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PROJECT XXX – A WORK IN PROGRESS



INTRODUCTION



- Create a piece of multi media theatre
- What if Romeo met Juliet but was already addicted to internet porn and wanted to film their first sexual experience and upload it for the world to see?
- Explores the availability and mainstreaming of internet pornography
- The effect this has on the relationships and sexual health of young people

BACKGROUND



- Kim Wiltshire - Writer
- PhD on representation of masculinity in contemporary texts
- Community work with young people around substance use, mental health and sexual health
- Paul Hine – Theatre maker
- Community work and educational work with young people around substance use, mental health and sexual health

PARTNERSHIPS



- Arts Council England – Grants For The Arts
- Lime Art – match funding and support
- Bolton Octagon Theatre – 3 days dramaturgy and workshops
- Edge Hill University – support
- MMU Cheshire DCA – support and workshops
- Cheshire East Council – support and workshops
- North West Playwrights - support

PHASE ONE



- Research through workshops with young people in Manchester, Bolton and Crewe
- Research through academic reading
- Collaborative Development with actors and multi media artist
- Writing the Script
- Dramaturgy at Octagon Theatre with actors and director Elizabeth Newman
- Scratch Performance, as yet to be confirmed

QUESTIONS



The piece of theatre will ask questions like:

- Who uses Internet Porn?
- Why?
- How does the use of Internet Porn affect relationships?
- How does the use of Internet Porn affect sexual health?
- Is Internet Porn becoming increasingly graphic and violent?
- If so, how does this affect young people's sexual expectations in 'real life'?

LITERATURE REVIEW



- The Porn Report - McKee, Albury and Lumby (2008)
- The Invention of Pornography – Lynne Hunt (ed) (1993)
- www.stoppornculture.com
- Getting Off – Robert Jensen (2007)
- Pornland – Gail Dines (2010)
- Pornified – Pamela Paul (2005)

RESEARCH



The danger isn't sex, but a particular conception of sex in patriarchy. And the way sex is done in pornography is becoming more and more cruel and degrading at the same time that pornography is becoming more normalized than ever. That's the paradox.

Robert Jensen, *Getting Off* (2007)p.16

WORKSHOPS



- MMU Cheshire – age 19+ - 3 young people
- Lyceum Youth Theatre – ages 14-18 – 4 young people
- Bolton Octagon Activ8: Willows Youth Club and INDRA group – ages 13-19 – 16 young people
- David Johnson Drama School – ages 15-19 – 22 young people

WORKSHOP FINDINGS



- Young people are accessing internet porn at a very young age, usually around 13
- Young people are more technically knowledgeable than parents or teachers and can get around most filters and barriers on the internet
- Young people very often use only their smart phones to access porn because it is the one thing their parents don't check up on, although some teachers might
- Many young people have close friends who have 'sexted' a current partner – whether using 'dirty talk', sending naked photos or even video. Nearly all of these anecdotes end with the photos or video being sent on, and going viral through a wider network of people
- Many young people find they had issues with porn, either through religion or through their own moral code, and this can be confusing.
- Girls expressed the opinion that porn is wrong and yet at the same time boys expect them to look and behave like porn stars - an unrealistic perfection that they cannot attain. Boys often admitted to watching a lot of porn and yet do not want to relate this to the females in their lives.
- Young people are aware of many types of porn in terms of the names – whether they actually know what is involved is a different question, but the lists of types of porn they came up with were often very, very long.

HOW THE WORK IS PROGRESSING



- We ran auditions with 8 young actors and employed our Romeo and Juliet
- We ran three days of workshops working on a storyline and exploring how scenes would work
- Paul and Kim worked together on the basic storyline

CREATIVE DECISIONS



- There will be a cast of four – one male to play the Romeo part, one female to play the Juliet part, and two other females who will play all other parts, both male and female
- Using film and screens, we will use the idea of the perfect porn star to tell the truth about the industry to the young people
- The story will focus on love and how relationships can be harmed when love is forgotten with regards to sex
- This will be a humorous piece – audiences get messages when they've also had a good laugh – and sex is quite funny
- We aim to leave the audience with more questions than answers

