

# THE POWER OF AGENCY

By Molly Freeman, Co-Artistic Director of  
Smoking Apples Theatre

# SMOKING APPLES

We started working on our new show *Three* back in 2023 and before you ask, no, it's not unusual for us to take so long to create new work. We often have a lengthy gap between the initial research and development stage, and the phase where we finish and premiere the show. This is partly down to practical things like securing funding and finding key partners, but mostly it's down to letting the creative ideas mature and settle. It's hard to articulate exactly but something happens when we plant the seed and then step away from it and move our attention elsewhere. In philosophy, the law of attraction states that 'the energy of your thoughts manifest your experiences' (Scott, 2024) and I think there is some truth in that. Whilst we step away and creatively turn our attention to other things, our minds are constantly seeking the missing pieces needed to deepen and complete the show that might be dormant or in progress.

Which brings me to the question of agency. In a nutshell, *Three* is about agency. Following the intertwining stories of three neighbours, the show explores the unique relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. A core idea explored is agency and how this, or our perception of this, ebbs and flows through the different cycles of life. Writing and co-directing this show has made me think a lot about my own sense of agency, not just in my life as a whole but also in my creative work. In running my own theatre company, I am really privileged to be able to have agency in that initial seed but it's interesting to think about how much control there is after this stage. At what point does the creative journey start to become influenced or shaped by the in-roads already made mixed with new observations? It seems as though the events and experiences of my life between 2023 and 2025 begin to interweave or have greater resonance with the themes of *Three*, things that are relevant or relative to it have a sharper focus, despite not consciously searching for these connections.

One thing we at Smoking Apples are known for, is our approach to working with complex subject matter, specifically through the medium of puppetry and visual theatre. *Three* is our latest offering, exploring complex familial relationships in different sections of society. Except this time, we are working additionally with mask, something that has been a wild and joyous ride. Both mask and puppetry are used in the show to denote different parts of the life cycle. With puppetry, there is a very literal form of agency, in that they have none. They are entirely at the mercy of the puppeteer, with physical manipulation required.

The mask however, is completely different. Settled onto and blended into the performer, they also do not exist without the physical body but there is something subtly commanding about the mask. It demands your attention, it pulls on your heartstrings, it forces you to lean in. John Wright says, 'On the outside we want to watch you in a mask. In fact we can't take our eyes off you. We're astonished by the transformation' (Nick Hern Books, 2017). Puppetry, in contrast to this, isn't so immediate. There is a negotiation that takes place between the audience where they have to agree to suspend their disbelief, see the puppeteers, and choose to accept them as part of the illusion. Balancing these two forms and exploring different types of agency throughout the narrative has been hugely exciting (and challenging). We are not mask experts by any means but it has been creatively inspiring working with a new medium and being supported by the brilliant Rachael Savage, Artistic Director of the UK's leading mask company, Vamos Theatre.







Image: Smoking Apples

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*Three*, as with all of our shows, is about what it means to be human and in this case, what it means to have different kinds of familial bonds, responsibilities, obligations even. Ida, Ralph, and Jaanvi, who live in the same block of flats, are older adults who have the richness of a full life behind them, including the many ups and downs that come with that. Ida's ferocious independence wanes as her memory starts to fade. Ralph is content in his solitude and Jaanvi moves from India to the UK, to support her family. So, why would we want to explore something as complicated as this and how on earth (and why!) do we do it with a non-verbal show featuring puppets and masks with fixed expressions?!

Well, the simple answer is that sometimes, the most complex subjects, thoughts, and ideas are often shared or at least can be shared by exploring the raw, human emotion behind these things. This is what binds us all and whilst the audiences watching our shows may not be experts in motor neurone disease, trawler fishing, nuclear fission or the historical *Kindertransport* (previous work), they can access them through something they can relate to – human action, emotion, and feeling.

Not all of our work is non-verbal but *Three* is and it's mostly because it just doesn't need words for the audience to connect to the emotional journeys of the characters. People have asked whether *Three* is autobiographical and my answer to that is no, not intentionally. However, with the subconscious loss of agency and a kind of osmosis taking place between the show and the encounters that happen whilst the work is dormant, it's hard to say it's also not based on any real-life experiences. The one thing I do hope is that there is a part of *Three* that everyone can connect to. This is also partly why we chose to tell three intertwined stories and not one, as we wanted to reflect the many facets of contemporary British life and family dynamics.

Fundamentally, in any creative process, to me it seems that there are fluctuating moments of agency and this is essential in how the work develops and unfolds. It might be a scary concept that you don't have complete creative control over something that you're making but I also firmly believe that as theatre-makers we have a responsibility to be shaped by the things around us and make work that connects to our audiences.

#### References

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**Award-winning Smoking Apples Theatre premiere new show *Three*, exploring grandparents, tea and British Culture**

**At the heart of every family lies a story, and at the heart of every house is its kitchen. *Three* invites you into the lives of neighbours, Ida, Jaanvi and Ralph, to share their experiences, uncover their pasts, and learn how to make the best cup of tea.**

Ida cherishes her time with her granddaughter Sophie, but as her memories fade, she feels her independence slipping away. Jaanvi shares her heritage with Anika, whose love forces her to face a life-changing decision. Ralph, content in his solitude, meets an unexpected visitor who challenges his loneliness.

From multi-award-winning puppetry company Smoking Apples, *Three* explores the unique relationships between Grandparents and Grandchildren. Using captivating masks, in combination with striking puppetry and mesmerising shadow play, *Three* captures the quiet moments that define us.

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