

How We Read Bodies: An Interview with Chris Goode in Conversation with Catherine Love

Edited by Catherine Love

Chris Goode is a writer, director, performer and sound designer. His work includes *Neutrino* (2001), *Kiss of Life* (2002), ... *Sisters* (2008), *The Adventures of Wound Man and Shirley* (2009), *GOD/HEAD* (2012), *Monkey Bars* (2012), *The Forest and the Field* (2013) and *Men in the Cities* (2014). He is the lead artist of Chris Goode and Company and recently formed the new all-male ensemble Ponyboy Curtis. His book *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World*, which considers the concept of theatre as a 'space', will be published by Oberon Books later this year.

Throughout much of his work as a theatre-maker, Goode investigates ideas of space, desire, bodies and nakedness. In *The Forest and the Field*, for example, nakedness is placed in a dialogue with nudity, following John Berger's distinction that 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself' (54). In his work with Ponyboy Curtis, meanwhile, Goode is examining constructions and performances of masculinity through a process that involves extensive use of nudity.

Goode has also engaged at length with discourses around nakedness on his long-standing blog, *Thompson's Bank of Communicable Desire*. On this blog, Goode identifies stage nakedness as a research question threading through his theatre-making and poses the question: 'once you're naked - once you've "got" naked - how can you carry on getting *more* naked? How can you extend the line, the curve, however you imagine it, on the graph of clothedness, how can you extend the line

back through its own origin to sub-zero?’ (original emphasis). This provides the starting point for our conversation.

CL: You have described your interest in stage nakedness as a research question as much as an aesthetic interest that you are looking to explore through your work. I’m interested in how you feel you have explored that or where you think you’re going with that research question.

CG: I’m now wondering what I meant by that. I must have had something in mind, but I don’t really understand the distinction I’m making there. What there has been for several years is an interest in staging nakedness as a thing in itself rather than as an effect or as a tonal modifier or for any kind of instrumental reason. The moment I got interested in nakedness as a question was when there was some kind of project application where we had to describe our work and I remember we were talking at the time about the body in limit states. I remember reading back through that application once we’d written it and seeing nakedness in that list of extreme things that we were asking the body to do and suddenly being really struck by that, because I think often we do read nakedness on stage as an extreme case that’s arrived at; we go on a journey and get there. Or if we’re suddenly confronted with it then it feels like it’s occupying a sort of extreme position in relation to whatever we think of as normalcy on stage. It occurred to me how curiously dissonant that is in relation to lived experience, where again there’s a sense that being clothed is the default, but still my experience is that the core of me, the core of my experience, is of nakedness and of clothing that nakedness in order to go out into the world. So that rather than it feeling like an extreme state, it feels like a fundamental, base state. I suppose that was the interesting thing that we started working with: the idea of nakedness being the thing we

departed from and came back to - so essentially flipping the syntax of clothedness on stage. That's a thing that's lodged in my practice.

In a way it's a militantly rigorous response to the idea of thinking about the body. You spend a lot of time as practitioners and theorists talking about "the body" or "the actor's body" when very seldom actually are we seeing the actor's body; we're seeing the actor's body moving clothes around. Once we'd made that flip in terms of the thought position, suddenly clothing really clearly re-presented itself, not as part of the body but as part of the place that the body is in. So if we're talking about the body then the question at the point of departure is always partly about what it is that we want to present and if there's no reason for it to be clothed then there won't be any clothing. What that produces is kind of wilful, because it doesn't matter what perceptual shifts we've been through, people still read nakedness with alarm or with erotic fascination or whatever it might be. But that was where we started out.

A lot later I went back and read *The Empty Space* and it's a question in there that I'd completely forgotten. At one point in passing he says 'why clothes at all?' So it's not a totally new minted idea, but it felt to me like it was quite a big paradigm shift in my head. And I suppose that's become more and more important as my practice has gravitated more and more towards the ideological content of constructions like "body" and "place" and realising what it means to watch actors essentially moving around advertisements for particular ideological positions and thinking of those very often as neutral clothing. Which is obviously not to say that there's anything neutral about nakedness either. Jonathan Burrows has a lovely line about nudity being no more neutral than wearing a big hat, which I think is absolutely right. Nonetheless, I think with pieces I've made, particularly with Jonny Liron, we did find that it was possible to shift an audience's relationship with nakedness.

So there's a critical relationship with clothing and a different kind of attentiveness to the body, one corollary of which is that we've tended to separate out not only nudity from nakedness, which is a distinction with a long critical history, but also trying to use the word 'unclothed' quite often instead. It's tricky, because it re-positions clothedness as the default from which you depart, but what it connotes seems to be more expressive of a problematic binary that's quite interesting between clothed and unclothed, because obviously nudity for a lot of practitioners is a kind of clothedness.

