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# The Wrangling is Over

By Exeunt Staff (http://exeuntmagazine.com/author/exeunt-staff/)

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*Border ballads, sea shanties, dancing plastic bags, zombies, pop songs and fleabags. Our writers take a look back at the theatre year and discuss the moments that have lived longest in their memories.*



**Catherine Love:** There was a tiny moment, right at the end of Lucy Ellinson’s border ballad (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-bloody-great-border-ballad-project/>) in Edinburgh, that has lingered in my mind ever since. It can’t lay claim to being the most visually dazzling theatrical moment I’ve experienced this year – those marks would probably go to Es Devlin’s stunning design for *Chimerica* or the vivid, frenetic images racing through Mission Drift (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/mission-drift-2/>) – but it might just be one of the most affecting. Throughout the piece, candles were snuffed out one by one, symbolic of the destruction of public services. But then, out of the darkness, a match was struck. Within seconds, we were all lighting our candles, working together to once again illuminate the space. The simplicity and collectivity of this act feels representative of what Northern Stage were attempting to do at St Stephen’s this year. There are plenty of contenders jostling for room in my personal highlights of 2013 (*Grounded*, *1984*, *The Forest and the Field*, *Narrative*, *As You Like It*, to name just a few) but the driving spirit of The Bloody Great Border Ballad Project (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-bloody-great->

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[border-ballad-project/](#)) contains much of what excites me about theatre's potential: storytelling, political force and the sense of truly sharing a space together.

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**Stewart Pringle:** Memorable things in London: watching Toby Jones not quite manage to say something in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, Ben Moor say lots of beautiful things with a new intimacy performing *Each of Us* during Kerry Brewer's exhibition (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-night-gallery/>) and Hannah Boyd deflate a balloon in *Henry the Fifth* and make it feel like a soldier's lonely death. *The Wasp Factory* at the Royal Opera House was like spending an hour inside one of those insectocutors that you get in butchers shops – it wasn't perfect but I can still feel it buzzing around my head. I also remember feeling that I hadn't really started watching theatre in 2013 until I finally got to see Chris Goode's *The Forest and the Field* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-forest-the-field/>) and then thinking 'Oh right, yeah, ready now. Let's go, year.'

Edinburgh was knackered but there were wonderful things there: Brokentalkers pushing a pint on the scarecrow of a dead father in *Have I No Mouth*, *Captain Amazing* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/captain-amazing/>) drunkenly slugging the air in his red cape, Abbertoir Ferme's instant (oc)cult classic *Tourniquet 2013* and Ross Sutherland making the skin on my neck prickle with an old Natwest advert in *Stand By for Tape Backup* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/stand-by-for-tape-back-up/>). I also saw Daniel Kitson eight times this year, and all of them were my favourite.



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**Daniel B. Yates:** Sitting in Hunt & Darton's performative cafe in Edinburgh, around Liz Crow's bed, listening to her talk with wit and rage, with defiance and openness, about her bed-life and living with disabilities in #beddingout. Never before had I witnessed the personal and public confluence charged with such formal daring and brilliance. Nor had I understood physically taxing and durational work as so evidentially political before. My own bed-life, that has involved invisibility and precariousness, has felt less of a shameful burden, more connected, ever since. And #beddingout was only part of a real blossoming of radical democratic theatre that seemed to come this year: #TORYCORE which I saw in Ipswich was a pulverising full-frontal assault on austerity, crystalline in its anger, and opening politics to a range of feelings that capital 'P' Politics suppresses as a matter of routine.

