in their news release of 2015, states that the procedure should only be used when medically necessary.<sup>40</sup> There has been much debate in support of, and against this since. These swings of fashion in childbirth, the return of some of Leah's 18<sup>th</sup> century customs and the clash between the social and the medical framing of childbirth, provided the material for content of the story.

## Character

I wanted Leah to be in conversation with someone. Willy Russell's solo play *Shirley Valentine*<sup>41</sup> has the title character speaking to a wall in the first half of the play and to a rock in the second, which reflects her lack of a friend to confide in, but I wanted Leah to be surrounded by friends – I needed the audience to be her guests. Added to which, after my observation of the historical re-enactor, the idea of improvising in character started to lead the process. So, both form and content helped to evolve one of the questions of this dissertation - to what extent might an audience accept their casting – I will go into more detail on this later in the chapter.

Firstly, to create a performable character, I began with clues from the original poem. Crabbe gives Leah several heated lines of argument against her newly arrived nemesis<sup>42</sup> and from this it was clear that she wasn't a shy woman or nervous of speaking up, so it was a reasonable assumption that she could hold her own in an argument. From the text of the poem, I took the fact that she was most probably drunk and under the influence of some other drug – what Crabbe describes only as 'stronger aid'.<sup>43</sup> A very cursory internet trawl confirmed that some sort of opium extract would have been easily available to her at that time.

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<sup>40</sup> W.H.O. news release Geneva 2015 <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2015/caesarean-sections/en/> Accessed most recently 24<sup>th</sup> August

<sup>41</sup> Willy Russell *Shirley Valentine* (London: Samuel French Stage Play edition 2014)

<sup>42</sup> Appendix 1 Extract from *The Parish Register* Lines 60 - 84

<sup>43</sup> Appendix 1 Extract from *The Parish Register* Lines 90 - 92

Crabbe draws the literary picture of the clash between Leah and Glibb so clearly that it might be easily supposed that he had encountered such a confrontation during his time as a parish clergyman, and although he didn't work exclusively in Suffolk, he was born and spent most of his life in the county. Since I also live in Suffolk, I chose to make Leah a Suffolk woman. However, I am not an expert in historical dialect and besides, I did not want the texture of the language to overtake the content of Leah's speech, so I have used some elements of the accent and dialect which would be familiar to a modern audience either from within or without the county - but not so much that her language might be difficult to understand. It was important to the exercise of bringing the guests into the action of the play that they felt comfortable and in no way alienated – that they were able to talk to Leah without the embarrassment of wondering if they should answer in her language - so any potential for historical authenticity gave way to ease of comprehension. Leah frequently uses 'Thass' instead of both 'that is' and 'it is' which is still a common dialect phrase still heard in Suffolk. For example, on p23 Leah says:

Thass not a spell of course. Thass just a song.

Similarly, I have used the common dialect mis-use of different tenses to smooth over the different between Leah's century and that of the guests – between Leah's 'now' and that of the guests. On p8 of the script she asks a guest:

What your father do for a living?

which could mean both what 'does' he do and what 'did' he do.

For a few other Suffolk-specific words or phrases such as 'frackfull' meaning crowded, I am indebted to A.O.D. Claxton's fascinating book *The Suffolk Dialect of the Twentieth Century*.<sup>44</sup>

## **Casting the guests**

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<sup>44</sup> A.O.D Claxton *The Suffolk Dialect of the Twentieth Century*. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 1968 reprinted 1985)

Since she appears in the 'Deaths' section of the fictional parish register, I decided early on that the conversation with Leah would be the final 50 or so minutes of her life as she was dying – both of disease and of a broken heart. It gave the conversation purpose – the conversation would be her last words and it meant that there was more urgency in her wanting to gain the trust of her audience of guests. But that raised the question of who they were in the fiction.

As writing progressed I was still unsure what collective character the guests were to play. The aim was to explore the permeability of the fourth wall in both directions – not just to cast the audience into roles appropriate to the chamber of an 18<sup>th</sup> century midwife but also to see if the midwife could in any way acknowledge their position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without resorting to naïve solutions such as time travel or (beloved of youth theatre devising) 'it was all a dream'.

Eventually I cast the guests as those people whom Leah helped into the world at their birth – some directly (on p13 she refers to one of the guests by a fictional name – Zekiel – and tells his story) and sometimes by reference as the *descendants* of those she birthed. On p7 she says:

Perhaps that's why you're here. Is it? Have you all come to see me because I birthed you? Or your mother. Did I birth her? Or your grand...grand...gran'ma...and you're not...are you?

These confusions as to who the guests are and Leah's realisation that there is something unusual about them are written in at times when she is less than lucid because of drunkenness or because of pain. The confusion represents her closeness to death – as if she is slipping through to a different world that does not necessarily follow the rules of nature. The performer can stay in character and the character can acknowledge the jump in time. It released me from needing Leah to express understanding of the theatrical event.

The casting of the audience was not straightforward, especially if they were to be active participants. Leah's confused state allowed for the guests could be given more than one kind of role to play and more than one way of having to play them as she cast them as both her fellow villagers and as the descendants of those villagers.

### **Engaging the guests**

In the script I tested a range of different ways for Leah to engage with the guests. Firstly, the initial welcome where they are invited to their seats as her friends and 'god-sibs' – which

requires no direct response. Secondly, through their being asked questions as themselves (not in character) which I hoped would elicit an authentic and honest response (see Chapter 4 for how this played out in the test-performance). I placed this kind of question early in the script, before the guests discovered that later they may be asked to respond in character. Thirdly, asking a member of the guests to read the part of Dr Glibb from a script <sup>45</sup>. The next was a physical connection - Leah asking another guest to take her hand after she's wiped up her own urine from the floor.

