



Bereavement in the Arts

Theatre without words



The Wrong Crowd, L to R – Hannah Mulder, Rachael Canning and Bonnie Mitchell

Is it possible to examine how grief affects family relationships, without using the spoken word? This is the question two new short plays set out to answer. In this interview Kate Mitchell speaks to the writers and directors of *Kite: an adventure as wild as the wind* and *i know all the secrets in my world*, both of which have just finished UK tours.

Kite: an adventure as wild as the wind is a play for children from theatre company The Wrong Crowd. The story is of a young girl, who has to move to her grandma's city flat after her mother dies. Two silent actors embody 'the wind' helping move sets, props, puppets and costume and move the story along. One night the wind helps bring a handmade kite to life and the play uses music and puppetry to show the girls subsequent wild journey across the city night, and her re-connection both with her grandmother and memories of her mother.

Tackling a very similar theme, African theatre company tiata fahodzi brings us *i know all the secrets in my world*, which again charts those moments between speech, whilst asking other questions about masculinity, fantasy, and father-son relationships. The play opens with a sequence where father and son play together, but their lives are ruptured when the mother

of the family dies. The rest of the play charts their failures to connect in grief, ending at the moment where there is hope that communication can begin again.

Bereavement Care spoke to Bonnie Mitchell (Co-Director of The Wrong Crowd/Producer of *Kite*), Rachael Canning (Co-Director of The Wrong Crowd and Director/Designer of *Kite*) and Natalie Ibu (writer and director of *i know all the secrets in my world*).

Why did you decide to tackle the themes of grief and family relationships?

Rachael: We're visual theatre makers, and the inspiration for *Kite* came initially from the visual idea of wanting to make a show involving indoor kites. Working on a production of *Kes* at Sheffield Crucible I used a kite as the kestrel at one point. It gave such an emotional aspect to that union that I immediately came back to The Wrong Crowd and suggested there was definitely something in kites we should explore.

Very quickly it became clear that the beauty of an indoor kite in a theatre space is the connection between the kite and an actor. We understand the kite by how the actor responds to the kite. And so very quickly actually a story came out of early research and development for the show that saw the kite and the wind that animates the kite as benevolent characters, coming to the help of a young girl – Mary Poppins style.

Bonnie: The resulting story, developed with a gifted set of actors in multiple R&Ds and rehearsals is of a young girl whose mother has recently died, being sent to live with her grandmother. Both are struggling



Natalie Ibu, writer and director of *i know all the secrets in my world*
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to come to terms with their loss and are grieving in isolation and silence. And then one night our magical kite comes to life and so ensues a journey across rooftops and clouds that ultimately enables a processing of that grief and a moving forwards for both the girl and her grandmother.

We're also massive fans of stories where inanimate objects have a personality and come to life to combat loneliness such as *The Red Balloon* and *The Snowman*, and we've been delighted with audiences telling us that *Kite* reminds them of both of these pieces.

Natalie: I wasn't conscious of setting out to explore grief and family relationships. I started thinking about this play in 2008, thinking about a character who refused to speak. As I moved from my mid twenties to early thirties, the idea got richer, more complex, more inquisitive and I guess things that I started to think about started to find a place in the work. A transformative moment – where the play really found itself – was when I found out, over Facebook, that I had five half brothers in Nigeria that I didn't know about. I found myself grieving five men that hadn't died but were absent. I also started to think about the imprint my existence had had on their lives and the impact that knowing about them had on my sense of self – as an only child, brought up by a mother and with loads of aunties where men were absent. I don't think audiences will see that explicitly in the work but that time definitely had an impact on *i know*, which asks the audience to grieve someone they have never met.

Why did you decide not to include dialogue?

Rachael: As visual theatre makers, and in particular coming from a back ground in puppetry direction, it's a very natural development to make a show without text. I feel like less is more. I've always enjoyed silent films. I think it allows your imagination to engage more. Like puppetry does, it makes you as audience work harder. There's a story yes, but there's also ambiguity where you the audience can fill in the gaps. Which is something we've done before, especially with our puppetry, but in *Kite* we've taken it even further by taking out all of the text.

In so many of our interactions with other people we don't use any words, and so its really interesting to me how we communicate, human behaviour, how much of that is wordless. So much can be said with just a touch. I think it takes things to a more emotional level, because you are having to work harder as an audience.