In *Have I No Mouth*, Brokentalkers collapsed the distinction between theatre-as-therapy and high art in extraordinary ways. In *Credible Likeable Superstar Role Model* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/credible-likeable-superstar-role-model-2/>) Bryony Kimmings took the multicentred promise of network society at its word, and with her niece Taylor built a radical pop star. In *Beating McEnroe* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/beating-mcenroe/>) Jamie Wood, with incredible love, worked mad-cap genius on the internalisation of competition and found the balance between solidarity and difference. Chris Thorpe dug nails into the subcutaneous fibres of systems to find human agency, in his extraordinarily moving *There Has Possibly Been an Incident*. Coney created microcosmic borders, astonishing political sandboxes through the medium of game. Tim Crouch performed Andy Smith's translucent post-theatrical manifesto Commonwealth as part of the joyful and recuperative Open Court season, and together they

split representation and politics in theatre asunder with the lightest of feathers in What Happens to Hope at the End of the Evening. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/what-happens-to-hope-at-the-evening/>) Common Wealth implicated us in the iceberg of domestic violence, our slow moving society made up of so much ignored stygian gloom. Scottee confronting relationships, Laura Jane Dean narrating mental distress in Head Hand Head. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/head-hand-head/>) Dan Bye and friends giving us brightly coloured lessons on occupying an oilrig. All of this daring work, with its insistence on politicised form, felt truly like the theatre of radical democracy to me, and had the traditional political theatre I sat through this year – Westminster, Royalty, Devolution – come off positively Hapsburgian.

**David Ralf:** In 2013 Alexi Kaye Campbell read THE PRIDE to a few strangers including myself underneath the Royal Court stage while Mike Barlett read COCK to another small group during Open Court. (Barlett finished first, but Campbell didn't cast aspersions.)

In 2013 PapaTango prizewinner Luke Owen blew the Finborough's hilarious and astute literary policy out of the water with the excellent debut UNSCORCHED.

In 2013 it turned out that the Zombie Run 2.8 HOURS LATER is actually immersive theatre in disguise. (And the disguise is zombies.)

In 2013 the National and the Tricycle put Margaret Thatcher on stage opposite the Queen, but only Jon Brittain and Matthew Tedford made MARGARET THATCHER QUEEN OF SOHO (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/margaret-thatcher-queen-of-soho/>) at Theatre503.

In 2013 theatre became so Secret at the Lyric that it made us better critics.

**Lauren Mooney:** The thing that has stayed with me most is probably Simple8's adaptation of the unadaptable Moby-Dick at the Arcola. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/moby-dick/>) A friend told me when I started reviewing that the difference between 4 stars and 5 is personal taste, and I think that's absolutely true – slick as this production was, the reason I adored it is more knotty than that. It's basically an example of all the things I love most (poor theatre, ensemble work, SHANTIES (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBf6voPIQ7s>)) being done really, really well, by people who put an awful lot of care and thought into the work they're producing. Joseph Kloska was remarkable as Ahab – desperate, monomaniacal, but a strangely compelling figure – but in spite of its stand-out performances, *Moby-Dick* was a true ensemble piece, far more than the sum of its parts. Packed with ingenuity throughout, I'll never forget the moment at the start of the second act where they used just bits of old wood, impossibly, to put a whale on the stage, in all its vast magnificence. Beautiful, memorable theatre.

**Natasha Tripney:** A cup of cocoa is pressed into my hands. It is 1 o'clock in the morning and the light in the Norwich Playhouse is a medicinal yellow. We have just emerged from the last chapter of Nature Theater of Oklahoma's twelve hour Life and Times marathon. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/nature-theater-of-oklahoma/>) Presented as part of the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, this was a collection of the first five (and a half) episodes of an epic project which sets out to chart a single life from birth until the present, through a form of a physical transcription. A series of telephone conversations are presented on stage, with every 'um' and 'hmm' lovingly rendered, first into song, then dance, even into manuscript form. There was something beautifully universal in its specificity and as an experience it made me ask properly searching question about memory and storytelling. There was also a wonderfully communal feel to the piece with the cast members manning a barbecue on the intervals and handing out brownies and as long as it was I didn't really want it to end.

I felt a similar feeling of community and warmth sitting in the café of the Forest Fringe's new home at Edinburgh's Drill Hall. I'll admit to finding the Forest a bit club-like in the past, a bit off putting, but this year it felt more embracive, helped in no small part by their programming of two of my favourite shows of the year – Hannah Jane Walker and Chris Thorpe's *I Wish I was Lonely* and Ross Sutherland's brilliant *Stand-By for Tape Back Up*. I saw them both over the course of an afternoon which was capped by the fist-pumping joy that was Sam Halmarack and the Miserablites. That was a good day.