NEXT STAGES



- To contact Kim: kim.wiltshire@edgehill.ac.uk
- Readthrough at Octagon Theatre – 20th January 2011
- Scratch performance – March 2012 – venue tbc
- Facebook group – Project XXX – private group:
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/322280231121429/>
- Blog <http://xxxprojectxxx.wordpress.com>

Project XXX – A Work In Progress
Dr Kim Wiltshire – Edge Hill University

This paper will explore a creative, theatre based project I am currently working on, called Project XXX. The aim of the project is to create a piece of multi-media theatre that explores the effect the availability and mainstreaming of internet porn may have on the relationships of young people. The project tag line is: What if when Romeo met Juliet he was already addicted to internet porn, and wanted to film their first sexual experience and upload it for all the world to see.

For this paper I will detail setting up the project, present some of the findings so far and the timeline we are working to, as well as explore some of the questions around the issue that the work on the project has presented.

Project XXX came about during work on my PhD, which was a hybrid English and Creative Writing thesis exploring masculinity called *The Loser: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Texts*. During this time I earned money by creating and delivering community arts projects exploring health issues through a charity based at Central Manchester Foundation Trust called Lime Art.ⁱ On a project exploring the substance use with young people I worked with theatre maker and writer Paul Hine and in 2008 we began discussing the idea of sexual health and mental well-being often being strongly linked to substance use issues. Paul mentioned that he had always wanted to create a piece of theatre around the growing use of internet pornography by young people and how it might affect young people's sexual health and relationships. As my PhD research had also thrown up issues around representation of women in the media and contemporary male attitudes to women, around Fratire and Laddism, I was also really interested in this issue. We decided to pool resources and work together. Both of us were interested in using theatre as a public forum to open out the issue for discussion through a multi-media performance piece. Once we had the basic idea for the project, the next step was to set up a network of partners and put in a funding application to Arts Council England for Grants for the Arts funding.

Whilst waiting for the funding decision, we forged partnerships with Bolton Octagon Theatre, Cheshire East Council's arts team, MMU's Department of Contemporary Arts, North West Playwrights and confirmed financial support from Lime Art and research time from my institute, Edge Hill University.

There are three specific stages to this first phase, or the research and development phase: stage one saw us working with young people in Bolton, Manchester and Cheshire to explore their use or knowledge of internet porn through creative drama workshops, which have gone on to inform the script. We also spent time reading widely around the subject, from popular texts and media to more academic texts. Stage two was a collaborative process,

where Paul and I worked with two young actors and the multi-media artist over a three day period to work on the storyline using all the research collated, following which the first full draft of the script is currently being written. The final stage will follow three days of dramaturgy at Bolton Octagon followed by more rewrites and research culminating in a scratch performance in March 2012.

This project was set up to be exploratory, both for Paul and myself as writers and theatre makers as well as for the young people engaged. The actual piece of theatre we intend to create, we have no doubt, will raise more questions rather than answer them as we believe the issues around porn need to be discussed in a wider forum, and because of this we decided that the final piece should be aimed at a mixed audience. So, this is not a piece of theatre that will preach to young people who use internet pornography about the “dangers” of doing so, it is a piece of theatre that will ask questions such as: who uses internet porn? Why? How does this use affect relationships, if at all? How does its use affect sexual health? Is internet porn becoming increasingly graphic, and if so how does this affect the young people who use it in their sexual expectations? And we realise that to a certain extent none of these questions can ever be adequately answered, and so far we have relied in the primary research very much on anecdotal evidence and the fact that the same issues and the same stories are coming out over and over again. We are also very aware that so far this is a very heteronormative story, however very little around LGBT pornography came up through the workshops and the creative decision was made that it is impossible to cover every angle of an issue in a creative piece, and that therefore we would have to focus only on the issues that came up through the workshops with young people.