In the draft of the script taken to the test-performance, the final interaction required a guest to stroke Leah's hand at the moment she dies and then make the decision for the rest of the guests as to when they should leave the performance space. I considered trying to give the audience responsibility over the event as well as some degree of autonomy as characters within it.

For the purposes of the dissertation I wanted to see how far the audience would accept their casting and engage with the participation. Again, chapter 4 covers the results of these tests.

### **Examples of participation**

For inspiration on how this might be achieved, I looked for some examples of extant scripts which include audience engagement. Firstly, the connection between a pantomime audience and the character of the Dame.

I interviewed actor/writer Eric Potts who specializes in writing pantomime scripts for several regional repertory theatres. He articulated:

“I always think that the only character you don't type on the cast list is the audience. I do believe, though, that that is exactly what they are. They may not fully realise that fact and, in some cases that is not a bad thing as it may either scare or encourage to a degree of negativity.”<sup>46</sup>

This negativity refers to the reluctance that some people have to audience participation as previously mentioned in Chapter 2.

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<sup>45</sup> See the performance notes on p1 of the creative piece

<sup>46</sup> Email interview with the author June 2018

I certainly was aware during the test-performance of *Leah Cousins* that some were more willing to be asked to participate than others.

Secondly, I looked at the work of Tim Crouch. Crouch's theme as a theatre-maker is the suggestibility of audiences. He speaks in an interview with playwright and academic Dan Rebellato of the items he collects from the audience before a performance of his play *My Arm* which represent different characters and elements of the story he is about to tell:

Ideas of audience participation become very keen for me I think in this, in all the pieces, not, as in, come up on stage and make an idiot of yourself, but how you get an audience to actively participate in the fabric of the piece. So, you find that in *My Arm* where investment comes entirely from the audience. (...) I'm most excited, in a way, when my hand randomly selects a lipstick and that's 'my dad' because then there's just a lot more work for you to do, there's a lot more interest...<sup>47</sup>

His commitment to creating situations where the audience is invited and required to 'fill the spaces' as he says later in the interview, pervades much of his canon. However, there were two things about his statement that interested me. Firstly, that he collects the items for *My Arm* from the audience *prior* to the show – not during the performance. It seems that he still doesn't want this to be *part* of the play. The leap in belief that the audience is required to make is very much a part of the play, but not their actual direct participation. Secondly, I was interested in his assumption that if the audience *were* required to participate directly, this would equate to making 'an idiot' of them. The writing of *Leah Cousins* set out to challenge whether this must necessarily be the case.

The most influential example I found - where the audience is invited to participate directly in the course of a dramatic script is *Iris Brunette* by performer and sound artist Melanie Wilson. The play requires members of the audience to perform specific characters, albeit without prior knowledge.

In *Iris Brunette* Wilson gives the audience agency by asking questions where the response encourages them into the drama but does not jeopardise the path of the narrative. The script requires that the performer holds the reins. In some cases, she ensures that the engagement is

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<sup>47</sup> Tim Crouch and Dan Rebellato (transcript of live interview) *Platform*, Vol. 6, No. 2, *Representing the Human*, Summer 2012



framed in a way that means the performer can continue with the narrative as written regardless of the answer, for example:

Do you remember before, in the clearing house? When I caught sight of you?

How did you feel?

(audience response)

Yes, me too. I looked at you and sounds crept into my ears.<sup>48</sup>

This 'Yes, me too' reassures the guest that her/his comment has been heard and included but whatever the reply may be, the performer is not prevented from continuing with her pre-rehearsed line

In other instances, Wilson writes closed questions and then shows the two options with which the performer could respond:

Do we go with the figure or do we continue down the road?

(audience chooses)

choice A, which then leads into B:

The sea captain strides off down the street. His eyes sting, cut with the memory of a thousand bodies thrashing in foam and falling water.

choice B:

We continue on down the road. Droplets of moisture form on our hair.<sup>49</sup>

In *Leah Cousins* I have included *example* potential answers to questions which would hopefully guide a performer. Not exact lines to learn and reproduce but an invitation to improvise accordingly. I've suggested some in the opening notes to the whole script and on other occasions have inserted them into the body of the script as part of the stage directions. For example, on p7 I've written into Leah's speech:

You must remember? How old were you, eight? Nine?

*(elicits answer improvises a response, for example 'Clearly a long time ago' or 'You don't look much more than that now'.)*

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<sup>48</sup> Melanie Wilson Iris Brunette Unpublished script 2008 created for Battersea Arts Centre Scene 9

<sup>49</sup> Melanie Wilson Iris Brunette Unpublished script 2008 created for Battersea Arts Centre, Scene 12

As with *Iris Brunette* it is of no great consequence to *Leah Cousins* how the guest answers the question – but by saying a number (and the script heavily suggests eight or nine as possible answers even if the guest is too shy to offer something her/himself) the guest has participated – the moment of engagement has been achieved and perhaps the very small consequence of their answer helps to indicate that the audience participation in *Leah Cousins* will not be humiliating or cause them to feel they have been ‘making an idiot’ of themselves.

In a traditional pantomime, the Dame will use a similar technique of closed questions or questions without consequence to engage the audience, although there is an expected degree of misrule in such a performance and the actor playing the Dame will have carefully chosen his participant in order to be able to push at the boundary of gentle teasing. The Dame’s exchanges are rarely indicated in a Pantomime script, the improvisation being left to the performer guided by the director in rehearsal and working from a set of traditional routines, passed on by word-of-mouth and observation.

In other places in *Leah Cousins* I have simply written ‘*she improvises*’ and would rely on the performer’s own skill and experience to judge how far to allow each improvisation to run on before pulling the show back to the narrative line. Both Alison Goldie’s book *Impro*<sup>50</sup> and of course the work of Keith Johnstone *Impro*<sup>51</sup> and *Impro for Storytellers*<sup>52</sup> offer great guidance on how to develop these skills but really the casting of *Leah Cousins* would depend on someone playing the role who was experienced and comfortable with improvisation.