**Lulu Raczka:** Walking into The Shed and having Andrew Scott casually greet you at the start of Simon Stephen's *Sea Wall*, only have him rip your heart out half an hour later with the same smile. ~ Discussing female masturbation in some detail after Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*, and not at all caring about the weird looks being attracted. ~ Walking into Chris Thorpe's *There Has Possibly Been an Incident* and being greeted with deafening white noise only to find that when this abruptly stops, you find yourself listening with rare focus. ~ Walking behind a bunch of giddy sixth formers after Bryony Kimmings' Heartache.Heartbreak. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/heartache-heartbreak/>) wondering how much better my teenage years would be, having seen Bryony shave her legs with whipped cream. ~ Sitting in the Lyric Theatre's plastic-covered auditorium waiting for a

Secret Theatre (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/keeping-the-secret/>) Show to start, feeling excited, like something new and different was about to happen.

**Diana Damian:** Verk Produksjoner's *The Eternal Smile* and Oblivia's Entertainment Island. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/entertainment-island/>) both presented as part of the Spill Festival of Performance, teased out with minimalist precision the position of our collective imagination in the neo-liberal landscape. Katie Mitchell's *Fraulein Julie* and Toneelgroep's Scenes from a Marriage (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/scenes-from-a-marriage-2/>) were both interested in the ways in which the cinematic can occupy the stage with particular lust for a contemporary theatricality.

Feminism in performance has taken a more visible presence this year, from LADA's excellent Roundtable hosted by Lois Weaver, to works such as Lauren Barri Holstein's *Splat!* and Atlanta Eke's *Monster Body* (as part of Spill and Fierce, respectively). These were two performances from engaged feminist artists who approach their work with caustic humour and sharp politics. Heather Cassils' *Becoming an Image* made an incision into body politics and the visibility of gender in historical records, but also acted as a re-consideration of liveness and the body as material in relation to questions of image and presence. Similarly, Ivo Dimchev's Lili Handel (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/lili-handel/>) explored the formal poetry of the body as part of this year's In Between Time Festival, alongside the excellent *Night Tripper*, an evening concert and enchanting ritual, and Simon Faithfull's *Fake Moon*.

Different modes of showcasing performance and live art have emerged with a more engaged and considerate understanding of what curation might enable, and here I'm thinking of Steakhouse Live (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/steakhouse-live/>) at Rich Mix, Drunken Chorus and Beg Borrow Steal. Likewise, discourses on performance and live art which were engaged with questions of sustainability, the position of disability in the arts, models of practice and the future, from the performance salons at performance space, through to the Live Art Development Agency's DIY workshops, roundtables on cultural value and Live Art UK's gathering as part of the Fierce Festival.

**Andrew Haydon:** I was staying at my parent's house when Forced Entertainment's Quizoola (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/quizoola/>) was live-streamed from the Barbican. As a result, I could smoke, sleep, go to the bathroom whenever, and also spend the whole time chatting with friends about it on Twitter. And I totally loved it as a "live" experience. If I had to narrow it down to a single moment, I think it was probably about six in the morning and Clare didn't know the French word for "twenty". The hung in the air for about ten minutes of pretty much non-stop laughter as her interlocutor tried to help her find the answer.

The other, from the other end of the year and the other side of the north sea was the moment in Katie Mitchell's production of Martin Crimp's new play *Alles weitere kennen sie aus dem Kino*. At one point an entire scene "rewinds". Live. For about five minutes. It was stunningly choreographed, beautifully executed, totally strange and imaginative, and made an uncanny sense of the entire production. But more than that, it was somehow just this perfect distillation of chilling, artistic beauty. And my jaw actually dropped as I was watching. Perfect theatre.

**William Drew:** My favourite piece of dialogue this year comes from Chris Goode's [Monkey Bars](http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/monkey-bars/). (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/monkey-bars/>) It is a conversation between an adult (Karl James) and two boys of primary school age (Steve and Jamaal). On stage, the children were played by adults. I remember that Jamaal was played beautifully by Christian Roe.