One of the other upshots of disrupting clothedness in the way that we have in the past few years is that that disruption has happened within the system of clothing as well, so that quite often there's a disrupted or destabilised hierarchy of clothing. Particularly in my work with Jonny, he and I would be clothed, but what he might be clothed in could be at one particular moment a beanie hat and boots and nothing else. That inadvertently starts picking up on the image of pornography, where you see naked bodies part-clothed but also registering as naked. I suppose, thinking as best I can about what I might have meant about the research interest, it's about those then becoming really fundamental questions about how we read bodies, how we read the actor, and in particular how we read the special kind of place that theatre is. If clothing is an extension of place, then we need to talk about it in the same way that we talk about site, and I don't think that's something that generally happens.

You mention using nakedness as a point of departure rather than a point of arrival. I was also struck by something else you wrote about being more interested in the movement of getting naked than in the state of nakedness on stage. I wonder if you would be able to expand on that thought?

I think the place it shows up best is Bataille's writing on eroticism. He has a line I'm very fond of in his book *Eroticism* where he says 'getting naked is the decisive act', and I got really interested in that idea of nakedness as an act rather than a state of being. It's quite often our experience of nakedness anyway, that it is something that's moved into and out of, and I suppose I'm interested in the vector of it - partly because it becomes a time-based operation, which makes it feel to me like it belongs in theatre more interestingly. But also it's about the politics of that decisive act. It's funny, because we've just been talking about nakedness as a point of departure and immediately I'm talking about it as a point of arrival, but it feels like a prefatory act - we do this and then we begin. I think that's interesting because it gives an audience time to adjust their relation with what they're seeing and how they're feeling about it. I think there's a certain amount of dread sometimes for people seeing that that's going on, or there's a degree of anticipation, but there's a moving relationship that I think is interesting.

It's interesting, I think, in relation to what Bataille means by 'decisive'. He's setting up a whole network of ideas about discontinuity: the idea that you and I are separate people and we will die alone. Even if we're surrounded by loved ones, it is something that we will go through completely alone and we are the only animal that knows that we are going to go through that. For Bataille, most culture starts in that apprehension, and most culture is one way or another about how we deal with this distance, this discontinuity between us, in order to introduce a plausible element of continuity between us. So whether that's about empathy, or whether it's about recognition, or whether it's just about sharing an experience. This for me was terrifically exciting when I read it, because it seems to me absolutely to describe theatre. In conventional terms, we're in markedly separate areas, and yet what we've gone to the theatre to

do is try and minimise that distance between us - or at least that's what I do.

For me, there's something really interesting about what happens in that moment or that series of moments in the movement between clothedness and nakedness in front of an audience. It's generally still pretty rare for the audience to be being encouraged to get naked at the same time, so there's a built-in imbalance to that gesture. I think that intersects very interestingly with how actors view their own power, their own authority, in that situation. This is something that I think most actors would attest to: there's a very interesting double dynamic going on in getting naked, in that it always reads from the outside as a movement towards vulnerability, but from the inside an actor's experience very often is of becoming more powerful. The naked actor is often the most powerful person in the room, partly because they've got nothing left to hide. That always shows up very interestingly in relation to actors' understanding of their own authorial power and what they're going to do with it, and whether it's important to them to bolster it or whether they can give it away somehow.

One of the things I talk about in the book is an interesting example of this. Casting Call Pro is like a free Spotlight where people can put their headshot and their CV and actors who use that service have to fill in a questionnaire, one question on which is 'perform nude?' There are three options that you can choose from: one is 'yes', one is 'no', and the third is 'only professionally'. So there is a thing about essentially what you charge to get naked, or where the value in it happens. That of course is a kind of mirror of the idea that we have gratuitous nudity, which is where it's not participating properly in a value system that shows it up as expensive. It's gratuitous because it's given away for free, without it being part of a transaction that makes sense in some kind of internal economy

of power or value or authority. So for me, gratuitous nudity is the best nudity there is, because it refuses to participate in that internal economy. That's one of the reasons that I like the idea of nakedness as that default point of departure. We've had a conversation about why I'm interested in that, but in a sense it doesn't justify itself within the operations of theatre. A lot of actors are trained to think 'would my character get naked at this point?' and there are certain kinds of distancing manoeuvres or dissociating gestures that get as far as going 'well, it's not really me that's naked, it's the character'. And then on the other side of that are audiences and critics, particularly newspaper reviewers, who if they ever complain about nakedness it's because they feel like they stop seeing a character and suddenly start seeing the actor; it's never King Lear's dick, it's Ian Holm's dick that we're going to talk about.