## **The structure**

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<sup>50</sup> Alison Goldie *The Improv Book – Improvisation for Theatre, Comedy, Education and Life* Oberon Books, London 2015

<sup>51</sup> Keith Johnstone *Impro* Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London and New York, 2015 edition

<sup>52</sup> Keith Johnstone *Impro for Storytellers* Faber and Faber Ltd, London. 1999

As I wrote Leah's last 50 minutes - her telling of stories, bouts of pain, descriptive passages, moments of high emotion and moments of confusion – I started to see a pattern that reflected the different emotions, pains, lucidity and confusions that a woman in the last stages of labour might experience. I matched the pain of Leah's illness with the pain of contractions and had her reassure *herself* of their passing, as she might a labouring mother. I discovered that bladder cancer would present many similar symptoms to the pain and discomfort of childbirth<sup>53</sup> and although I did not have Leah explain this (or possibly even *know* this) it suited the narrative. Her desire to kill such pain with drugs was akin to the pain relief asked for by many mothers in childbirth. Mothers often describe a short period of intense passion and anger and I wrote the most distressing of Leah's stories to match with this. In the section on pages 19-26 of the script I wanted Leah's character traits and emotions to be pushed to their extreme. She recounts the story of a difficult birth during which she moved through being stubborn, aggressive and intransigent to being violent towards the god-sib in the room before being forced to realise her own fallibility.

I titled the different sections of the script to reflect these changes of emotion:

- 1 - The Laying in chamber
- 2 – The first pains
- 3 – Waters break
- 4 – The Shouting Time
- 5 – Calmer
- 6 – The final push

Whereas this passage of child-birth leads to a new life being brought into the world, the passage of Leah's story takes her towards what she considers to be a different kind of new life – death itself.

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bladder-cancer/symptoms/> last accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018

## CHAPTER 4 - THE EFFECTS OF A TEST READING OF *LEAH COUSINS*

- Audience responses after a test-run of *Leah Cousins*
- How these responses impacted on the final draft of the script.

It was necessary before the final drafting of the script, to test out the participation sections to see what the responses of the guests might *actually* be rather than my pre-supposition when writing. Since the purpose of the dissertation was to test the permeability of the fourth wall, a practical exercise around this was imperative to discover if the guests would work with the performer or reject the invitations. I performed the part of Leah myself for this script-in-hand test-run.

The invited audience of around 20 was made up of acquaintances with varying degrees of theatrical knowledge. Some were specialist theatre academics and/or professional theatre-makers. Others were interested amateurs, and some had very little experience of theatre at all. In age they were mostly between 40 and 60 with only a couple of people outside of this range but I don't imagine this necessarily to be the typical demographic of the play. Although it would affect the direct responses, it's themes and form would be suitable for cohorts from school students to midwives to WI groups. But this is who agreed to help me, and they also kindly agreed to offer written and voiced comments after the performance which are anonymized and contained in Appendix 2.

I chose for the reading to take place in a relatively small space, not associated with live performance, which was intentional as I did not want the guests to be surrounded by the paraphernalia of theatre to remind them of the theatricality of the event. Despite the fact it clearly was exactly that, I wanted to enable them to think of it as much as possible as a conversation rather than as a show and not to advertise its theatricality. Chairs were arranged in in a few rows to form a tight semi-circle around a small, thrust, open space with a chair and a small table with a glass, a bottle (gin) and a small phial (laudanum) as if a corner of Leah's room. I wore clothes faintly suggestive of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – a long skirt, a dirty cloth turban. These props and costumes were indicative rather than detailed and allowed room for the guests own imaginations to work.

Most of the guests recognised by the first address of them by the Leah as ‘my god-sibs’ that they had been drawn into the fiction. I had enabled Leah, in one short, vocative phrase of greeting, cast them in her story. They were not ‘only’ an audience any longer, but they had discovered they were now also Leah’s friends and god-sibs (whether or not the phrase was familiar to them) and soon after they became her patients and representatives or relatives of all the babies she brought into the world.

The performance followed the draft script with guests joining in where invited. It was clear to me, looking directly at them, that there was some degree of shyness, but the direct conversational approach did manage to elicit a response each time and none of the guests refused a connection when asked – either an answer to a question, the reading of a script or a request to help the character or take her hand – all were accepted.

In the post-show discussion, people who were not familiar with performance techniques inquired how a performer ‘knows’ who to pick or who not to, in order to select someone who will participate in a way appropriate and desired of the script and although the discussion around this was interesting, I will not dwell on it as it does not relate to this dissertation. It depends on the performer’s experience and skill and cannot be predicted or accounted for in a play-script.

A pre-determined audience selection works as a very compelling invitation and, although I did not use this technique in *Leah Cousins*, it is worthy of mention as a method of engaging guests in active participation. In *Monty Python’s Spamalot* the Holy Grail is found beneath a seat in the audience whose incumbent is invited onto the stage. The seat number is cryptically worked into the preceding script as a joke and reflects a comic take on destiny that the show’s spoof treatment of the Arthurian legend invites – and in the following paragraph, professional actor Paul Rider talks about the same technique in his one-man show about a fictional hangman:

I suppose if your ‘persona’ has been strongly defined during your performance you hope the audience come towards you as much as you reach out to them in those moments. You hope they now like you enough as an actor to literally ‘play along’ with you. I performed a one man show called the Last Executioner about a fictional hangman called Sidney Rouse who had come to speak to the assembled audience about his career as an executioner. I

used to have the stage manager place a cross under a chair and at a certain point in the show I'd then ask that person to come up on stage and use them to demonstrate how to hang a one-armed man. Because they'd experienced the quiriness of the character for the preceding 45 minutes more often than not they were prepared to go along with having a hood put over their head and their arm bound with a leather strap and attached to a belt.<sup>54</sup>

As Rider demonstrates, the guests' willingness to 'play along' is encouraged by both their warmth towards the character/performer and also by the sense of pre-destiny, having been chosen not by the actor but by accident – not because they betrayed a perfect level of willingness, but purely by chance.