Paul and I came from very different viewpoints on pornography, and this was a decisive reason for working together, as our differences brought together a range of views that could and even would change as research continued, and we realised that some of the issues I saw with pornography were not considered by Paul to be issues at all. This underlined our conviction that there needs to be discussion around pornography and that answering many of these questions definitively is impossible. For example, at the start Paul’s view was that most men use porn in a way that is harmless and simple fantasy, that this use forms part of a young person’s sexual awareness. My view, however, was grounded in second-wave feminist ideology, believing that pornography is a form of sexual violence against women, objectifying them and causing men who use it to have unrealistic sexual expectations in real life relationships of both the women they love or desire and the way sex is ‘supposed’ to go. At this point I would suggest that our views have probably changed very little, however we have both become more aware of the issues surrounding the use of internet porn for young people through the research conducted in the workshops and through the texts available on the subject. But what this difference of opinion gives the project is a dynamic that wouldn’t have come about if one person had a particular point of view they wanted to get across, and as such I believe will make for a better piece of theatre, creatively speaking.

Paul has many years of experience as a facilitator and community artist, and so he worked on workshop ideas and facilitation techniques whilst I read as widely as I could from a more academic point of view. The parameters of the project, as a creative piece, meant that we would not be showing pornography to any of the groups and in essence the project was not about pornography per se but about reaction to and effects of pornography. There would be no need for any close readings of pornographic materials, but it would be necessary to explore the practicalities of using the internet for pornography and to explore what exactly young people would be finding when sat in front of their PCs or surfing on their smart phones.

Although I read widely across the subject, there were some texts that proved more useful in terms of gauging public opinion towards pornography than others. The first text was *The Porn Report*, by McKee, Albury and Lumby. This report into the consumer behaviour around pornography was interesting however its use was limited as it focussed solely on Australian consumers, as was its brief, and didn't explore in much detail the types of pornography being consumed. It also did not give much space to internet pornography, the main site of porn consumption for this project, but explored more the consumption of porn through mail order sites, however whilst there are clearly issues with this report in terms of the researchers' methodology, the overall sense of how widespread the use of pornography was found to be was of interest.

The Invention of Pornography, a series of essays edited by Lynn Hunt, confirmed our assumption that pornography becomes more widely available with each technological breakthrough, such as printing, etching, photography and moving on to video and the internet. Each new piece of technology enables pornography to move on in its development, changing a little each time. So whilst there is the argument that people have always used erotic or pornographic imagery and stories, technology has allowed the producers of porn to distribute their work to ever increasing audiences. This was an important point for the project, as the underlying assumption was that increased availability meant increased consumption of more hardcore porn and at a younger age.

Work such as the stoppornculture website and slide show, as well as Jensen's *Getting Off* suggested that access to free porn via the internet is on the increase, and because the market is getting to saturation point, the producers needed to find new and more extreme ways of gaining customers. Free websites such as youporn and redtube are accessed by young people used to free internet downloads, and this fact was borne out by the young people we worked with in the drama workshops, many of whom knew of these sites and had indeed visited them, often regularly. In fact, many of the young people we spoke with

suggested that they would never buy porn, they would only ever look at free sites. Jensen articulates two points which sum up my stance in relation to this project, and they are that:

The danger isn't sex, but a particular conception of sex in patriarchy. And the way sex is done in pornography is becoming more and more cruel and degrading at the same time that pornography is becoming more normalized than ever. That's the paradox.ⁱⁱ

For me, this was the paradox; the concern is not that young people consume pornography as part of growing up, I would suggest that this would be the norm rather than something unusual. No, the concern is that the porn they are accessing is becoming ever more violent and degrading in its objectification of women and at the same time becoming ever more mainstream and acceptable in terms of its influence on music videos, fashion and sexual behaviour.

Jensen also suggests that the concept of empathy is missing for many men who begin using pornography regularly, and this was an area I also wanted to explore in the project. Jensen includes a section on a porn star's ritual as she gets ready for a shoot the next day, where she explains how she does not eat after 5pm, she gets up early to have time to do two enemas and she does not eat again during the day, because she knows anal sex will be part of the shoot. As I read this explanation it occurred to me that this description sounded much more medical than it did sexy, and I wondered how many young men demanding anal sex from their young partners understood the processes women in porn films put their bodies through to allow anal sex to be performed, whilst at the same time making it look as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The health issues that can be involved around such practices and the fact that so much artifice is involved to make something look so natural seemed to add to this paradox as well as link to the whole issue of media imagery and its affect on young people – a much wider argument than I cannot explore here but one I'd like to acknowledge as part of a continuum of media representations of sex and gender.