Natalie: I was interested in finding a way – as a director – to author stories. Up until that point – and even beyond – I was/am a text-based director. I direct new plays and relish language but I was always struck that 98% of communication is non-verbal yet plays can sometimes be all about the 2%. How does a writer/director write the 98% – the unsaid, the unspoken? *i know* is an answer to that question.

What aspects of family relationships did you want to explore?

Bonnie: We were interested in exploring an estranged grandmother and granddaughter, whose only link (their daughter/mother) has passed away. Two family members thrown together and both unable to share their very personal grieving with the stranger they now live with. The grandmother cannot become mother and the granddaughter cannot become child. But we were interested in what new family these two women could become.

Natalie: The play is all about a father and son – we only see their relationship – but we do reflect on their relationship as a family and the relationship each of them had with 'her', only it does so through the gap she leaves.

How did the actors rise to the challenge of showing us strong emotions without words?

Rachael: Through an incredible amount of physical work with our movement director Eddie Kay, and detailed refining of storytelling. All enhanced by the music of our composer Isobel Waller-Bridge.

Natalie: It's a real privilege to work with Solomon Israel (Father) and Samuel Nicholas (Son) because they are very talented performers. When in rehearsal for a 'traditional' play, the words are your map for storytelling but they never tell all of the story. So, in that way, this play is no different to another – there was a script that detailed the story – and they brought their extraordinary talents to realise it and turn it into something that is living and breathing. I've also had the pleasure of working with Annie-Lunnette Deakin-Foster, movement director, who created movement that communicated the story and emotions of the characters skilfully.

Did you start out with a clear script or idea of the story you were telling or did it develop as you went along?

Bonnie: As a play without words *Kite* didn't have a script, but we did have a clear story that we took into the rehearsal room, and found ways of bringing to life. Large sections were pretty clearly mapped out before we got into rehearsals, but the finding of the physical language was only something that we could achieve once we were in the rehearsal room with our actors.

Natalie: In 2008, I worked with two actors for just 12 hours exploring the idea of a father who couldn't speak and a son who refused to speak. It was 10 minutes long. Then in 2009, I did some more research and development which generated a structure and 30 minutes worth of possible material. By the time

I spent a week workshopping in 2012, I'd gone on such a journey with the idea that I was able to write a script that I then redrafted before going into rehearsal for this version of the show, which started in 2015. Now we have a really dynamic 55-minute show that feels in some ways everything I imagined back in 2008 and yet more than I could have ever thought possible, as a result of all the people who have played a part along the way. When I read the script now, there are some scenes that exist exactly as written and other scenes that posed a question that the company (movement director, designer, two actors, sound designer, dramaturgical support and I) have managed to answer. I couldn't have done it with just a pen and paper.

Both plays look at establishing a 'continuing bond' with the mother who has died, through clothes, pictures and perfume. At various points these possessions are rejected and reclaimed by the characters. Did you set out to include this message that it is important to keep those who have died 'with us' in some way?

Bonnie: The journey of Kite climaxes with a reuniting of the girl and her grandma, at which point they choose to let go of the kite and embrace for the first time. For us it was about letting go of the need to hold in your feelings, to push down your grief, your anger, your despair. To express what needs to be expressed, and to look up, and see the beauty of what still remains. So yes, we wanted to clearly show how important it is to keep those who we have lost 'with us', and indeed a source of inspiration.

Natalie: I'm not sure I set out to say anything definitively. My hope is that the play shows two journeys of experiencing grief and asks a series of questions along the way in the moments where each character makes a choice not to speak – because they don't know what to say, don't have the words, are scared or whatever. I think – perhaps – the play does make an argument for sitting with whatever you feel whenever you feel it. I think the rejection of the mother's things is forced, it's done as a way of forcing the process along and I think – if anything – the play is saying, don't force it. The journey of grief is so personal and I relished the opportunity to paint a specific and personal portrait but one that cannot speak for everyone and could never state what is right and wrong under such incredibly devastating circumstances.

What additional ways of telling a story did you use to make up for the lack of dialogue?

Rachael: We honestly didn't feel making a show without words created a lack of dialogue. This was always conceived as a show told through physicality, music, and a physical language. We employed the use of puppets, of which the kite is the primary puppet, but we also have smaller versions of both the girl and



Kite: Grandma and Girl © Richard Davenport



Girl on a cloud © Richard Davenport



Kite: Girl and Kite playing © Richard Davenport

i know: Father and Son © Wasi Daniju



the grandmother, bunraku puppets, that we use to demonstrate scale, perspective and heighten moments of magical realism. We could have gone for a more 'dancey' approach to address these challenges but to us there's something wonderful about making the audiences' imaginations work that little bit harder in certain moments of our story with the use of puppets.