Rider's hope that by the time the guests are being asked to participate in very active ways, they will 'come towards you' also re-enforces what many of the *Leah Cousins* guests felt about accepting the participation from the character because she was likeable and funny. One guest wrote:

Usually I'm uncomfortable with the interaction with the performer but Leah made me feel at ease - possibly because of the humour she uses.

Another:

At first, I didn't know where to look - into Leah's eyes - at the floor. Then it became...very captivating and I couldn't look away.<sup>55</sup>

One of the first direct approaches to a guest in the script of *Leah Cousins* which requires an answer, is to ask, as per the script, about their father's occupation. The test-guest replied, 'He was a printer'. This answer was quite easy to improvise around since the occupation existed in Leah's time and still does in the present time. I have suggested in the 'Notes' at the start of the script (p1) an example of what a performer might do if the father's occupation had been too modern for Leah, in her fictional 18<sup>th</sup> century, to understand. If the fourth wall is to be tested as permeable, I needed to allow Leah to move towards the world of the guests as much

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<sup>54</sup> Email interview with the author June 2018

<sup>55</sup> See appendix 2 - Summary of anonymous audience responses.

as drawing them into her fictional world. Whatever her response, I intended that she find a way to react to the occupation genuinely offered by the guest without speaking anachronistically. The performer must improvise an answer that can be accepted in both Leah's fictional world and yet, accept and build on the contribution from the guest.

There was a lot of agreement in the post-show talk-back of the test-performance about the that the guests would have been 'prepared to lie' if they had been asked the same question. They had quickly realised the dilemma which might face the performer should their *truthful* answer to the father's occupation question need to be something like 'a systems analyst' or 'an airline pilot' or - the one occupation I had prepared for in the suggestions in the script notes on p1 - 'he works in I.T.'

Rather than letting the performer improvise her way out of era-clashing danger – which was what I anticipated while writing the script, they were, very early on in the story, prepared to collude with the character in order to make life easier for the performer.

As the performer, I was partly thrilled to know that the guests had been so quickly won by Leah and were prepared to make their move through the fourth wall but partly disappointed that their willingness to 'play along' could also have deprived the character of *her* opportunity to move through the fourth wall towards *them*. Probably a less-invested and friendly audience might challenge the performer more and not be so accommodating. This would be the excitement in creating a piece where the script cannot be fixed.

One thing that several of the audience questionnaires remarked upon was that because the pattern of Leah's illness followed the phases of childbirth, people were confused as to whether she was actually pregnant or not. I had assumed that both the suggested casting age for Leah, and my own age (well above childbearing years) as the performer would clearly preclude this. I expected it would be quite clear. However, once again, the audience was prepared to suspend their disbelief further than I had anticipated.

I made some changes to the script in order to attempt to clarify that Leah is ill, rather than pregnant, without spelling it out too obviously, with the addition of the line early in the play (p4):

“Just an hour to say goodbye to the old life”

and a little later:

“(a pain in her abdomen)

This in here has finally got me beaten. Today is my new start, I reckon. And new is always terrifying (p6)

To take the participation to a deeper level, in the section called ‘The Shouting Time’ (p13) I created a scenario to test whether a guest would take on the reading of a main character from the story and decided to bring Dr Glibb out of reported speech and into dialogue with Leah.

I wrote out his part of the script in pencil on a prop scrap of paper, as a country midwife might have done and a note at the end of the script indicates how this should be worded. In the test performance the guest who read Glibb was fluent and took the role seriously.

Even though I had Leah call him ‘you foolish, foolish little kite’ and refer to him as ‘boy’. I had deliberately emphasized in the text that he was performing a rôle, making Leah praise his performance skills and comparing him to the actor David Garrick – in order to was to ensure that the reader would remain at one remove from the abuse – that Leah was referring to the *character* of Glibb and not the reader. The test-reader confirmed in the post-show discussion that he had not felt that Leah’s abuse was personal or offensive to him.

However, to push through this layer of protection I had Leah ask the reader:

Well, answer me this, in his voice if you can - why is it...Doctor Glibb... why is it what we women aren't allowed to go and train in the use of these instruments of yours? (p 17)

Leah’s attitude is clearly more aggressive and less protecting and it required the reader to join the performer in improvising within the narrative. It was a request for him to *think* like Glibb without a script to guide him. It was fortunate that the reader I had chosen engaged fully with the flexibility of the fourth wall himself – he answered Leah’s question with a shrug and the word “Society?”



He clearly wanted Leah to have an answer that would serve the narrative. I was delighted that he responded to the invitation to participate and was prepared to improvise.

Other members of the audience commented afterwards that they thought he had this answer written in the paper script, so I have since added in a line which might clarify the unscripted nature of his response and might *also* help a less engaged reader towards an answer if he were faltering: “Don’t try and find the answer in some script. I’m asking you for real, Glibb!”

The stage direction that follows shortly afterwards stands in case of a guest who is less confident in his response:

*(if he flounders, open it up to the floor)*

Although in the test performance I (regretfully) did not take the opportunity to do so, there is the possibility at this point for quite an open discussion should the performer decide. This would further emphasise the permeability of the fourth wall – the character and the guests sharing political opinions from the perspectives of the fictional and the non-fictional sides. The guests would be aware that this could not have been scripted and is being facilitated by the performer through the medium of the character. Having said this, it is impossible to predict if the guests would ever answer in character as cast, rather than offer their own opinions. As I discovered, these guests had declared themselves ‘prepared to lie’.