So for me there's a real interest in asking actors to think about what it is that they're charging, as it were, in that quasi-economic context. My feeling is that the more that we can give away - the less valorised nakedness is in that economy - the easier it is to then see it as beautiful or as exemplary or as somehow just a little bit elevated. Because that's something that I've always tried to maintain; although I'm talking about nakedness as a point of departure and as a base state, I'm never looking to make it mundane or unremarkable. I think it does take courage for actors to be naked on stage, even those who get very used to it. I think it takes courage and it takes a kind of generosity that I think is very beautiful. It makes very clear the basic contract of what being an actor is, which is to stand up in public and say 'let me be the one who is looked at', and that I think is an extraordinary, generous and important act of volunteering - and it's a volunteering even when it's paid. So I always want an actor's nakedness to be appreciated and that's why I'm interested in the act, the event of becoming naked, because

you see that choice being made and you see the implications of that unfolding in a way that at one and the same time reinforces its humanness and its slight elevation.

There is obviously, as soon as this becomes real and not just something we're talking about, something really problematic about gender here. I in practice as a director - or as a writer to a degree - have a really different relationship with nakedness in relation to female rather than male actors. Partly because patriarchy, partly because the way that patriarchy functions is that it's still more common, I would think, for women to be asked to be naked on stage than for men and it's certainly more common for that nudity to be sexualised. And because I am a male director, even though I'm a queer male director, I am reticent about asking female actors to be naked. I think it has to be that way and I wouldn't want it any other way. It doesn't mean there isn't female nudity in my work sometimes, but it would normally be with an actor that I knew really well and where there had been a conversation. But that becomes a problem when I say, as I've already said in this conversation, that getting naked feels like a fundamental thing for an actor to be able to do. There is a weird thing about my saying, more or less at one and the same time, I expect the actors I work with to be able to at least engage with this question, and I think being able to put naked actors on stage is a fundamental part of my practice, but I'm also sort of then making it impossible for women to register in the same way on stage in my work because I'm reluctant to ask that or even to want that.

A thing that's often made me really happy is when female actors in my room will get naked in an improvisation or a rehearsal and no one's asked them to do that. It just feels like they're OK with offering that in that situation because they feel they can participate in the making of a space that refuses all the things that we

came in with. At the end of the day, it's just another way patriarchy is showing up in that rehearsal room; it's what happens when you pay attention to that. So I'd rather be in that discomfort than in the discomfort of not paying attention to that and then having people have a horrible time being naked on stage in front of an audience when they're not feeling it. It feels like in our present condition there's always going to be something about it that feels uncomfortable and maybe that's it for now and maybe that's right for now.

I was thinking about that power dynamic when nakedness is being staged and an audience is watching while clothed, which for me as an audience member is an oscillating one. I was also thinking about the framing of theatre and how nakedness reads in theatre specifically. How far do you think it is possible to change audiences' perceptions of staged nakedness and to re-configure that understanding of nakedness as being not the point of arrival but the point of departure? Is it possible to begin to shift that understanding over the course of one piece of work, or is it an ongoing journey?

I think one of the most satisfactory ways of introducing nakedness into a piece for me was in the first version of *The Forest and the Field*, which was in 2009, in which again like the more recent version there was another performer in the room who was naked for quite a lot of the time. That was around the time when I was really feeling very committed to this idea of let's not clothe the actor unless it's necessary. In that case, working with Sébastien Lawson, he was sitting with the audience to begin with and there was no indication that he was going to be involved in the piece. There was something about talking about nakedness first, directly to the audience - talking about what a naked body might be in

this environment - and then introducing Sébastien. I remember him getting a laugh always because it was pretty clear as soon as he was introduced that he was going to be the one who got naked. Us being able to have a little conversation, part scripted and part not, in which an audience saw him consent to that and then start to undress from their midst - I really liked that, because it made it all very transparent and it was familiar by the time it started happening.

Something that I've never liked doing is presenting nakedness in an aggressive way or a way that's meant to cause the audience to recoil. It's always framed as a journey towards intimacy. An audience can't necessarily consent to that intimacy, or they can't always signal their consent, but it's always I think done in a way that invites a measured, calm and spacious response, in which no one hopefully is shocked and where actually if anything it's hard to hang onto that slight elevation that I was talking about and it does become almost boring in the end. Like, 'oh my God, he's taking his clothes off again'. That's quite an interesting moment to get to. In a way I'm always really satisfied by it, because it shows that that whole economy has collapsed, which is good. One of the things that happened with Jonny Liron, which was sad, was that his nakedness became a cliché in our work because we were both interested in it and it was always present. There is a strange jocularly around the response to it, because it stopped being seen as special in a sense and it became not just gratuitous but sort of deflated. I do think that's difficult.

