

PROJECT REPORT: 'THE INNOCENT AND THE THUNDERBOLT'

The Innocent and the Thunderbolt, written and produced by Joshua Elliott (English and comparative literary studies, [The University of Warwick](#)) enjoyed a run at [The Attic Theatre](#) in Stratford-upon-Avon from the 28th – 30th July 2011, following a rehearsed reading at Milburn House (Warwick) on the 31st May. The project was produced through [Ginterval Theatre](#) and funded by [the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning \(IATL\)](#) 'Student as Producer' fund with Dr Ruth Leary (Cultural Policy Studies) acting as Academic Sponsor.

ABSTRACT

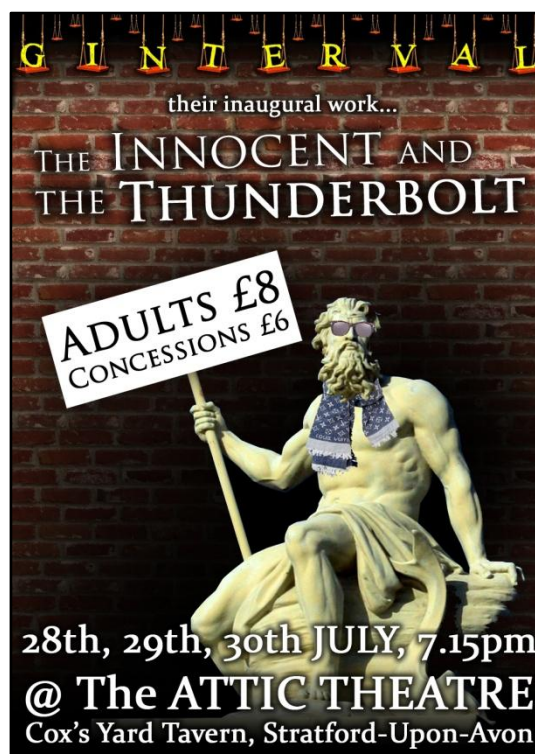
The Innocent and the Thunderbolt was written with intent to (1) explore the Arts' difficulty with the way it funds itself, and to (2) further develop (both artistically and commercially) fledgling theatre company 'Ginterval' (www.ginterval.com), founded off the back of WUDS' (www.wuds.co.uk) production of Antony and Cleopatra by William Shakespeare (2-5 March, Warwick Arts Centre -- for more information please visit: <http://ginterval.com/#/antony-cleopatra/4550666848>).

The first ambition led to the play's present-day London setting, the realization of 'professional muses' Jude Reed and Patti Blewitt, as well as director Clare Byrne's liberal use of music in the run. The latter, on the other hand, triggered an exploration of mythology, fairytale and ensemble work, giving birth to a pantheon of geriatric gods as well as law graduate Rosie Hughes -- a girl who mistakes *The Kama Sutra* for a curry. Described in publicity as a 'rift' on the 'Little Red Riding Hood' fable, the play charts the downfall of millennia old muse, Jude.

'THE INNOCENT AND THE THUNDERBOLT' IN RETROSPECT

My first year studying English and Theatre at Warwick was dominated by one overriding question: what is 'inspiration' and where does it come from? *The Innocent and the Thunderbolt* was never intended to be about the Arts cuts, [as one WordPress reviewer suggested](#), but it was (as the publicity says) written in response to it — and here's how.

This was 2009; the recession had hit and was being talked about by everyone and by the following year the Government had announced its plans for cuts to public spending. The compulsory (and frankly invaluable) **English and Theatre module 'British Theatre since 1939'** (convened by [the brilliant Prof. Tony Howard](#)) had



1 Poster, credit: Edward Davis

dismissed any doubts I may have had about theatre as a medium for political commentary and inspiring social change. Over the year I had digested the likes of Osborne, Bond and Wesker and the Arts cuts seemed – to an excitable, left-leaning first year – like little more than pre-emptive censorship on the part of the Tories. Arts representatives saying that, actually, it would be a Bad Thing if funding was cut so drastically, were met with a hostility that I can't help feeling lies with the near the near-mystical, unhelpful, nonsensical – but, ultimately, popular stereotype of the tortured artist.