At the end of the draft for the test performance I had wanted the audience to leave without breaking the final picture with applause. This is an unusual request for an audience who customarily like at best to show their appreciation and at worst know when the play is finished. It is a convention we learn from babyhood. Indeed, Tim Crouch’s Malvolio in *I Malvolio* condemns his audience to the awkward theatrical limbo of not knowing whether the play is finished to represent the very ‘revenge’ that the character in Shakespeare’s original threatens on the whole pack of us.

And now for my revenge. Are you ready? Here it is. I will leave you sitting here.  
Sitting here with nothing to do (...)

*He exits.*

*He does not return.*<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Tim Crouch *I Malvolio* Oberon Books Ltd, London 2011 final page

As the final participatory act for the guests, I wanted to persuade them to honour Leah's request to leave her alone and quiet and break that familiar convention. Writing in one early draft:

When I fall asleep, wipe my brow and then leave me quiet will you?

(...)

You can go after that. Somebody make the decision for the others.

Somebody take charge.

Then go and top up your glasses.

However, I was concerned that the awkwardness of not being able to have closure on the event might destroy an audience's feelings about the rest of the play so in the performance draft I had:

Do not applaud her. The noise will be too much. Besides. She failed.

Just leave and let her have her quiet time. Finally quiet.

All my children. You will not meet her like again.

*She slumps, silent. She's gone.*

I couldn't have imagined what an impassioned response this request *not* to applaud would elicit in the post-show discussion and questionnaires.

Many guests were most vocal in their objection to being asked to remain silent and potentially leave without applauding, suggesting it would have been 'disrespectful'.

The reason, they agreed, was quite the polar opposite of what I had anticipated. I wanted them NOT to applaud in order to consolidate their part in the fiction. I wanted to have drawn them through the semi-permeable membrane far enough that they could feel they did NOT need react in the customary theatrical way and that applause would somehow push them instantly back onto 'their side' of the fourth wall.

In fact, they felt the moment very differently. Most did not want to be reminded that this was fictional, it was commented upon that the very word 'applaud' was too sudden a reminder of their separation from the fiction. I had, by putting the word into Leah's mouth, and by having her speak of herself in the third person, had the very opposite effect to that which I intended and thrown them out of the fiction too suddenly.

One guest said:

You invited us over the threshold from the very beginning - so afterwards you can't push us back and remind us we're 'an audience'.

As a result of this very clear message from the audience, I have removed the experiment from the end of the play. It now reads:

Keep hold of her for a little bit longer if you don't mind. Then let her have her quiet time, preparing for her new life.

Finally quiet.

Thank you all.

All my lovely children.

*She slumps, silent. She's gone*

This particular audience clearly felt they had made their move across that 'threshold' of the fourth wall but wanted to be allowed to return to their starting position on their own terms – to choose for themselves the moment at which that happens and not be instructed.

The audience become their own community - it's why it works. You've built us as a community. Part of watching the actor - also watching each other.<sup>57</sup>

The test audience confirmed Crouch's theory that

Its subconscious is open and it really wants to do some work.<sup>58</sup>

They were prepared to make a range of moves through the fourth wall and into the fiction. Although some expressed reservations about the direct participation, most found a way to accept it and one guest summed it up saying: "For me, we were in the time SHE was in".

I had wanted to use the script to explore in some depth what guests might be prepared to do. I was confident that small interactions like asking a guest to help Leah back to her

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<sup>57</sup> See Appendix 2

<sup>58</sup> The Art of the Autosuggestion | Tim Crouch | TEDxRoyalCentralSchool

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pb11GYJ7wY/> most recently accessed August 23rd 2018

chair or even asking for a helping hand after that very hand has wiped up 'urine' from the floor were not likely to get a refusal and indeed they did not, partly, as the guests agreed, because despite being drawn into the drama, they were at all times aware that it was a fiction. Although the character Leah is entirely unaware that she is in a play, the guests can enjoy the layering of knowing that Schechner's third 'half' of the actor/character is *also* conscious of the fiction.

## CONCLUSION

The experiment of writing and performing *Leah Cousins* involved finding moments in the script for the performer to invite a genuine response from the audience and requiring the performer to improvise - accepting and building on these responses. These moments of engagement ranged from approaches to the audience as a whole; to targeted questions to an individual; to inviting individuals to take on specific roles in the drama - the aim being to see what effect this had on their collective response and whether it increased their enjoyment.

The script needed to allow the performer to get easily back into the narrative and not lose control of the event.

Borrowing from Melanie Wilson's work, therefore, I kept the earliest of these invitations relatively inconsequential, only increasing the audience's depth of involvement and responsibility further into the play once they had grown accustomed to the idea.

In order to accept the audience's response and in turn to respond appropriately the performer is required to step outside of Stanislavski's 'circle of concentration'.

Whilst the Leah that the guests meet, of course does not know that she is in a play, the audience is conscious of the skill of the performer in manipulating the conversation to keep a credible, historical, character voice. I felt, and the responses from the guests confirmed to me, that this awareness certainly increased their enjoyment and therefore their interest in the content and themes of the piece. It is the unique offer that live performance can make.

One guest said:

But it was also FUNNY and much of the humour was a result of your relationship with us - both (the performer) and the audience and LEAH and HER audience.

Another said 'It created bonds'.<sup>59</sup>

Their realisation that they, too, were to be actively involved engendered some trepidation, but no-one actually refused an invitation. The fact that this was clearly not going to be a risk-free event for either the performer *or* the guests kept them from drifting into passivity, which has long been the aim of applied and political theatre-makers as mentioned in Chapter 1.