Something that happened to me early on and that was really encouraging was getting to know Tim Miller, who's a Los Angeles performance artist who has always used nudity in his performances in a very joyous way. He's a kind of storyteller really, but sooner or later he's always going to get naked. That's part of

an assertion of queer identity, but it's also an assertion of the importance of nakedness as a not only private state. Tim writes about this in one of his books: he says very clearly that the theatre is the last public place we have where you can look legitimately at the naked body of a stranger; it's kind of the only place where that's possible, at least without it being immediately overdetermined by sexual overtones and a discomfort around etiquette. If there's a naked body on stage, you know you're allowed to look at it.

I started to think about that sense that only theatre can contain this. I feel like there's something really interesting about that, and it explains for me in a richer way than I'd been able to before what my interest in theatrical nakedness has been about. I think there's a very interesting tension there, or an interesting kind of paradox. It's a bit like those chemical elements that only ever exist in the lab for a few seconds and then they're so unstable they sort of disappear again. What theatre allows us to do is to really look at a naked body in a space where that body is OK, where it's not at risk, where it's not actually vulnerable, partly because it's clothed by the theatre. If clothing is part of the place the body is in, then one of the reasons we can do nudity in the theatre is because the theatre becomes the clothing that the actor is in. The theatre is doing the job not only of clothing but of warmth and shelter and all the things that make nakedness viable as an option. So it's a space where there's no reason for nudity to be problematic in itself, because you see a body that doesn't need resolving into anything else; it's the body at its most irreducible, in a sense. I suppose that's what I'm getting at with the idea about it being fundamental, that there is something absolute about a naked body and the fact that there is that completeness is very beautiful.

But at the same time, it's less than complete, because it's dependent on the conditions of theatre to be sustainable. When we

did *The Forest and the Field* at Camden People's Theatre that first time, Sébastien used to leave the theatre and have to walk around the side of the building, so he would be outside naked for a few seconds before he came back in again and there was always something really interesting about the extent to which he had to carry the idea of the theatre with him as he went around. So I think there is this sense that we see something that's signalling a completeness and an integrity in itself, a body that doesn't need to be clothed in order to be legitimate, that doesn't need to be in private in order to be legitimate, but at the same time we're very aware as an audience that we are part of the system that makes this possible and so there is a sense of the actor being dependent on our presence in order to be naked. And in a sense I suppose that just creates an entanglement in the authorship of this moment. Essentially nakedness on stage is always a collaboration and it's dependent on being seen in a way that I guess is true of all theatre, but it means that that's theatre in a very pure sense, because before it's anything else it's just that body.

Finally, you've written about the radical promise contained within this reconfiguring of our relationship with stage nakedness; this idea of transforming it from being a limit state to something that's passed through. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that?

I suppose the thing that comes to mind particularly is the idea of intimacy. Intimate is a word formed along the same lines as ultimate, which is to say that it's about a kind of mostness. Just as the ultimate is about going as far as you can with something, the intimate is about getting as far *into* a relationship or an event or whatever as possible. So that in seeking intimacy we seek a depth of engagement that I suppose ties in a sense to that Bataillan construction of erotic continuity, of the ways in which we are able to

expose to each other ourselves at our most ineluctably human. So for me nakedness is a technology of intimacy, not just in terms of the revelation in public of a state that normally belongs to the private sphere - which I think is sometimes what we mean by intimacy in theatre, that it's about behaving in public as though we were in private together. It's about the construction of moments in which we are as close to each other as we can be. That idea of being close is interesting, because partly it's about proximity, but it's also closeness as in likeness, as in we see each other as more alike each other than we might do and we notice the ways in which clothing serves to separate us and tribalise us and conceal our sameness in some ways. Although there is also another way of looking at it, that there's a huge amount of difference that's revealed and that also is true, but I think the way it signals - particularly when it's staged as an event - has to do with a revelation of intimacy.

This is a very simple thought really: nakedness shows us at our most basic and that's why I want it to be a base state that we read it as, rather than as a state of extremity. We're not in a state of extremity when we're naked; we're in a state of animal basicness. Every version of that sentence has to be completed with something about what we go to the theatre to do and that will be different for everybody, but I think for me there's a sense of wanting to be closer to people, to be reminded of what we share or what we hold in common, to be reminded of our common occupancy of a single place and a single time. Bataille talked eventually about bringing into a discontinuous world all of the continuity that such a world can bear, and I think that's as good a way of expressing it as anything. If the problem we go to theatre to solve is our isolation, our sense of human separateness from each other - I don't know about solve, but alleviate maybe - then it feels to me like nakedness has a really basic role to play in fostering that, both in itself and in how

it changes everything around it.

Works Cited

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972. Print.
- Goode, Chris. 'Giving it all away'. *Thompson's Bank of Communicable Desire*. 25 Feb. 2014. Web. 4 Mar. 2015.