STEVIE: My dad gave me a twenty pound note yesterday

KARL: Did he?

STEVIE: Yeah. He gave me a twenty pound.

JAMAAL: Well, well I have more than that.

STEVIE: My mum has fifty pounds and my dad has twenty pounds and ten pounds and five pounds. And he's so rich! He has like one hundred and six hundred pounds.

KARL: My goodness me.

JAMAAL: Well I have more than that. I have just like, I just have like, um, money like just like a mountain.

KARL: Really?

JAMAAL: Yeah, bigger than this whole school.

KARL: Seriously? You have a mountain of money at home?

JAMAAL: Yeah.

STEVIE: Well I'm going to bring my twenty pound tomorrow.

KARL: Okay.

JAMAAL: And then you can put your twenty pound on top.

**Rosanna Hall:** It's all too easy to forget the texture of theatre, the moments of connection which makes live theatre unlike anything else. When I locked eyes with George Anton in Untitled Production's [Confessions of a Justified Sinner](http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/paul-brights-confessions-of-a-justified-sinner/) (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/paul-brights-confessions-of-a-justified-sinner/>) I experienced a moment of honesty which stayed with me, in a way I still struggle to put into words. 'And if you want to know more about my breakdown, you can find all the details on the internet', he said. The rawness of this, of this connection struck home, and I went away thinking about the vulnerability of actors or artists or anyone who puts themselves all the way

out there in that way.

**Maria Iu:** Nothing quite sticks in the mind like heartbreak, and it is three devastating performances that I recall most clearly when thinking back to 2013. The first of these was Alina Cojocaru's unforgettable interpretation of Onegin, moving with such despair that there was total silence as the curtains came down, and it was hard to believe she wasn't dancing with her usual partner and fiancée, Johan Kobborg.

Then there was Tamara Rojo's farewell performance in *Marguerite and Armand*, partnering the dance world's own anti-hero, Sergei Polunin. It finished with the traditional "flower shower" as the audience wished her luck for her new adventure at the English National Ballet – it's not (thankfully) everyday you witness the end of an era of a true star.

Natalia Osipova gave her own take of tragic heroine in Mikhailovsky Theatre's *Giselle*, lifting a flawed production with her impossibly frail phrasing. There's a chance to catch a repeat of sorts as *Giselle* returns in 2014 to her new home at the Royal – a must-see.

**Tom Wicker:** My theatre year could easily be about what I didn't get to see, thanks to time, money – I have weekly nightmares about my overdraft – and the exigencies of going where you're paid to be rather than where you might choose to be. For example, I'm gutted that I missed *Sea Wall*, the National's *Edward II* and practically everything at the Royal Court – most recently *Let the Right One In*. But if, at times, it's felt as though I've had one eye closed, I've seen a lot with the other one. From the creeping chill of *Old Times* at the Harold Pinter Theatre to Jamie Lloyd's bloodily frenetic *Macbeth* and Lucy Ellinson's blistering performance in *Grounded*. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/grounded/>) it's been by turns challenging and exhilarating. Great new writing like *Mucky Kid* at Theatre 503 and bonkers (but brilliant) Edinburgh shows like *Projector/Conjector* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/projectorconjector/>) and *Beating McEnroe* have soundly trounced big-budget bores like *Strangers on a Train*. I've taken off my shoes, shaken hands with strangers and been moved by tales of fatherhood and loss. What I've seen hasn't always been perfect theatre. But for heart, humour and sheer ambition in unexpected places, it's been a cracking year.

**Alice Saville:** *Macbeth* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/macbeth-8/>) started messily – long before any blood was shed, I was part of a crowd being harried through a derelict Manchester factory, all dust and confusion, on the hottest week of the year so far. But after the opening flurry of theme-park awkwardness, the quiet absolute cool of the church we were led to was completely spell-binding, as were the faintly childish pleasures of real rain, mud, and witchy apparitions. The play was charged at full kilter, and Kenneth Branagh's production for the MIF felt completely whole and exhilarating. *Tourniquet 2013* at Summerhall was similarly whole, time standing still as three figures slowly dressed, undressed, spilled chalk and filled time with a series of insignificant actions elevated to ritual power.

