

## Post-show Talk - Frantic Assembly *Things I Know to be True*

Creatives:      Scott Graham - Artistic Director                  Jonnie Riordan - Associate Director  
Cast:             Matthew Barker - Mark    Natalie Casey - Pip  
                      Kirsty Oswald - Rosie    Ewan Stewart - Bob  
                      Imogen Stubbs - Fran

**Chair:** Hello and welcome to the Oxford Playhouse, you're joining us here for the post-show talk of *Things I Know To Be True* by Frantic Assembly. We'll begin with an introduction to the show by Scott Graham, who is the Artistic Director and co-founder of Frantic Assembly, and Associate Director Jonnie Riordan. *Things I Know to Be True* was co-directed by Scott and the Artistic Director of State Theatre Company in Adelaide, Geordie Brookman. It's a collaboration that started a few years ago. Scott, can you tell us how you came up with the idea for the story? It's a story about a family in Australia but it could be a family from many other countries or here in Oxford. Could you also share details of the creative processes that you went through during your research and development?

**Scott:** First of all I worked with Geordie Brookman a few years back when he assisted on the creation of a show called *Lovesong*. Then he became artistic director of State Theatre Company in South Australia and he approached Andrew Bovell, who is a really well-known Australian writer, and asked if he could write a play for his theatre company. Andrew said yes, but only if he could have his creative process challenged. And Geordie thought that it was a great opportunity to get Frantic Assembly involved. I got really excited by that as well. Not just to facilitate Andrew's learning or growth... just because I thought it might be really interesting experience for me to be in a room with such a brilliant writer and with Geordie. We're all committed to doing something really different and we all learn from each other. The starting point was that commitment to all come together. So, we met in a rehearsal room in Adelaide with nothing but a book of photographs by photographer Gregory Crewdson. We just sat there, working with six actors and designer Geoff Cobham, and looked at these images and talked about what we saw. What was apparent to us in these photos... and what came out of it was...we started talking about this kind of faded American dream. If anyone's aware of these images there are some absolutely superb images of the faded American dream and suburbia...this started a conversation about the dreams that we are sold. We were talking about America but there I was, a British director in Australia with all Australian creatives, we felt that somehow our cultures had also been sold dreams. I started to think about my own mum and dad who were perfectly ordinary working class people, working as a motor mechanic and in factories and warehouses, they worked extremely hard to provide me and my brother with the opportunity to go to university, the first time anyone in our family had done that, and I know from experience what that does is bring this generational clash and generational tension into the family because they're just different worlds. I guess me and my brother were given the opportunity to do whatever we wanted, but my mum and dad's generation were told, "No, you have to work hard, and somewhere towards the end of that life you will reap the rewards in some kind of relaxation or retirement". That's very different from my generation and it's going to be very different from the next generation. So we started talking about these dreams that we're all sold and working with the actor. Andrew was brilliant at setting up these improvisations to bring out text and story. What emerged quite quickly was this family, so we started creating stories around family and the generational tensions that might exist. A couple of parents who have afforded all these opportunities for their offspring and then it all comes back to bite them. At the same time as developing this text and these characters, we were developing a physical language or palette to use alongside it. That was all part of our plan. We wanted a textual language where it could sit together. The development was one week in Adelaide, then the next year we came together for another week in Adelaide, then the year after that we actually started rehearsals on the first show which opened in Adelaide in May. So over that time Andrew was developing a script that became a rehearsal draft on day one.

**Chair:** This is the English tour of the production, and the actors here didn't perform in Australia.

Let's meet the family/the actors; we have Ewan who plays the father Bob, Imogen who plays the mother Fran, Kirsty who plays Rosie the youngest daughter, Natalie who plays Pip, and Matthew who plays Mark. And Associate Director Jonnie. Did any of you see the original show in Australia?

**Jonnie:** Just me. It was amazing and very different. We're afforded all these beautiful, historic theatres in the UK, I think what's really interesting in the UK is the theatres we're working with are smaller, more beautiful in a way, which for me just intensifies the story and the intimacy of it.

**Chair:** What kind of movement background do you have and how different has it been working in Frantic Assembly's unique style?