The work I read, including Jensen, Dines, Kimmel, Paul and Hunt amongst others, suggested overall that technological advances are a factor in the producers of porn pushing boundaries and that the instinct that Paul Hine and I had, that the ease of availability of hard core images for young people could be having an effect on their sexual experiences and health as well as relationships, was being borne out. However, the next stage was to explore with young people in the North West of England whether this was indeed the case.

There were several ways we could have run the on the ground or primary research for this project. We could have used questionnaires in schools and youth groups, we could have

formed focus groups or we could have run a larger community arts based project over several weeks to explore the issue. However, our end point was to create a piece of theatre that would continue the exploration and we decided that drama workshops would be the best option considering the end piece of work.

Also, we needed to run sessions with young people who had opinions and a voice, and wanted to explore the issues around the subject in a creative environment. We wanted an authentic voice, we didn't want the young people to be influenced by parents or teachers, and so youth theatre groups, where young people are used to exploring social issues through drama in a space they consider their own, seemed a viable option and one that would fit in with the creative ethos of the project.

Our two main partners, at this point, were Bolton Octagon and the arts team at Cheshire East Council and once we had the funding in place we set up the workshops, one with Lyceum Youth Theatre, one with MMU Cheshire's Department of Contemporary Arts and two with Bolton Octagon, a youth club called the Willows and the INDRA group (a group that explore social and conflict issues through drama). For the groups where the majority of participants were under 18 we drafted a letter explaining the project so that workers could send this out with a form to sign to parents to get permission for the young people to take part in the workshops. Almost immediately we lost two groups.

The Lyceum Youth Theatre group had only one permission form come back at first, effectively cancelling the first workshop. The workers sent out another letter after this poor response, and we ended up with four participants for the second workshop. This was a little disheartening initially, however by the end of the session we felt that the smaller group worked better as the young people were very forthcoming and honest.

The Willows group in Bolton simply stopped attending the centre. The workers had spoken about the project to the young people, but it would seem that over the summer holiday the young men who did attend decided to no longer do so, and so we had no access to the young people from that estate without doing a large amount of outreach work, which was beyond the remit of the project. This was very disappointing.

With the Willows group, it seemed as if this was simply bad luck, but the Lyceum group had clearly been either a case of refused parental permission or a lack of interest in the subject by the young people. Those we did work with reported that their parents had asked them if they wanted to attend the workshop, and when they said they did, had signed the form.

This set up a challenge for Paul and I – were we actually going to be able to work with any groups of young people under the age of eighteen? We had child protection training, child protection protocols and we were CRB checked, and yet we could not get over the barrier of

parents refusing permission or young people not wanting to talk about the subject, however safe an environment we created.

The MMU student group also dwindled from a confirmed eight participants to only three who actually came along, but again the issue seemed important to those three, and we had a good amount of work from them, and some very honest opinions. However, the INDRA group fulfilled all expectations, with around sixteen young people attending a two hour long workshop.

Finally we ran an audition workshop for young people 18 and under with a Manchester based drama school, where we had twenty two participants. This group were very confident and used improvisation to explore the issues, however it became clear that for the collaboration process these young people would not be suitable to work with as professional actors and the issue still seemed to have a clear shock value for them, and many of the improvisations ended up with inappropriate behaviour or in embarrassment for some of the young people. It seemed clear that for the collaborative process, our young actors would have to be older and more professional, however some useful insights into how young people view porn came out of this workshop audition.

Findings from all workshops suggested that, as some of the academic research had already indicated:

- Young people are accessing internet porn at a very young age, usually around 13
- Young people are more technically savvy than parents or teachers and can get around most filters and barriers on the internet, and very often used only their smart phones to access porn because it was the one thing their parents won't check up on, although teachers might
- Many young people have close friends who had 'sexted' a current partner – whether using 'dirty talk', sending naked photos or even video. Nearly all of these anecdotes ended with the photos or video being sent on, and going viral through a wide network of people
- Many young people found they had issues with porn, either through religion or through their own moral code, and this became confusing. Girls felt porn was wrong and yet at the same time thought boys expected them to look and behave like porn stars, and that this was an unrealistic perfection that they could not attain. Boys often admitted to watching a lot of porn and yet did not want to relate this to the females in their lives.
- Young people are aware of many types of porn in terms of the names – whether they actually know what is involved is a different question, but the lists of types of porn they came up with were often very, very long.