Others: Lucy Hopkins' rendition of 'La Vie en Rose' in *The Veil* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-veil-le-foulard/>) was a more intimate kind of stunning – she reimagined Radiohead's *Creep* for female middle age, her simultaneous translations fluttering with hope and hopeless desire. The sudden shock transition from daffy cabaret to Israeli military precision in *Ballad of the Burning Star*. And, two years behind, tearing up as *Matilda* and friends soared out over the audience, stomach-first on swings.

**Neil Dowden:** Deserved fiftieth anniversary celebrations aside, 2013 may not have been a vintage year for the National Theatre, but I thought Nicholas Hytner's staging of *Othello* was the best show of the year, while Rupert Goold's production of Lucy Prebble's clinical romance *The Effect* was one of the strongest new plays. As usual the NT has offered a wide range of new work, revivals of classics and rarities, musicals and family shows, bending over backwards to extend the diversity of its audiences with affordable ticket prices and its temporary venue The Shed has staged a wide range of innovative, alternative shows,

particularly appealing to younger people and first-time theatregoers, while the Cottesloe Theatre is being made over to reopen as the improved Dorfman Theatre sometime next year. With the recent announcement that Rufus Norris would be taking over as Artistic Director in 2015, the NT should be in safe hands going into its second half-century.

**Sara Veale:** It all seemed so simple. Wake up, meet some friends for brunch, catch a matinee of *Don Quixote*. (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/don-quixote/>) Home in time for *Downton*. And yet two minutes before the scheduled start I was still on a jam-packed Underground elevator and trembling, at the thought of being turned away from Carlos Acosta's directorial debut for the Royal Ballet because of tardiness, my respiration ragged, the result of an ill-advised decision to combine a three-block dash down Tottenham Court Road with the consumption of one very large bacon sandwich. (0/5, would not recommend.) Bourée away, ballerinas; don't mind me. I'll just be here in the lobby, wheezing. As the lift groans its way up the shaft, I brace myself against the oncoming tide of weekend tourists, stand up straight, sidle up to the lift doors as they open and commence my hurdle towards the baronial, ever elysian Royal Opera House, praying the custodians will take pity on my beleaguered being and discreetly usher me in through a side door so that I may bask in the glow of those infinitely more poised than I. They did. And it was fabulous.

**Dan Hutton:** *Pirouetting plastic bags* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/lapres-midi-dun-foehn/>); *Border Ballads*; *Capitalist critiques*; *Prudencia the poet* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-strange-undoing-of-prudencia-hart-2/>); *Disturbing Doublethink* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/1984-2/>); *Battalions of balloons*; *Naughty Narratives*; *Consuming quizzes*; *Damned drones*; *Raving Rosalinds*; *Frustrating Fiftieths*; *Reasonable Rolemodels*; *Filthy Fleabags* (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/fleabag/>); *Shiny Sheds*; *Sullen Seagulls*; *Intricate Events*; *Sexy Secrets*; *Haphazard hope*.



In [What? No Fish!](http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/wot-no-fish/) (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/wot-no-fish/>), Danny Braverman describes history as neither a straight line nor a circle. Instead, he offers, time and events take the form of a spiral staircase, as we find ourselves in seemingly similar positions which on closer inspection turn out to be that little bit better. In a year when we've had countless 'regime' changes at theatrical organisations – from Michael Brazier's first outing as director of NSDF to the appointment of Rufus Norris as AD of the NT – this is an idea which feels particularly apt. Those little changes in mindset and practice will add up to something far more palpable in output over the following year. In all honesty, I've not seen anything that's truly blown me away in 2013, but the general feeling of a swelling tide has been invigorating. This may be my youthful naivety talking here, but I've a feeling we'll look back on 2013 as the year Things Started To Happen.

*Main image by Jemima Yong.*

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