**Natalie:** I was once a dancer but it's a completely different way of working. It's a different language isn't it? A lot of people ask about the show "is it dance?" and it's very difficult to explain that it is dance in some ways but not in other ways. It's sort of dance from 'in here'. There are no pirouettes. It has the breadth of dance but it doesn't have the steps of dance.

**Scott:** It was a really lovely rehearsal process, it was great to be in Adelaide working with some fantastic collaborators, but nearly all of them came over to the UK and had the privilege of working very quickly with a new cast while it was all fresh, but still learning loads about the play. Both Geordie and I were adamant that we weren't going to ask any British performers to just stand in place where the Australian actor had stood, it had to be found and we had to be open to what these guys would bring to it, which made it a really exciting process.

**Audience member:** Did you intend from the beginning for it to be a play with narrative...where people tell their own story and you go into a scene and then the character goes into a monologue... or did that come out of the improvisation process?

**Scott:** Did we always intend to use direct address and monologues? We didn't start off with any clear conviction that it would be that way, I think we were all just trying to find our way. One of the first things that happened in the rehearsal room was the original actor who played Rosie started talking about this disastrous trip she had to Europe, where she'd gone on a great European adventure, met this boy, then found herself getting dumped by him, and to get herself through that she wrote down all the things she knew to be true and found it was very little that she knew was true. So that was a massive starting point for the whole project. It felt so integral to it to give her a voice that it meant that it was always going to be part of the show. Once we'd found Rosie's voice, it felt right to give everyone a voice and not in a 'if you need some stage time go up and speak' way. It gives you a perspective on the family, whether that's right or wrong. What I love most of all is an unreliable narrator; I think that's much more interesting than someone who looks back on things from the perspective of knowing it all. I much prefer it when they are partial. So when Ben is talking about the love that the Mum and Dad have for each other he's talking about it in such simplistic terms, he has no idea about the complexities at the heart of that relationship. And I think that's nice, it's not just the pressure the parents put on the children but also the pressure the children have put on the parents, to be simple and to be solid. To always be there to solve the problems and that's when the cracks come, it's hard to live up to that. I think on both sides, the children and the family are really struggling to live up to those pressures.

**Audience member:** I really love Rosie's monologue, I quite resented it for a while that it wasn't going to be your story, because you were first... and then you settle into it, it's very powerful.

**Scott:** I think it kind of is her story, because that's as much as she knows at that point, and then she comes back and all of this happens, and it still adds up to all the things she knows to be true. It's still a small list but some things have changed, fundamentally.

**Audience member:** Rosie and her family are Australian, why did you choose British accents for this production?

**Scott:** To our ear, if we all saw the Australian production we'd say they were all talking in Australian accents. However, they were all speaking in different Australian accents – Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. Those are

different accents but to an English audience they sound the same, so we're not really interested in that nuance. During the development of the play we did talk about where the British equivalent might be. How do we change this? Where do we set it? I thought it might be possible, but that we were missing the point. Because it's about the relationships, it's not the specific of Adelaide, a specific suburb that has its own particular accent. What's interesting is the tension that exists between the family so we came to the conclusion that we weren't going to change anything in the text for the British version. That became quite a strong political statement for us to make because Australia has a culture of importing British culture and has what Geordie calls the 'cultural cringe' where they don't think the work they make is very good and get embarrassed by it, which is absurd. So it's quite a political statement to make a piece of work that is undeniably and unashamedly Australian and to bring it over here and tell a story of a family in Adelaide but not to make it a technical exercise where we all adopt an Australian accent, because to your ear they might all just sound like Australian accents but to our Australian director, designer and writer they feel like "they're murdering it!" and so you lose the truth at the heart of the play and the relationships.

**Chair:** After the show yesterday some members of our Young Company said that they wanted to know more about each character because there is so much in the story we see. I think it's perfectly structured in terms of the sense of time you have with this family. How did you choose which moments see and share with the family?