As it's an adventure that takes place in London we of course had to have some newspaper pigeon puppets in too. And really the whole design concept of the show is about manipulation of the set. The fridge and wardrobe become the cityscape of London. The dinnerware becomes the moon. Again, we hope exercising the imaginations of our audiences young and old.

Natalie: The absence of dialogue is a really important element of the production and I didn't – as an artist – feel I had to make up for it. I wanted to make a piece of work which felt true, one that honoured the pain of loss. However, I also think silence is a fallacy – just because the characters don't speak doesn't mean there would be silence so I worked with an extraordinary sound designer to create a rich sound world for the play to sit in. After the mother dies, all sound is then a result of some incredible work from Helen Skiera as she used her own vocals to create the sound design. Her voice is manipulated in lots of different ways to create all the sound you hear. I also worked with Annie, a very talent movement director, to develop the primary language – how they move around space, move around each other, manoeuvre around the indentation mother has made on their lives.

As well as how the characters communicate in grief, were there other themes you wanted to explore? How did using a story about grief help you examine these secondary themes?

Bonnie: The joy of play was definitely another component of *Kite*. We first see the girl smile when she plays with the kite for the first time. Grandma initially cannot cope with the

girl's playfulness and this leads to her running away. Grandma eventually does remember how to play, enjoys playing, and this ultimately leads to her being reunited with her granddaughter. I guess telling a story about grief raised questions around when do we have permission or when is it appropriate to smile, to play, to enjoy the moment, without guilt and without fear.

Natalie: I was also interested in exploring masculinity and femininity, absence and presence, chaos and silence – it was really important to me that the play dealt with what was there and what wasn't there and therefore all sorts of juxtapositions. Grief is a large and complex theme that runs through the play but moments of stress provide a fertile ground for exploring other themes. So, the loss of mother – whilst large, complex and heartbreaking – also



i know: Father and son © Wasi Daniju



i know: Afterwards © Wasi Daniju

provides a platform to ask all the other questions. So a question like, 'who does a narrow and singular definition of masculinity, which society instils in men and boys, really serve?' doesn't stand up on its own, it's not dramatic. But then it becomes 'if you've been fed a narrow definition of masculinity, how does it serve you when you experience loss?' Which *is* dramatic and one of the questions at the heart of the play.

Did you feel it was important to end on a note of hope?

Bonnie: Yes absolutely. Whilst we're not afraid to show the emotional pain our grieving characters experience, the kite to us was always a benevolent character who was going to shift the dynamics in this family for the better.

Natalie: It was important to me that we didn't try to conclude or wrap the play up neatly – grief isn't time limited and something that just ends. The play ends, where their unhindered grief begins – when the Father has stopped resisting his emotions, when he starts to engage with his feelings – and where they start – in a very small way – to find a way to reach each other with language.

What sort of reaction have you received from audiences? Have you had any feedback specifically from those who have been bereaved themselves?

Bonnie: We have had an overwhelming response. Audience members who themselves have experienced grief have written to us and thanked us for representing their experience on stage. We have also received a great response from parents who bring

young children, and are at first anxious about how their children will respond to the loss of a mother and the grief process unfolding on stage in front of them. They have told us how absorbed and thoughtful their children have been.

Natalie: Whilst making the show, we engaged in research – meeting those who'd lost someone and therapists, reading a lot of articles, watching lots of youtube videos, listening to a lot of podcasts (and that doesn't stop – I feel like every day I discover another piece of research that sparks an idea or deepens my understanding of the play). There are people who have lost on our creative team who have shared their experiences and how they relate to the play and how they recognise themselves in the story.

Audiences have been really generous with their emotions – they laugh and cry and go on the journey with our characters. People talk of being moved very deeply by the play and all of them talk of how surprised they are by how effectively we can tell the story without a reliance of words and often say that you couldn't tell this story with words. They really get it and are really vocal afterwards which is delightful – making work feels scary, no matter how many plays you've directed, and even more so when you're trying to do something different so it's a real privilege to have their undivided attention and all of their imagination and emotions for 55 minutes. For me, the play is as much about love as it is about loss so I hope – for audiences – it's as hopeful as it is heartbreaking. ■

You can find out more about Kite at:

www.wrongcrowdtheatre.co.uk and *i know all the secrets in my world* at www.tiatafahodzi.com/natalie-ibu/i-know-all-the-secrets-in-my-world-2016/.