

What never stops?

The following loosely-edited conversation between Joe Kelleher, Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin took place on the stage of the Chelsea Theatre on 10th October 2013, shortly after the first London performance of *Control Signal*.

JOE. There are various moments early in the show when you are both stood in those two doorways at the back of the stage. And you're really still. I'm reminded of those clocks you see in old European squares, which have these wooden figures that come out according to a certain schedule, and they perform an action. They don't know when the action is going to happen because they are just made of wood, so they are simply going to do this thing, on the hour or whenever it might be. But of course you are not made of wood. In fact you are actual people. And so there is something else in these early moments of the show, a dynamic, which has to do with the fact that you've rehearsed what you are doing. It's obvious you have rehearsed it. In fact you are telling us that you have rehearsed it. You're effectively saying to us: This has been tried out before, and if we do what we are doing in this way there should be a particular effect. But then again... not necessarily. Because we haven't tried this out here, for real. It may be something else will happen, something wonderful which will be quite other than the expected effect. The business has been rehearsed and prepared, yes, but at the same time 'What if...?'

KAREN. I like that a lot. One of the things we started with, and I think some of what you're saying comes from this, is the idea of invisible influences. So you may think that you are operating with this or that understanding in mind, or that you are being affected in a particular way, but you have to be open to the fact that it's

not in black and white and you could get it wrong. You can get it very wrong. In fact you can be very certain for a long time and then you realise you're in the wrong part of the polar icecap, or wherever. And all of a sudden it's very serious. And I think part of that getting lost and the question of did you mean to get lost or not get lost, the work is connecting into that too.

SOPHIE. There is repetition but there are also these breaks in it all the time. It's something that maybe only became clear in the later part of the process, as things were supposed to be finished. But there's a vibration. There are certain moments that will never be finished because for whatever reason these moments were kept shaky, kept vibrating. No matter what, there will always be this uncertainty, and in the end we just allow it to be.

JOE. Hence the enigma of the title of the work. Control Signal. The beam that controls us, or the signal that is used to control how things happen. Although of course things don't necessarily allow themselves to be controlled. Something I enjoyed particularly about the structure of the show is that it 'goes somewhere'. There is the sense that at the end we are somewhere else than when we started out. But also there is the possibility that it can go somewhere else at any particular moment. There is, for example, an effect of silence that comes at certain moments. Or the darkness falls, actually and metaphorically. Or we might be enjoying a particular sequence, but then the work goes in another direction. One of the places it goes to is history, and it goes to a sympathy with people from history. Something happened: the Rosenbergs were executed in America in the early twentieth century, convicted of spying for the Soviet Union. At the beginning I don't have that as something to deal with but it has leaked through what you are

doing on stage and so now I'm reading that chair as the electric chair, and I am reading the shudders you make in the same way, not exclusively as 'this is what that means' but it becomes part of how I see it. So for me there's a really powerful accumulation of effects which has to do with something behind the performance. A story even. There is a story, or there is the sense of a story that might have been told, there's a sympathy with regard to things that happened in the world and which are being re-ghosted here. And for me that becomes a movement of the show, and part of its power.

KAREN. Sophie and I wandered in the darkness together and tried to figure out what would happen. And we made a set of plans, we set out an avenue of investigation. But instead of saying 'We're going there' we said 'Let's walk like this and see where we end up'. And so I think the Rosenbergs were a surprise to us, but they were an obvious surprise. When we found them we went 'Oh right, everything we are doing leads to this'. And then there was Edward Snowden and other things that said 'Pick me' in a very serious way. Electricity was there the whole time, and if you start looking into electricity...

SOPHIE. Topsy had been there from the beginning. One of the very first things we ever did was the Topsy leg, the quivering leg. And thinking back now, Topsy led to Ethel Rosenberg, led to the idea of electrocution, or electricity being used as a means to go through a body and to control the body.

KAREN. Topsy was an elephant who was killed at the suggestion of Thomas Edison. She was killed with electricity because he wanted to discredit alternating current, which Nikola Tesla and Westinghouse, the American company, had the patent on, and Edison had the patent on direct current. So he wanted everyone to think

alternating current is really dangerous. So here is an elephant and we want to put this elephant to death. Let's do it in public and do it with electricity because elephants are huge and invincible and if it can kill an elephant it's 'bad' and everyone will be afraid of it. There's a Youtube clip you can still see, since Thomas Edison was also doing early films, he filmed it, so you can see an electrocution of an elephant, which is Topsy. And the first thing I said to myself is, well, you certainly can't equate Ethel and the elephant. And then of course if you can't do it... you...

JOE. ... you do it.

KAREN. Which is not to say they are equated of course. But they are used together, in a way. And they're both female.