**Scott:** The structure is very much Andrew Bovell's forte, he's a genius with structure, but I think it's also what he wanted challenged a little bit. He has a very clear understanding of who these people are and the work that we did with the actors originally just really worked and it was built from the ground up. I think Andrew had a very real sense of what was enough just to get inside that story. Through that process there was a little bit more that got trimmed off, there was a whole scene at the end that never made it into the rehearsal room, where Bob tears a strip off one of the children once Fran is dead, he just destroys them for who they are and how selfish they are. All it took was one conversation between us to ask, 'Do we need this?' Isn't it kind of implicit in the life that we've led, the choices we've made and the mistakes we've had to make? We might have upset our parents and we might have let them down. So I think there was very little extra stuff, we just kind of got it right.

**Audience Member:** I wanted to hear more from Bob's perspective, was there a decision to have some of his speech cut down?

**Scott:** We already have a tremendously eloquent statement for Bob where he looks at the garden and destroys the roses, so we came to a point of agreement where Bob had said it all there, because he has focused on these flowers, provided this garden, this kingdom for his offspring to live in, and in many ways he's taking his eye off the ball, he hasn't noticed the most important thing, so the roses become a folly in the end. Right at the beginning when those voices are in his head, when that phone goes in the middle of the night, he talks about all the things that might have happened...which one of his children is hurt, which one of them is dead, how do I tell their mother... he doesn't think 'has something happened to Fran?' and that's because Fran is the rock that they all orbit around. They just take her for granted, and I think that's kind of tangible, palpable, Bob didn't need to tell them that, they know it in the way they come back together. That's why he destroys the roses, because in that moment he knows he's missed the point.

**Audience Member:** These are very difficult, emotional roles to play. How did you cope with that and how did you create that family dynamic?

**Matthew:** Volleyball. A lot of volleyball in rehearsal.

**Natalie:** We do intense physical warm-ups because it's an intense show. You do not want to drop anyone and you don't want to hurt yourself. We played volleyball together and picked teams. And it just brought a really nice team spirit to it and that was a really important part of it. When you're acting a family it's next to impossible to get to the stage where you have the background experience of actually being in a family. We liked each other, that's useful as well, but you don't have the breadth of years of experience of being together so you have to artificially produce it and that's a really good way of doing it.

**Ewan:** He won't thank me but it is true...is part of his genius as a director, bringing people together. Getting that feeling of unity is very important in something like this.

**Scott:** I think with a play like this it would be very easy to sit in a rehearsal room and talk about all the problems, talk about all the angst...I think that's sometimes missing the point. Andrew was always at pains to talk about this play as being about love. It's not about anger or hatred, even though what comes out of it might sound like that sometimes. It's all a different shade of love and it comes from the tensions that sit around love. So the rehearsal room had to be fun. They had to be absolutely comfortable and natural around each other and that involved being comfortable physically and with the technicality of lifting each other. So we just jumped straight in there, playing Volleyball, lots and lots of physical warm ups, and we just let the other stuff develop.

**Audience Member:** You mentioned bringing people together and I wondered about the audition process. How does the audition process work? You've got to believe that this family will work as a group. How did you choose the people?

**Scott:** Because the question about whether we should set it in Australia was starting to open up and I wasn't interested in necessarily homogenising an accent, I just wanted it to be truthful. I didn't want a technicality to get in the way of the honesty of their delivery. We also looked at colour blind casting. Because of the subject matter of the play we really went out there to try and find transgender actors and engage them in the audition process. Ultimately my job was to pick what I thought would be the best cast for the show and I really feel I did do that.

**Kirsty:** There was a physical part to the audition which I had done before when I did Othello with Frantic Assembly. I've worked with Scott before. I did my physical time then and Scott knew I could do that, so I didn't go through that process again. So it's that process of being in a group with various people who might be playing your part, or other people's parts, and then working on one of the monologues and chatting with them about their ideas. What your reaction to it is. Any questions you have. Anything you agree or don't agree with.

**Scott:** I think when people do a one to one audition people can come at you with a bag of tricks and they can really impress you with something they've honed in their bedroom, but it doesn't tell you how they're going to work in a room. In a group workshop you do see how they interact and you can see how they fail as well, which is good because you want to see how they bounce back. I know how hard it is for actors to come to auditions and how soul destroying it can be for actors to give, give, give and then hear 'next'. I've always thought auditions need to be fun, so even if you don't get the part, you can leave with something.

**Audience Member:** It was amazing how emotionally connected you were. It was like you'd done it for the first time. How do you keep fresh and make sure you're still emotionally connected? What do you focus on?

