A long time ago, in the 1980s…

… Fern Smith (who co-founded Volcano with Andrew Jones and me) saw of Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men in London. She came back and said we had to invite Nigel Charnock to run a workshop here in Swansea. We were, at the time, presenting Revolution, a week of theatre workshops. Among those invited to teach were Test Department (now NVA) and Neil Caplan from the Lindsay Kemp Company. Nigel accepted the invitation. Little did any of us know that this was the beginning of a relationship that would see Nigel direct four of our shows and choreograph two of them. This is a little of that story of collaboration.

In 1991 Nigel was back in Swansea to choreograph our production of Medea: SexWar. This show was invited to Hong Kong and to Greece. It was about now that it seemed to us, and I believe to Nigel, that we were natural collaborators. After co-founding DV8, Nigel was seeking to return to his passion for words and the immediacy of performance, and we were trying to develop a more sophisticated relationship to movement. In 1992 we had the idea of adapting Shakespeare’s Sonnets for the stage. We thought Nigel might be interested in directing – that show became L.O.V.E.

L.O.V.E. toured throughout the UK including sell-out runs at the Riverside Studios and the Purcell Rooms in London. It won a Fringe First award from Time Out and formed the centrepiece of a BBC documentary on Volcano. L.O.V.E. also played all over Europe, at the Vienna Festwochen and the first ever International Theatre Festival in Buenos Aires. Part of the reason for its success was that it harnessed the wonderful words of Shakespeare to a breakneck physicality. It was also the stage for Fern and Nigel to play out an exuberantly terrifying and funny assault on male sexuality. Fern’s explosive energy on stage matched Nigel’s restless energy in the rehearsal room (I have often thought that it was this peculiar synergy that was at the heart of our collaborative success). There was a reasonably intelligible narrative about sexual jealousy, and a stage scene that was anarchic, irreverent and above all truthful. It was a violent show (as indeed a number of our collaborations with Nigel were), but Nigel, Fern and I were practiced in the ways of physical and emotional extremism (it was, after all, not long since we had produced Tony Harrison’s cri de coeur, V.)
We last produced *L.O.V.E.* ten years ago for a tour of the Caucasus – Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Tbilisi we had to be locked in our dressing rooms for our own safety after the show caused a near riot due to its sexual content. Ten years later, and twenty years after its first appearance, we decided to reproduce *L.O.V.E.* to celebrate the company’s 25th anniversary. It was exhausting to perform - you never quite knew how hard you were going to be hit or kissed, or how the audience were going to react as you flung yourself amongst them. Liam Steel was nearly knocked out in Italy, and James Hewison (his replacement) severed an artery in Vienna. There was an over-the-top urgency about the whole thing and that made it wonderful. It was a show that was not, as they say, for the faint hearted, and neither was it for those raised on the cool memories of Jean Baudrillard.

It seemed natural for both us and our new-found collaborator to work on another project after the success of *L.O.V.E.* and it had to be something difficult, awkward and unexpected. We opted for Ibsen. As one of the founders of dramatic realism, he seemed an obvious choice for our post-dance, post-structuralist attentions. We did not expect to like Ibsen, but we all came to love him – particularly the later works. Amidst all the talk of how wonderful a dancer Nigel was (although I myself think he would have had no truck with this, he was no fan of dance as a singular art form) I recall how much he loved words. He could quote some of the more obscure passages of *Little Eyolf* or *Brand* by heart. *How to Live or Ibsenities* was what we called our second collaboration – it was a malignant love story dominated by the luminescent ‘light of the south’ Jane Arnfield and the passionate ‘pain of the North’ Fern Smith. It was wonderfully funny and was, I believe, the first time in theatre that Nigel had experimented textually with improvisation as content and structure. We rehearsed the show in a scout hut in Swansea. Nigel stayed at the house that Fern and I owned on Hanover Street. We were family, and the child that we created premiered at Theatre Workshop as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It sold out for the entire run. If it was less physical than *L.O.V.E.* it was no less emotional. Perhaps it was the emotional impact of Ibsen’s words that persuaded Nigel that I would be a suitable candidate for his affections. Unfortunately it didn’t work out and Nigel and I parted on less than friendly terms. Much of the difficulty of this time found its way into Nigel’s solo show *Resurrection*. For Nigel the personal was not just political, it was also the subject of performance, although whether the private lives of individuals is ever sufficient material to create a work of art is another matter.

**Some years later…**

…we both got over the failure and we resolved to produce what was to become a startling version of *Macbeth*. Nigel had a new boyfriend, Reinhard Lorenz from Berlin, who specialized in video. Fern and I read Gordon Burns’ book on Fred and Rose West, *Happy Like Murderers*, and before we knew it we were rehearsing and filming. I can’t recall whether it was art or economics that cut the cast to just Fern and me, but with a sumptuous design by Andrew Jones we began as Lord and Lady Macbeth and after the murder of Duncan behaved like Fred and Rose West. Reinhard produced some wonderful images and it was an extremely violent and disturbing show. We were all very pleased with it, even if it was very difficult to perform. It was selected for the British Council Showcase in Edinburgh in 1998, and although not particularly well received in Western Europe it was enthusiastically endorsed in countries where tyranny and violence were commonplace – Russia and Sri Lanka, amongst others.

*After Macbeth* we were involved in a protracted collaboration with the writer Tony Harrison. Harrison was going to provide us a text which detailed man’s propensity for tyranny, murder and genocide. Nigel was going to direct. We had two great actors join us – Jan Knightley and June Broughton. The writer, actors and director were in the rehearsal room but it slowly became evident that Harrison was somewhat preoccupied
with the script for his Channel 4 film *Prometheus*. Nigel was surprisingly diplomatic about the situation and with no script we set about creating one. In spite of his and our best efforts, *The Message* was, by some way, our least successful collaboration.

I have not mentioned Nigel’s assistance with the movement for our adaptation of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*. He also enjoyed Fern’s homage to her mother, *This Imaginary Woman* and puzzled over our shows *After the Orgy* and *Moments of Madness*.

We met Nigel at the end of a particularly difficult decade (the Eighties). It was an angry time and a lot of people wanted to shake things up. We were no different. Clearly Nigel was a wonderful performer – he could sing, he could dance, he could shout. He was also interested in literature, in theatre, in poetry. From our Edinburgh days I remember endlessly discussing A.L. Kennedy, John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, Arnold Schopenhauer and (terribly as it turned out) Bert Keizer’s book, *Dancing with Mister D*. In the studio Nigel could be brutal. Warm-ups for *L.O.V.E.* lasted two hours. Whilst he invariably got the best out of everyone, sometimes he could be too quick, too petulant, in judgement and movement. Sometimes his boundless energy replaced a capacity for and interest in stillness and, surprisingly, improvisation. But he was above all an actors’ director. If you couldn’t do it, Nigel would spring up like some wolf protecting her cubs and show you what he meant and how to do it.

It was with some trepidation and a lot of pleasure that I was looking forward to seeing Nigel again in our studio in Swansea for the rehearsal of *L.O.V.E.* We had known each other on and off for twenty years and that time, in this peculiar profession, now seems too short and more precious than any drama we created.

**PAUL DAVIES, AUGUST 2012**