The most enlightening thing about the process was, hardly surprisingly, testing out the draft on an actual live audience. Their readiness to step through the fourth wall and meet Leah on her own territory was surprising. Especially finding that they considered adjusting their answers in order to play in the fictional world.

Despite Tim Crouch's reassurance that an audience doesn't need to believe, they only need to think, to *imagine*,<sup>60</sup> I had, nonetheless, been prepared for the performer to do *all* the improvising and adjusting and had underestimated the audience's readiness to do the work. I had thought the character would move further through the fourth wall than the guests, whereas in fact, in this case, they rushed to meet her.

It must be appreciated that no two audiences would behave predictably in the same way – which is precisely the joy of *Leah Cousins*.

While of course, no two theatrical performances of any script are ever the same since the audience brings their own interpretations and their own community to a performance just by being there at one moment as opposed to another moment - with *Leah Cousins* they are genuinely invited to contribute, to alter the play - an un-nerving and exciting prospect for guests, performer and playwright alike.

**(10,997 words)**

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<sup>59</sup> Appendix 2

<sup>60</sup> Tim Crouch *The Art of Suggestion* TEDx Royal Central School  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pb11GYJ7wY>  
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Acknowledgments:

Jon Boden (via Twitter) for steering me towards the song 'King Willie' which he said was the only folk song he knew about childbirth. <http://www.afolksongaday.com/?p=2444>



## APPENDIX 1 - EXTRACT FROM *THE PARISH REGISTER* BY GEORGE CRABBE

From <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5208> accessed March 2018

(NOTE This numbering is for ease of reference and does not appear on the original text.)

1       Of *Leah Cousins* next the name appears,  
2       With honours crown'd and blest with length of years,  
3       Save that she lived to feel, in life's decay,  
4       The pleasure die, the honours drop away;  
5       A matron she, whom every village-wife  
6       View'd as the help and guardian of her life,  
7       Fathers and sons, indebted to her aid,  
8       Respect to her and her profession paid;  
9       Who in the house of plenty largely fed,  
10      Yet took her station at the pauper's bed;  
11      Nor from that duty could be bribed again,  
12      While fear or danger urged her to remain:  
13      In her experience all her friends relied.  
14      Heaven was her help and nature was her guide.  
15      Thus Leah lived; long trusted, much caress'd,  
16      Till a Town-Dame a youthful farmer bless'd;  
17      A gay vain bride, who would example give  
18      To that poor village where she deign'd to live;  
19      Some few months past, she sent, in hour of need,  
20      For Doctor *Glibb*, who came with wond'rous speed,  
21      Two days he waited, all his art applied,  
22      To save the mother when her infant died: -  
23      "‘Twas well I came," at last he deign'd to say;  
24      "‘Twas wondrous well;" - and proudly rode away.  
25      The news ran round; - "How vast the Doctor's pow'r!"  
26      He saved the Lady in the trying hour;  
27      Saved her from death, when she was dead to hope,  
28      And her fond husband had resign'd her up:

29 So all, like her, may evil fate defy,  
30 If Doctor Glibb, with saving hand, be nigh.  
31 Fame (now his friend), fear, novelty, and whim,  
32 And fashion, sent the varying sex to him:  
33 From this, contention in the village rose;  
34 And these the Dame espoused; the Doctor those,  
35 The wealthier part to him and science went;  
36 With luck and her the poor remain'd content.  
37 The Matron sigh'd; for she was vex'd at heart,  
38 With so much profit, so much fame, to part:  
39 "So long successful in my art," she cried,  
40 "And this proud man, so young and so untried!"  
41 "Nay," said the Doctor, "dare you trust your wives,  
42 The joy, the pride, the solace of your lives,  
43 To one who acts and knows no reason why,  
44 But trusts, poor hag! to luck for an ally? -  
45 Who, on experience, can her claims advance,  
46 And own the powers of accident and chance?  
47 A whining dame, who prays in danger's view,  
48 (A proof she knows not what beside to do;)  
49 What's her experience? In the time that's gone,  
50 Blundering she wrought, and still she blunders on:-  
51 And what is Nature? One who acts in aid  
52 Of gossips half asleep and half afraid:  
53 With such allies I scorn my fame to blend,  
54 Skill is my luck and courage is my friend:  
55 No slave to Nature, 'tis my chief delight  
56 To win my way and act in her despite:-  
57 Trust then my art, that, in itself complete,  
58 Needs no assistance and fears no defeat."  
59 Warm'd by her well-spiced ale and aiding pipe,  
60 The angry Matron grew for contest ripe.  
61 "Can you," she said, "ungrateful and unjust,

62 Before experience, ostentation trust!  
63 What is your hazard, foolish daughters, tell?  
64 If safe, you're certain; if secure, you're well:  
65 That I have luck must friend and foe confess,  
66 And what's good judgment but a lucky guess?  
67 He boasts, but what he can do: - will you run  
68 From me, your friend! who, all lie boasts, have done?  
69 By proud and learned words his powers are known;  
70 By healthy boys and handsome girls my own:  
71 Wives! fathers! children! by my help you live;  
72 Has this pale Doctor more than life to give?  
73 No stunted cripple hops the village round;  
74 Your hands are active and your heads are sound;  
75 My lads are all your fields and flocks require;  
76 My lasses all those sturdy lads admire.  
77 Can this proud leech, with all his boasted skill,  
78 Amend the soul or body, wit or will?  
79 Does he for courts the sons of farmers frame,  
80 Or make the daughter differ from the dame?  
81 Or, whom he brings into this world of woe,  
82 Prepares he them their part to undergo?  
83 If not, this stranger from your doors repel,  
84 And be content to *be* and to be *well*.”  
85 She spake; but, ah! with words too strong and plain;  
86 Her warmth offended, and her truth was vain:  
87 The many left her, and the friendly few,  
88 If never colder, yet they older grew;  
89 Till, unemploy'd, she felt her spirits droop,  
90 And took, insidious aid! th' inspiring cup;  
91 Grew poor and peevish as her powers decay'd,  
92 And propp'd the tottering frame with stronger aid,  
93 Then died! I saw our careful swains convey,  
94 From this our changeful world, the Matron's clay,

95 Who to this world, at least, with equal care,  
96 Brought them its changes, good and ill, to share.

## APPENDIX 2 - AUDIENCE COMMENTS FROM TEST PERFORMANCE

*This was a paper questionnaire issued and completed immediately after the performance.  
I've ascribed a colour to each guest for anonymity.*

QUESTION: What were the clearest and the least clear parts of the play?