The stereotype I refer to has his roots in the Byronic hero of Romanticism, the Poet in **Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*** and is embodied today in the sometimes pitied, sometimes reviled figures of Pete Doherty and others of his ilk. To those characters music, words and painting come easily; only ever needing a dash of opium or the touch of a muse to dispel a period of writer's block. Why would anyone give money to them? Needless to say the stereotype is outdated and romantic. Artists for the most part combine their talent with craftsmanship and practice, are hard working and (at least partially) compose, write and paint to make a living.

The Ancient Greek idea of the Muse was perhaps to blame. The nine, beautiful women living on Mount Parnassus suggested that creativity was magical or divine, and it's an idea that's been hard to shake. It's also a dangerous one. If we persist in thinking it then we will never give Art the consideration or financial support it deserves and eventually, with or without a Muse, our artists will fall silent.

These thoughts were further exhilarated by my iPod throwing up **Carly Simon's 'You're So Vain'** ('I'll bet you think this song is about you/ Don't you? Don't you?') on shuffle, and the idea of a 'professional Muse' was born.

ZEUS: From the chasm of potential, from lightning/ And breath, I call into existence/ The Muses Nine. Calliope, Clio,/ Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Thalia,/ Euterpe and Erata, Urania/ And Derek. Remember Us./ Let songs of Us reach the Heavens -/ Let Our names echo through time -/ Let Our image last forever -/ Through you,/ My Will be done.

(Sound of thunder and lightning)

ARES: That was cool...

(from 'The Innocent and the Thunderbolt,' 1.5)

SHADES OF GRAY

The concept, once decided upon, was a fun one and a pleasure to explore. **Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*** took the Muse theme further. From reading it I decided upon two things. Firstly that it would be interesting to make my Muses, like Dorian and the Greek nine, immortal, and secondly – on a very superficial level – I decided to make all the character names, like 'Gray,' link with a colour: Jude Reed/red, Patti Blue/Blewitt, Indigo Coward, Madison Greene, Rosie Hughes, etc... This was not in pursuit of any deeper meaning of any kind but it was fun to do and helped to define an eventual aesthetic.

Both **Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*** and **Lord Byron's *Manfred*** were useful reads for getting to grips with a character with an immense lifespan behind him and eternal life before him. Both, in a way, were opposite sides of the same coin. From *Orlando* I took the fluid sexuality and playfulness of the titular character that seemed to be symptomatic of eternal life. With *Manfred* I was able to consider the complete opposite. With Byron's character, immortality is a curse – and I've attempted to explore both possibilities in *The Innocent*.

JUDE REED: My name's Jude Reed. I'm three-thousand, two-hundred and four years old. Patti and me, we're Muses, and I'm very, very hungry. Welcome to the company Miss...?

ROSIE HUGHES: Hughes.

JUDE REED: Miss Hughes. The work we do requires particularly understanding lawyers – imagine that, understanding lawyers -? I hope you do us proud -

ROSIE HUGHES: I will. I – I do have more questions -

*JUDE REED: Rosie. You thought *The Kama Sutra* was a curry. I don't doubt it.*

(from 'The Innocent and the Thunderbolt,' 1.6)



2 Rosie (Polly Clare Boon) and Jude (Edward Davis) at The Attic Theatre, credit: Maggie Hayes

With the character of Rosie (the 'Innocent' of the title, making Jude the 'Thunderbolt') I was able to contrast this playful, millennia old Muse with a frigid, 22 year-old law graduate from Botolph Claydon. The collision between two very different people heightened their respective attitudes and made for a lot of the dialogue I'm most proud of. Also, by making Rosie a lawyer I hope I am at least able to touch base with issues I wasn't able to explore in the play, those surrounding intellectual property and copyright. At the same time, her naivety – I hope – serves to heighten the idea that perhaps Jude has lived a little too much whilst posing questions as to whether or not 'art' is defined by the experiences of 'the artist.' Interestingly, talking to cast and audience, most seemed to side with either 'The Innocent' or 'The Thunderbolt,' declaring one definitively 'good' and the other definitively 'bad.'