**Ewan:** You want it to go well so you want to do your best. Sometimes it doesn't work and other times it does. But most times you go out there and you've got a whole bunch of people who've come out to see it. You don't want to turn them away with them having not enjoyed it. You don't want to let yourself down or them down. Really it's just that. When there's a big moment...and everyone has emotional moments...you just have to take the jump.

**Kirsty:** Listening as well, I mean you always said this to us. You need to keep in mind that you haven't heard this information before and need to go out there and actually listen. That was quite easy in the character I played because I would sit there and observe and listen to everybody for a whole chunk of time, and then realise how that's changed me. And that's how you go through life, you know? You are affected by other people. That's how you become emotional, that's how you learn more things about the world and that's how you change as a person. If we sit there and actually do continue to listen and let it affect us then it's very easy. Generally it's hardest with monologues, especially if you can't actually see the audience. But then it's just remembering that those people are your friends, you can talk to them and you trust them. And you can communicate and figure out what you're going through at the same time, and explain to them.

**Natalie:** And you care about these people as well. When you watch people go through something emotional on stage it does affect you. You do care.

**Imogen:** It seems very simple but it's beautifully written. If you're brave enough to say the lines without going through something in your head that's particularly sad that happened in your own life then this particular play...the chosen moments... do work on you. It takes you back a bit. It moves forward in a way that takes you emotionally from one scene and it carries you along to the next. When you have a lot of people out there it's tempting to try hard to make it something. It's probably better if you don't try too hard.

**Matt:** It's tempting to push for that sometimes. During the rehearsal process Scott and Geordie would find the pitch to play it at: whether it was aggressive or emotional...where to let it out and where to hold back. There's something about holding it back, trying to keep a lid on it, that feeds it even more. If you watch someone who is desperately trying not to lose their cool, whatever it may be, that feeds an audience response and that feeds the story. So, pitching it right, falling back on that was helpful.

**Scott:** Just to finish off on that I think what Kirsty says is so important. Any young actor might look at their script and...we joke about this...and think 'somebody else, somebody else, somebody else, somebody else, somebody else, me, my lines, me...'when you do that you think 'oh my god, I've just got a couple of lines here to really deliver and put myself across'. When you do that you're doing it the wrong way round, you're just putting pressure on those lines. But the freshness is in how you listen to all those other lines, and that informs how you act on the line. I know it's a little bit neat but I have heard someone say 'it's not acting, it's reacting'.

**Audience Member:** The set is an integral part. In your creative process as actors did you have a say in the set?

**Scott:** This is the Australian set, so that was done through the original production and shipped over here.

**Kirsty:** The idea of the movement and the tables, that was very similar. We got to improvise a few things, movement, some changes of space, but that was the idea you already had. And even with the roses was an idea they already had, but they let you try it first. There was no order in which you had to do it. They said the idea and you had your own instinct.

**Ewan:** The physical things it's nice to get from other people.

**Jonnie:** It almost is a development on the Australian movement in a way because it would be awful to categorically tell actors to do this move that doesn't necessarily fit their bodies...things like the hug section they do while Rosie's walking through the streets of Berlin...that's new material that these guys found and did together. Certainly some of the lifting is a development on what's already happened. Because it's the same production again it's an opportunity for Scott and Geordie to not just do the same show but to work on what worked and to make it better.

**Audience Member:** When you're playing a role like this is it easier to play a character or an extension of your own personality?

**Natalie:** They are all extensions of your personality though. If you get a part hopefully it's because a director sees something in you that is similar to the part. Lots of people can play lots of different parts but if you don't get a job it's because you can't do it, it's not something that's in you.

**Scott:** I think you must draw on elements of your own personality, even if it's 'I wouldn't do that' you're still engaging with your personality and who you are. I had a really interesting process with Imogen because it was kind of one to one and she kept saying 'I am so wrong for this part' which made me really interested in Imogen and what she might bring to this. So it's not just about finding that person who looks like how I imagined that character to be, it's about someone saying to me 'I'm fascinated by this part'. That's really exciting, that portrayed to me a really interesting mind that was passionate and articulated by it, so I wanted to go on that journey. She is the only one who had an accent in this because she wanted to approach her character in a different way.