Change in midwifery. Only obvious later that she was dying

Clear all through. Don't remember feeling lost.

Clearly she was dying and addressing a close group of friends. Not so clear if her pain was related to pain in birth.

The first birth. The second birth.

The birth story. Had me gripped. No unclear parts.

Dying or giving birth - but that was a good lack of clarity. Clearest, the forceps birth.

Not so clear - 'what was ailing health - at first thought she was pregnant'.

Janet's birth was extremely clear. I found the introduction slightly muddled.

(No answer to this)

The character and the setting (clear). I didn't know what was wrong with her.

All parts were clear.

Clearest - Leah's sadness and resentment; Less clear - what is she suffering from, labour or reduncancy?

Clearest - her distress at incoming male doctor. Least clear - what is wrong with her?

Pregnant? At 57? Dying.

The relationship with the audience was clear. Whether there was a 'patient' present or not was not.

Clearest - when Leah was talking to us. Not so clear - the start - had it started, real or not?

Clearest - towards the middle - realisation Leah was near death. Less clear @the outset establishing meaning.

I found all really clear - led us through stories from Leah's past, her present with nods to OUR present - negotiating the time journey was so effective.

QUESTION - What did you feel about Leah as a person? For example, was she likeable? Was she deluded? (These examples 'led' the audience response rather too strongly)

Likeable but 'lost in her ways'

I minded that Dr Glib came into her world

Very likeable. Wise funny & interesting.

She was a woman of her time. No (not deluded)

Likeable, knew her trade. Did she have dementia or just on her way out. Believable a woman of her time.

.Believable. Holding onto dissappointments but self aware by the end that there is a wider context for all change. I was a bit sc ared of her and her ability to tell a very dark tale if she wanted to.

Very likeable. Really empathised with her. ..Old fashioned. I liked it that she wanted to be educated in the use of instruments - showed intelligence.

.Proud caring dedicated and yes, likeable. Not deluded but challenged by advancement and possibly frightened by what the future held for her.

Not deluded but found it hard to reconcile her loss of status. Negating her role in life - and she knew the vaule of what she had to offer and the young doctor had no awareness.

She was likeable. I felt her loneliness more than anything.

Very likeable

Likeable but a bit scary. Not deluded but miffed.

Very likeable - A beloved member of the community.

Likeable, feeling unwanted, obviously on her way to death. Definitely not crazy but pissed (off) (Not drunk)

She was inspiring lovely warm homely real.

I loved the character that you portrayed, lynn but feel she had become a bit deluded with age.

.Totally bought into her - her foibles, her prejudices - her beliefs - found her incredibly HUMAN. She's not a heroine. She's not a witch. Loved her critical response to 'new technology'!

QUESTION How did Leah talking directly to the audience make you feel? Please feel free to comment on both positive and negative feelings! What do you think was the relationship between you, as a group, and Leah?

Thought that our familiarity helped but wouldn't know about an unfamiliar audience (!!)

Slightly awkward, it shouldn't matter but sort of does. I loved being one of her babies.

At first I didn't know where to look - into Leah's eyes - at the floor. Then it became...very captivating and I couldn't look away.

Good. I liked the interaction. A like the way she asked questions about the audience.

A little uncomfortable initially being so close but I got used to it. ...We were Leah's past.

It was fun. Seeing the audience become characters in Leah's mind brought a whole cast in. I thought the audience enjoyed their roles and Leah was good at making it an inclusive natural part of the play. Group....supportive and friendly.

Felt OK - was expecting it. Easy relationship with group - felt Leah really connected with people and made them part of it.

Slightly awkward. Afraid to be involved initially but as the play progressed more at ease.

Leah talking to audience drew them in but I thought there was a conflict with her being on her own, scared and dying. But is also a good mechanism for bringing in characters and stories of her life.

I like it as a concept but there is and uncomfortable at times. I understood this but it can be a risky game We didn't know exactly who we were.

I don't know. I liked it. It didn't matter.

Very close, very emotional - Bit threatening - she might choose me next.

Positive - a chance to 'perform' Negative - 'what if I get it wrong'?

As a group it brought everyone to that time and place. We were all her children.

Usually I'm uncomfortable with the interaction with the performer but Leah made me feel at ease - possibly because of the humour she uses.

Slightly uncomfortable at times. Wanted to jump in and comfort Leah but as audience, struggled to jump in.

I felt very emotional and could feel the coherence of the rest of the audience as this went on and Leah developed more of a relationship with us all.

The rel'ship was a vital, exciting, challenging bonus to the piece. WE never forget it's a piece of THEATRE. And our roles are fluid - sometimes villager, (etc) but also we are empathisers. I identified and connected as a MOTHER.

QUESTION: Why do you think I 'cast' the audience into the play?

To engage them and make them become involved (even if not directly)

A one-person talk can feel a bit removed - this was VERY involving. I was rapt.

Made it seem real.

For interaction. Everyone in the audience has some experience at birth...

To give it another dimension - than just talking to us.