I also think the possibility of immortality is one that keeps creative people creating. It's a flawed idea and one that – in the play – the two Muses define themselves by. Purposefully breaking the hearts of their 'clients' generally leads to both suicide and 'better' art. The irresponsibility and callousness of this driving mission statement is – I hope – made all the more pronounced by The Muses' immortality

Another influence has been **the work of television writer Russell T Davies**. *The Second Coming*, *Doctor Who* (under his mantle) and *Torchwood* had been demonstrative of how to make impossible characters sound real – and equally, how to undercut those 'mythical' moments with humour to avoid getting declamatory.

THE MYTH MAKERS

Granting the Muses immortality gave them a more sinister edge. Having suggested that they control – through inspiration – the creation of art, immortality added the suggestion that they had been doing it for all time. I hope that for some in the audience this would resonate, drawing parallels with the Arts in the real world and how they fund themselves – which does in its own way control what gets produced.

Having taken the Muses from Greek Mythology I decided to mine the classical tradition further, inspired entirely by **Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*** epic. In initial drafts, the play consisted of a Muse (Jude), his lawyer (Rosie), his protégé (Patti – at this stage not a Muse herself) and two artists, Indigo and Madison (the play was originally titled “Indigo Coward”). I decided to bring more of the Muse myth in, stealing a handful of the Gods and writing my own take on their origins (cunningly ignoring the fact that they were all originally women – hopefully). Generally, I did not go to any great effort to keep continuity with Greek mythology (my knowledge based entirely on Wikipedia and Disney's *Hercules*) partly because doing so was completely impossible but mainly because that wasn't the point. Bringing in the Gods meant I could discuss the idea of inspiration as something divine and, by making them pompous, petty and caricatures of the classical figures, I could have them as desperate to be remembered as The Muses hoping to be immortalised by their artists, and the artists hoping to be immortalised through The Muses. In the original myth, the Muses were the children of Zeus and **Mnemosyne** - the personification of memory. Memory thus became a defining feature of the play.



3 Zeus (front, David Levesley) with Gaea (back, Immi Calderwood) at *The Attic*, credit: Maggie Hayes

Religion, mythology and fairytale – much like The Muses in the play, have and still hold an enduring and unshakeable influence over the art the Western world produces as well as the way we live our lives. After stumbling across **Norton's *The Classic Fairytales***, I decided to conflate the three for the purposes of the play. To Rosie, the Gods and Muses are fairytales – but over the course of the play, a Muse becomes her boss and a God (Aphrodite) controls her actions. The Muses, on the other hand, are worshipped by their clients (Indigo, Madison) and like Gods they demand sacrifices from them. To the Gods, The Muses are their children and they're just about hitting adolescence, rebelling – and in the second scene of the play The Muses are seen firing God. Jude and Patti's joint and respective confrontations with deities were very much helped along by **Aaron Sorkin's 'Two Cathedrals' (Episode 44 of *The West Wing*)**.

JUDE REED: Remember? Remember you? Fogetting's the only gift you give us. It blots out all the other crap. It's like hope, forgetting. That's what words are, that's what music is, that's what art's for – that's how it starts. They do it to forget. It's polishing the turd you named the Earth and then it changes. It corrupts and decays. It's not enough. They want to be remembered, like You.

*They want to be famous and powerful and loved – like You. Immortal and dead.
Because they're made in your image and you in theirs.*

(from 'The Innocent and the Thunderbolt,' 3.2)

In the final rewrites, the fairytale logic became an integral part of the way the story was told. The 'rules' to The Muses' existence are established early on as in a fairytale whilst Rosie (Red Riding Hood like) is very much the little girl lost in the forest.

AMERICAN TRADE

That I hope goes some way to explaining the thought processes working behind the play. Before moving on to talking about the staging of the thing I'd like to say categorically that none of this would have happened without **Tarrell McCraney's 10 day playwriting course**, offered by the (now defunct) CAPITAL Centre at Warwick in June 2010. It was then that I first voiced the idea of 'professional muses,' met only with encouragement from McCraney and the course's other participants. Since then McCraney has looked over drafts, offered advice – and his own play, *American Trade* was a big help in developing the professional patter of Jude and Patti when working within Parnassus Ltd. He has also been supportive in the development of Ginterval Theatre, which eventually came to stage the production, as directed by fellow McCraney 'graduate,' former 'Student as Producer' applicant and Ginterval co-founder, Clare Byrne.