I should note again at this stage that workshops did mostly focus on heterosexual porn, and although many mentioned girl on girl porn, none of the young people spoke about homosexual porn.

At the same time as the community workshops, we also set up auditions with older young actors (aged 18-25) for the Romeo and Juliet parts, who we would work with through a collaborative weekend. Our intention was to bring two young actors onto the project who would stay with us through the whole process, and who would inform through their own views. We held a workshop audition on 22nd October, a two hour workshop that explored both the issue and how comfortable the actors were with the issue.

Over the weekend of 4th, 5th and 6th of November this year we ran three days of workshops with our Romeo – Gary, and Juliet – Holly (both professional actors who were paid for the work). We ran through scenes that we wanted to see, to get both the issues across and to get the story working, because of course without story there is no interest for the audience. Whilst our intention is to explore the issue, there has to be a reason for the audience to come and see this, and the creative aspects of storyline, believable characters with clear motivations and objectives has to work before the issues can begin to be explored.

Following the collaborative weekend, there were several meetings between Paul and myself as well a lot of email traffic as we sent storyline and first draft ideas back and forward. We are now at the stage where we are working on the first draft of the final script. We are also hoping some of the young people we worked with during the workshop phase will work with us on script editing and getting the tone, dialogue and character right.

The storyline as it is currently emerging follows a Romeo and Juliet type plot, however we have decided to reverse the gender status, having our Romeo closeted by parents, leading to his internet porn hobby or addiction, and Juliet coming from more liberal parents and being a little more worldly wise. Writing a piece of theatre is a constantly evolving process, and there is much that will change between the point of writing this paper and the actual performance, and already much has changed since we created our initial tag line. This is how the creative process works, and should be accepted as such.

There will be a cast of four: There will be only male actor, playing Romeo, and then three female actors, one of whom will play Juliet and the other two will switch between male and female roles. The concept behind this is the highlighting of the agency of female bodies in pornography, as well as the fact that with a female acting as a male character, as writers, we can get away with a little more than if we had a male actor. During the collaborative process we found that female actors were willing to push the boundaries in terms of what they chose to almost parody in their portrayals of young men, which would be too broad humour

wise for the final script, but which showed us that the gender swap between females playing men works, theatrically, a lot better than men playing women.

A clear creative idea that came from this process was the idea of using screens to show a 'dream' porn star called Jenna who appears to both the Romeo and Juliet characters (we are, by the way, changing the character names). We will also include social networking sites through the screens to show public and private personas of the young people, and to explore what is acceptable to say, and where is it acceptable to say it.

The focus or main theme is young love, and how this can survive in a world where Jensen's paradox is a reality, however we are intending this to be a humorous piece, one which gets the audience on side through laughter rather than through preaching. And also, sex can be quite funny, as we found out during the collaborative weekend.

Finally, as mentioned before, the piece should leave the audience with more questions than answers.

As I mentioned at the start, this is an ongoing project. We have not yet fully written the piece, and the dramaturgy sessions are due to take place at Bolton Octagon theatre on January 18th, 19th and 20th 2012. Following a read through with an invited audience, we will ask for feedback and then rewrite to second draft before trying to find partners to take the piece to full production. But I wanted to bring the project to this conference to share the experience Paul and I have had as artists and researchers as well as the experiences we shared through the workshops with young people. And if you would like to keep in touch with the project, you can go to the project blog which is at www.xxxprojectxxx.wordpress.com

ⁱ For more on Lime Art go to www.limeart.org or to read about one of the projects go to UNESCO's Youth Arts e-journal at <http://www.abp.unimelb.edu.au/unesco/ejournal/vol-two-issue-two.html>

ⁱⁱ Robert Jensen *Getting Off* (2007), p. 16.