Turns a monologue into a drama, expanding the cast. Project the people Leah is remembering, evoking her life. Like imbuing dolls with character in a pretend play...appealing...like watching a child. The audience got to love the fun of being included so it becomes interactive and potentially alive rather than the reading of a scripted drama. ..made us understand her warmth, created bonds...great way to move a play from an intellectual to emotional response in its audience.

To make the experience more interesting for the audience. To put us in the moment of the play instead of just watching the play.

(No answer to this.)

? In her dying days she was hallucinating and people she knew seemed real and appeared in her home??A way of bringing the real world in.

.To give an idea of immediacy

. The plight of women. Times changing. Women and power; men and power;

See above - to create that closeness, that threat.

For the audience to get more out of the play.

.The comedic start put me at ease; the 'fashion' statements made me think! The reference to past generations hit home particularly locally in Suffolk.

To make us feel part of, invested in Leah and her children.

.To give meaning to the audience.

.To help with our 'contract' to conjure the world we were entering allowing us the chance to buy into it.

QUESTION: What specific moments or subjects in the play affected you in any way (if at all)?

Enjoyed the learning experience

Janet's story was heart breaking. I feel very sad and sorry for Leah...losing the craft of midwifery. The end was very moving, the hand stroking and the silence.

(No answer to this question)

In the beginning when she explained who she was; The end when she died.

Cross with the doctor who wouldn't let her 'have' the instruments. Very sad when she died. I cried. Very moving.

.Description of difficult birthing...suspenseful and intense. Affected when Leah died with someone stroking her hand as she will have done for so many mothers. Funny dialogue...good contrasts of emotion.

.A LOT affected me. The holistic/real/warm way that Leah understood women and what they were going through during childbirth. The lost art of midwifery.

(No answer to this)

..Janet almost dying...I was completely gripped by the drama of it all and the drama of Leah's reaction to her loss of status. I was right there and felt Leah's angst.

The idea of the old and the new. I thought the description of the birth could have been less described.

(but a later NB More fear about her journey, or at least 'things she's heard' about her 'journey'. Also don't describe yourself ('eyes bulging') as you are then outside yourself.

The traumatic birth. The calling of the doctor. The ending. Asking for no applause was difficult. The audience need acknowledgment closure. Also the audience need to show appreciation.

Fear of unknown mixed with humour as a way to soften the pain.

The sadness of the loss of a natural, beautiful position Leah had. The change & progress. The struggle Leah had with bringing the doctor in on the birth; her death.

For me the whole of the play really struck a chord and grabbed my attention. Like all emotion!

I was utterly engaged from start to finish - so many changes of tempo - key changes. ...the difficult birth was riveting...the 'shock' of wetting yourself - the moments that wrong-footed us. But it was also FUNNY and much of the humour was a result of your relationship with us - both (the performer) and the audience and LEAH and HER audience.

**Below are very brief notes taken during the post-show talk.**



You wouldn't go - it's disrespectful.

I expected that in the theatre the lights drop - that tells the audience what to do.

I wouldn't want to leave - even if the lights went down. It's so disrespectful.

I had an issue with the 'don't applause' that made me very uncomfortable.

The audience become their own community - it's why it works. You've built us as a community. Part of watching the actor - also watching each other.

You gave us an identity.

How would you play it in a big auditorium?

The audience response - obviously not a 'planted' audience.

They wondered what they would have answered to 'what does your father do' if it didn't fit the 18th century bill!!

'If you'd have asked me what my father did, **I would have lied!**' (in order to make it 'easier' for Leah to deal with)

We were all there with you.

Lots said they **would have edited their response to 'fit the bill'.**

That's the very purpose of the dissertation! How does the performer deal with it.

It's the slipover into improv and panto.

What about the 'comfort' zone - laughter helps to encourage that. Takes away the nerves.

Laughter makes it easier.

**"If I didn't know you I would NEVER have sat in this seat".** But the comedy helped a lot.

**Once you've laughed you're complicit.**

'The mantle of the expert' Heathcote - you took control.

It wasn't the material that was uncomfortable, but the interaction is still scary.

It's a bombshell thing to put into a room full of women who have had babies - or not had babies. What are you going to tell me. 'Hooray for Doctor Glibb'.

Is she a ghost? Are we ghosts? Where are we in the timeline?

Are we part of the 'shift' (Time-shift).

The gin has a lot to do with it.

For me, we were in the time SHE was in.

The magic of theatre - we went straight there. I was in the time that she was in.

Is it a show - does SHE know it's a show?

The word 'applaud' brought the audience too quickly back into 'this is a show'

Not every one agreed but agreed that the word 'applaud' was too jarring.

The after discussion is interesting (should it always be included).

It can be MUCH more scary doing it to friends than an anonymous audience.

The warmth of the character (and the performer) reassured me I wasn't going to be a victim.

I might have said 'no' if you'd have asked me to hold your hand.

The control is fascinating - you've made the character so vulnerable by the end that almost anyone would have taken your hand. You made us feel secure.

Manipulative isn't necessarily bad! It's part of the deal that an audience knows what to expect.

You can tell by someone's body language whether they will or won't participate. Experience and observation tell you. The intuition of a performer.

But the audience isn't passive - which is what's so lovely about live theatre.

But you did signpost it so well. To get someone to hold your hand after you wee yourself - that's a massive contract, that.

You invited us over the threshold from the very beginning - so afterwards you can't push them back and remind us they're 'an audience'.

We love stories we love being part of stories.

We suspend disbelief - we KNOW it's not really wee.

Was I meant to think that was her waters breaking -

SOME CONFUSION ABOUT THAT.

We're you dying or giving birth - GOOD!!

(There's supposed to. be a correlation between her pain and labour pain.)

Did it need ONE MORE place where the audience was directly involved.

But generally not that forceps scene.

I wouldn't have wanted participation in that scene but at another point.

No, leave it - it's so compelling. Could it have gone back to Doctor Glibb?