INTERVIEW WITH CLARE BYRNE

I interview the play's director, Clare, on her experiences staging 'The Innocent' in Stratford and the rehearsal methods she used.

Right. Ready for your interview?

Um yesssss....

In a few short sentences, how would you describe The Innocent and the Thunderbolt'?

Innocent is an ever so slightly bizarre look at creativity. The origins of creativity, creative types and what that's come to mean today - for good or bad. A complete ensemble piece that manages to deal with a small relationship comedy, whilst at the same time tackling some serious questions and conceptions about inspiration.

Wrong answer. Joke. So what made you say yes to directing it?

Some guy threatened me. No. Both the slanted humour and the scope of the project were what drew me to it. The opening stage direction of "somewhere outside of time and space" tickled me. On a serious note, I think it's answering - or offering answers - to important timely questions. It would also gave me the opportunity to use some fantastic actors in a truly ensemble piece. Having the writer around also meant that issues I had with the flow of the piece could be worked out - a luxury that you don't always have with a text. And even though it seemed like a very short time scale for the project I felt that the content was strong and exciting enough, that it would be an entirely possible and enjoyable opportunity.

How would you describe your experience working with the cast, and under such a tight time frame? [due to exam and WSAF commitments on both her part and the cast's, Clare eventually ended up with 3 weeks' rehearsal time]

The time frame was intense, and certainly meant that some of what I wanted to do, or how I wanted the rehearsals to unfold pace wise, had to be compromised. Which was stressful. That said, because I was working with such a fantastic bunch of actors – some new faces to me and some old faces - there was always enthusiasm, patience and complete creativity coming from them. Having actors free away from term time commitments was a huge advantage and meant that we could spend whole days working as an ensemble - it couldn't have been done otherwise. I think the closeness and ensemble spirit created really came across in the final performances. It is something, some way off, I would like to give more time to... but with the Stratford sunshine, this being the first run at the script and such lovely people, it was a hugely valuable experience.



4 The Ginterval ensemble warming up in 'the Stratford sunshine,' credit: Maggie Hayes

On that note, how would you describe your experience out of the Stratford sunshine, working in and with The Attic Theatre?

Tough. It's a great but underused space which doesn't seem that accustomed to having lots of companies rolling in. Stratford in itself is a tricky and costly place to spend time and obviously a relatively new scene for us compared to the Warwick campus drama scene which we're perhaps too familiar with. We really had to work for our audience in a flying capacity, something which was somewhat underplayed to us by the venue, but you live you learn. As most of us had been to Edinburgh or similar fringe places and done this it was an unexpected but manageable twist. The cast were great and really rose to the occasion, wandering round Stratford in costume, in the sunshine with boundless enthusiasm. So overall, though trying at the time, it was very rewarding as when we did get bums on seats after every show we had a number of audience members come up to us, or our front of house, or our stage manager to pass on their compliments. Operating outside of the Warwick campus bubble also meant that whilst there was a lot of responsibility on our shoulders it also meant that feedback was completely honest.

Rewinding a bit, can you tell us a little about rehearsals – the techniques you used and how you dealt with such a large cast?

