



Object Collection: Travis Just (left) and Kara Feely

New York's Object Collection find operatic truths in Fugazi's between-song banter

Margin

Early on in Object Collection's production of *It's All True* at Bergen's Borealis festival, the company's newest member Catrin Lloyd-Ballard stands stage centre amid much clutter and chaos as she intones over and over: "Volume is not necessary." The mostly Norwegian audience attending its premiere performance might like to question her declaration. If volume really wasn't necessary, then nobody had told the pit band's four electric guitarists and two drummers.

Commissioned by the festival and the Bergen National Opera, Object Collection's composer Travis Just and librettist/director Kara Feely constructed *It's All True* from recordings of close to 900 shows by the US punk band Fugazi. Though they'd restricted themselves to Fugazi's interstitial chatter – during tuning, between-song banter and so on – they came up with a 75 minute onslaught of discordant noise and text addressing political protest, terrorism,

AIDS, police, stage lights, boredom, homelessness, the pope, rock gigs and summer camp. At its Bergen premiere, the four actors performing it appear to be afflicted with the kind of repetitive motion disorder that affects captive bears in a zoo. An Object Collection opera-in-overdrive is a lot to take in, and that's the way Feely and Just like it.

"It's taken for granted that an audience is going to be very diverse in where they're coming from," says Feely, when I meet her at the apartment she, Just and their young son share in the Greenpoint neighbourhood of Brooklyn. "It's respectful to create a piece that allows a lot of people a lot of paths to go through. When you have five paths instead of one, as a viewer you have to come up with a new way to watch. There's too much going on for you to be able to watch everything."

Confusion is "a fair response" to their work, concedes Just. "There's different goals with each

piece," he adds. "In general, we're just trying to activate the audience and have them be engaged."

Feely and Just have been crafting sensory assault operas under the name Object Collection since 2004. Learning from composer Robert Ashley and playwright Richard Foreman, their works combine the energy of growing up in rock music, the scattered attention of the TV generation, and a strong and mature political sensibility. Object Collection characters don't play out scenes from fictitious lives; they're figures trapped in an isolation tank discussing, with no lack of urgency, the lives from which they've been lifted. As in Ashley's text-heavy operas, there's a different kind of tension at play in Object Collection performances, with characters often addressing the audience directly rather than acting out a story.

It's All True may have been more overtly political, but dystopian unease runs through many of their productions. Last year's *Cheap & Easy* was based in

Walkers

large part on interviews with Fulya Peker, a frequent Object Collection actor who is also an activist in her native Turkey, with additional texts from Trotsky and socialist journalist John Reed. What makes *It's All True* different is, this time around they call that dystopia by name. "I don't identify as an American and I certainly don't identify with the American government," spits Just. "It's just a bunch of people fucking up the place where I live."

Their commitment to reflecting political concerns extends beyond the antics of elected officials: in 2008, they staged Cornelius Cardew's *Schooltime Compositions* as a "resistance to the distraction of the elections". They're planning another such event for this year's US election night. They're also aiming to work on a piece that satisfies their common love for science fiction, citing a German book of essays about space travel published in the early 20th century and the futuristic writings of Sun Ra as possible source materials.

It's still early days but picking a name is usually their starting point, says Just, and they already have a working title, *You Are Under Our Space Control*, a line lifted from the 1956 B movie *Fire Maidens From Outer Space*. Booking a theatre, however, is the strongest determining factor when they timeline a new project. And even then it would take several months of "unstructured fucking about" followed by at least as many again spent writing and rehearsing it.

Indeed, rehearsals with Object Collection's dedicated and talented crew are key to developing the final piece. "The style that we've created has been built on their backs," admits Feely. "I make them unlearn their habits and learn new things. With Catrin, at first I was giving her a lot of notes and then realised I need to let her find her way in."

"For a new person," interjects Just, "it's important that they want to do this kind of work. They can come from anywhere – we've had people who don't have a performance background."

"I learned to write for voice by writing for them," he adds. "They're really committed, they really work. As a composer, that's one of the things I love. You get these guys that really work and it gives a depth to the performance."

Performance is key to the Object Collection project. Indeed, seeing them live is the only way to experience their work. It would be hard to capture its impact on a DVD, they say, but they're not opposed to the idea. "I'd love to have something to sell," sighs Just. "I just don't know shit about distribution."

"I never listen to albums – I find them pretty boring," he concludes, possibly hinting at the origins of *It's All True*. "I'd rather listen to The Fall live than one of their albums. 'Oh, the left channel of the amp is a disaster. That's the way it goes.' I like that." □ objectcollection.us
Kurt Gottschalk



Daniel Allen Nelson in Object Collection's *It's All True* at Borealis, 2016