JOE. That uncertainty as to whether you can do this - and then there they are, doing it - one way of thinking about that is around how we the audience read the two of you: what kind of figures or creatures you are. You're both wearing a sort of housecoat uniform on stage. At a certain point you are tent-show entertainers, as in ladies and gentlemen, there is an elephant, roll up roll up. As in it's educational, sure, but give us your money. And then at another point you are operators of the machine, whatever the hell the machine is. Or experimenters. And those roles, when they are happening, they are quite defined, but they can also easily slip into something else. It is not a mish-mash, there is a rhetoric to each of those particular roles. But then that starts producing, for me, an interesting uncertainty as what it is these two performers might or might not be showing us, or demonstrating, or what sort of knowledge is at stake here.

SOPHIE. This idea of the changes between the different modes that you're talking about is something we worked with a lot. Different modes of how we are communicating, how we are telling something, how we are performing. There was sometimes a very fluid transition into something that then very slowly merges into something else. At other times it is important that those changes are very, very sudden, because then it jumps into a different time and a different mode and a different feeling. I think those transition modes are also there when there is an allowance for small mistakes, or when we are showing that we are now ready to go into this, or we are showing that we have now left that behind and that we can move into the next thing.

JOE. One of the reasons those moments register for me is something to do with rhythm. It's partly to do with what the two of you are doing on stage. Certain effects of rhythm are established, which you can then afford to break, although often quite delicately. This has to do with how an audience might relate to the piece physically and mentally. The sound, the music, which Boris Hauf has designed, is fantastic. It makes me think of weather systems for instance, but then there is the sound of a hand clapping, or of a chair being scraped. And then there are the silences around that, which again start producing these rhythmic blocks, where those little swerves and diversions can be registered as events.

KAREN. One of things we did was we decided to make little field trips for ourselves. In this situation, the thing about composing a performance directive is that it controls the work. So if you have one person who makes all of those instigations or whatever, that person pulls the strings. And that's fine, if you like that. But in our collaboration it was important that we each had control over how

to pull the strings. So we each had different ways of coming up with ‘We’ll do this a little bit and we’ll do that a little bit and see what happens.’ I think what I can say from my point of view, from the kinds of things that I like to do, is I like to put us in action. It might mean going on a little field trip to somewhere and having to do something or observe something and then figure out how to pull something performative out of that, to do for each other or with each other. Or if it’s in the studio, where you are not going out into the world, it might mean coming up with a task that has to be performed and then performing it and seeing what happens. Now that task might be something very simple like finding a performative answer to the question ‘What never stops?’ So if we both have to answer ‘What never stops?’ we go off into separate corners and we think about it for a little bit and then we direct each other, or we try to do a thing that occurred to us in answer to the question ‘What never stops?’ But it doesn’t answer the question in words necessarily. It is something that you perform.

SOPHIE. It was important that we didn’t always perform our own directives. You swap. And having someone else’s directive that has been shaped around an idea that you have shared before, makes you do something that you would never come up with yourself. And then to look at each other and to have that other person’s eyes while you do something that is happening in that moment, suddenly there is something there. So I think the swapping and the observing each other and then working from that was very important.

A MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE. Can you actually pass words through the air between you?

SOPHIE. [*deadpan*] In the end we managed to do it.

KAREN. [*not so deadpan*] We did it! You saw us do it!

AUDIENCE MEMBER. But seriously.

KAREN. I think so, after a while. We believe.

JOE. You say that. You say 'You saw us do it'. But one of the things I was noticing, for example in the chair duet sequence, where you make the chair rise in the air between you, is that you don't watch what you are doing. You get us to watch it. So the chair rises up, but you've both got your backs to it. You are focused on your task: If we do this it will make this other thing happen for them, the audience. But you don't see yourselves do it, we do.

KAREN. It's true. Sophie and I miss most of the show. Sometimes I have no idea what she is doing.

ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE. One of the things that never stops is a performative relationship to capital punishment, for example. And I don't know enough about the Rosenbergs but I know a bit about Topsy and the sense that it was a tussle between these two people who had different models of electricity and so on. But also that Topsy had been sentenced to death for the crime of trampling her keeper -

KAREN. - who was awful to her -

AUDIENCE MEMBER. Indeed. But anyway there was a functionality to it as there was with the Rosenbergs. Is that a vibration that relates to the thing that Joe just pointed out, some kind of associative connection, that you show us these things

that happen, like the chair rising, in a way that associates to what you are doing?

Another performative showing?

KAREN. Yes, it's like 'If this and this and this... then what do you think? What do you make of that?' I think it's really easy to look back, if you were to do so, at the Rosenbergs and to say 'See how wrong it is'. But I think things that are happening right now, for a lot of people, it's hard for them to say how they feel about a thing that's happening in world politics because you think 'Well, I don't know everything'. Or people say 'I'm not sure about...' Of course there are some people who are always sure about everything. But there's quite a few people, I think, who aren't so sure, and that's resonating with us too, I hope. It's that tension between looking at something and agreeing that it is what you think it is. Or looking out of the corner of your eye at it and thinking 'But I don't have to look at it and I don't have to deal with it'. You know what I mean? It feels like there is something about that in the piece to me.

—*This conversation was lead and "loosely edited" by [Joe Kelleher](#).*