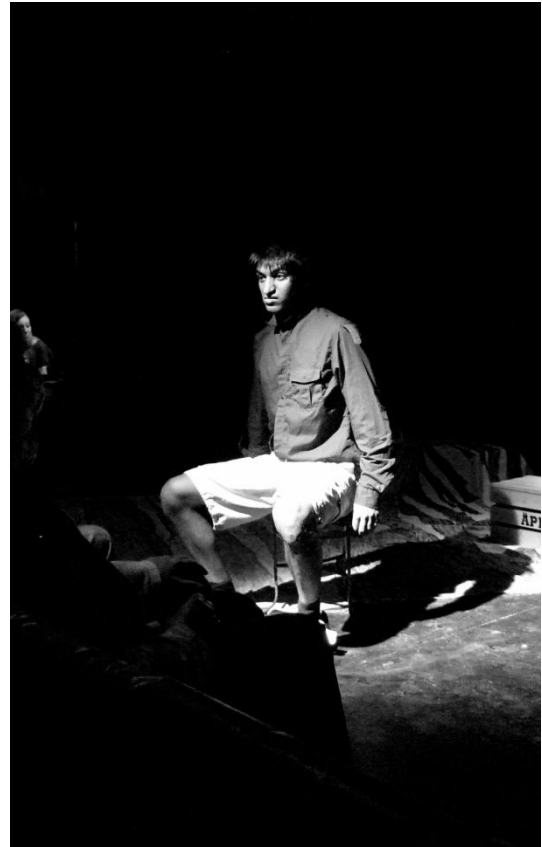
A fortunate side-effect to everyone's varying availability was the ability to break the cast down into smaller groupings first off before bringing everyone together. So we had the Gods rehearsing together, Rosie [played by Polly Clare Boon] and Jude [played by Edward Davis] as a pair and Patti [played by Victoria Odd] and Jude as another pairing for the first week or so. With Hermes [played by Henry William Hart], true to character, flitting around the various rehearsal groupings. This also meant that different rehearsal techniques could be used to suit the slightly different performance styles needed. For example David Levesley as Zeus had huge chunks of verse to play with whereas Ed really had to pick up a modern patter and pace entirely dependent on cues. With the couples (as it were) we spent a lot of time looking at rhythm, using different texts such as Crimp's adaptation of *Moliere's The Misanthrope* written in rhyming couplets and even some Shakespeare, just to get actors who hadn't worked together before aware of what, why and how the other person worked so there was a sync vocally and physically. With the larger Gods grouping I was able to do slightly more ensemble focused exercises, devising fairytales in Jephson Gardens [Leamington Spa], statue sculpture and improv exercises that really got them paying attention to body language, status and the classical representations of who they were

portraying. After that initial week or so, everything was put together and we added music from here on in and just kept running, running, tweaking and recapping the earlier work.

Dealing with such a big cast, is hard, particularly when all get along so well as a unit, invaluable but tricky as it means you do get sick of hearing your own voice saying “be quiet” to stop the in between scene banter. But these lot are pretty special and we did also realise the value of taking down time... For example, a Sunday spent set and costume painting in the park, which whilst constructive was also just a great opportunity for everyone to relax as the pace was generally quite relentless.

Overall, how beneficial an experience was this for you as a director?

It was a very useful and unique experience. Working in Stratford was new, working on a piece of new writing as a director with the writer in the room was new and I was working with some actors who were new to me or had been deliberately put in roles that were new to them. All in all lots of new ground covered. It was also my first time working with such a large cast without an Assistant or a Co-Director, and lots of lessons have been learnt for next time. Certainly room for improvement, which I think you can only realise when you gain more experience. Looking back I really value the first week or so where there was more room to play around time wise, as here obviously I got to try new things and challenge myself a bit more. The time constraint did put quite a lot of pressure on but there's the rest of the summer to recover. Having to really work for the audience is always a great way to keep perspective on theatre and actually how tough it is a career path. Hearing people quickly reply “sorry I have tickets to the RSC” or “No, not interested in theatre, sorry” is a nice little reminder that theatre is a small field and that also audiences always need to be broadened. Luckily the show was a success and as such it was also a reminder of how rewarding it can be when just one person comes up with a thought-out offering on your work.



5 Breman Rajkumar in the 'speed-dating' sequence, credit: Maggie Hayes

And how beneficial an experience was this for Ginterval?

The play really encompassed what Ginterval is about. The piece itself blending old with new but also what we did with it. We did the play as a rehearsed reading first and foremost getting invaluable feedback from that, changing things accordingly. You were very flexible with the piece and changes that I or actors felt should be made to it were considered openly and as a group. We had Dr Ruth Leary [Cultural Policy Studies, University of Warwick] in to rehearsal to look at the subject matter with a more academic, entrepreneurial eye. Actors appreciated this is a change of pace during rehearsal and as subject for discussion throughout. We tried, aided probably by spending nearly every waking hour together, to maintain that spirit of ensemble throughout rehearsals, discussions, debates and the occasional dilemma. We used our actors and ourselves to full capacity, writer pitching in as producer, actors as musicians, painters, costume makers all in order to make our budget smaller and our bond stronger. I feel it forms a very strong base as small scale, first project for our company, giving confidence and better knowledge when pursuing the next project, whatever that may be.

Final question: what's next?

As for, what's next for the piece. I think we will re-visit it at some point in the not too distant future as it has a few last things to work out, deserves a little more time in rehearsal and as one of our audience members wrote in to us, it deserves a much bigger audience. For Ginterval however, as the majority of us are in our final year, I think we will take a while to decide where to concentrate our efforts. So we'll go back to the drawing board, to university and to our fabulous bunch of actors or creatives as they really are, and talk to them. See what they're interested in and how the time frame will work for the year. Perhaps taking a project up to

Edinburgh, where I've just got back from, but nothing has been decided yet. I know that both of us have from this a few different texts/ideas we would like to play around with, as do a lot of the Ginterval folk. Obviously it'll be dependent as so much is in theatre, on availability and funding. But I'm sure Ginterval will stay busy.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

VIDEO

Rehearsal footage: Around 10 minutes of rehearsal footage: scenes in rehearsal, warm-ups and stills. Shot at Milburn House, Jephson Gardens and in and around The Attic Theatre.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_z3QygHsM&feature=feedf

'Speed-Dating' trailer: Excerpts from the play's 'Speed-Dating' scene; filmed at Milburn House and uploaded to YouTube before the Stratford run for publicity purposes.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fj6-p7ZifvI>

CAST & CREW

I have included with each name the participant's departmental affiliation with the University as well as their year of study. In total the project has directly involved eleven 2nd years, six 3rd years and eleven 2nd year across six departments - this in itself I consider an achievement on the part of the project.

Written and Produced by **Joshua Elliott (2nd year English and Theatre Studies)**

Directed and Designed by **Clare Byrne (2nd year Politics and International Studies)**

Music and Lyrics by Katie Caddick with Kieran Lucas

Stage & Tech Managed by **Fergus Nimmo (3rd year Theatre and Performance and Cultural Policy Studies)**

Publicity Design by Edward Davis

CAST (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER):

Polly Clare Boon (3rd year Theatre) as Rosie Hughes

Katie Caddick (1st year English and Theatre) as Indigo Coward

Immi Calderwood (2nd year English and Theatre) as Gaea, Mrs Hughes, Shoniqua

Edward Davis (2nd year English and Comparative Literary Studies) as Jude Reed

Alistair Faiers (2nd year English and Latin Literature) as Cronus, Cameron, Madison, Dan

Henry William Hart (2nd year English) as Hermes, Nurse

Lucy Katz (2nd year English and Theatre) as Aphrodite (aka 'Rebekha')

David Levesley (1st year English) as Zeus, Mr Hughes, Dad, Tony

Kieran Lucas (2nd year English and Theatre) as Ares, Yuri Gorski, Tramp

Victoria Odd (3rd year Theatre) as Patti Blewitt

Breman Rajkumar (1st year PPE) as Hades, Creep

Isobel Rogers (2nd year English) as Poseidon, Triathlete

REHEARSED READING CAST -- AS ABOVE BUT FOR THE FOLLOWING:

Tom Falle (3rd year English) as Indigo Coward, Tramp

Kwaku Mills-Bampoe (3rd year English) as Hermes, Nurse

Tom Sharpe (2nd year English) as Uranus, Yuri

James Sheldrake (2nd year English) as Zeus, Mr Hughes, Dad

Nicki Williams (3rd year English and Italian) as Rosie Hughes

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Dr Susan Brock and Amy Clarke at the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL), for their support; Tarell Alvin McCraney, former RSC Playwright-in-Residence and currently with Steppenwolf Theatre, for his continuing time and encouragement; Dr Ruth Leary (Cultural Policy Studies, The University of Warwick) for her work on the project; Fergus Byrne for his help in liaising with the venue; Joe Boylan and Bathsehba Piepe for reading the parts of 'Jude' and 'Rosie' at Beats 'n' Bars in Leamington Spa, as hosted by Hoon Young Kim; Alice Gahan for publicity advice; Alice Parker, publicist; Rima Dodd; Elsbeth -- a polite little girl who liked to paint.