BIG LIL

WHAT IS IT?

Hull has struggled to tell/celebrate the story of Big Lil Billocca, the Headscarf Revolutionaries, and the events that led to improved safety on trawlers in the wake of the triple trawler disaster when 56 men died in three weeks on trawlers working out of Hull. ( Fishing was brutal and dangerous industry - 6000 men lost in 150 years of trawling - 900 ships didn't come home - a mortality rate 17 times higher than coal mining.)

In 1968 Big Lil, a fish filleter from Hessle Road, organised petitions and protested by occupying trawlers in the docks and confronting trawler owners with a list of demands to make trawlers safer in the wake of a huge loss of life. She managed to get a change in the law in little over three weeks. She went to London and the Houses of Parliament to represent the trawler men and their families. She appeared on the Eamon Andrews Show. However, within a month she had lost her job, received hate mail and been shunned by her community. She eventually ended her days working as a coat check in a Hull nightclub. She was, and still is, blamed for the rapid decline of the fishing industry. By 1971 there were only a handful of trawlers left. The trawler owners claimed that the new safety legislation meant it was too expensive to work out of Hull.

This is a story of direct action and a very human response to tragedy. It’s a story of hurt male pride and female empowerment. It’s a story of one woman's determination, courage and sacrifice.

There are lots of different versions of the key events - the two Revolutionaries still alive ( Mary and Yvonne ) disagree about Lil’s involvement. It still feels like there’s a bit of a failure to understand that the trawler owners were responsible, and that the fishing industry up to its demise was feudal in the way it was run. Men were put at risk in boats with no radios and poor equipment, they weren't paid if they were injured at sea, and had to hire their own oil skins. Their wages were docked if they damaged the nets.

The Lament of Big Lil Bilocca, or the Ballad of Big Lil, is a summoning up of this ordinary but remarkable woman in an environment and an atmosphere which allows her to tell some of her story in her own words.

WHATS THE EXPERIENCE/STORYBOARD ?

The project will be an immersive experience for an audience of 200 at The Guildhall in the centre of Hull. It will take the audience on a journey from the steps outside, into a number of different spaces with The Unthanks contributing to a live soundtrack to support a series of moments - visual images, choreography, soundscape, fragmented scenes and monologues - that summon up Lil - her world, her fight and her being ostracised. It will culminate in her lament, sung by the Unthanks.

Some of the key moments/ atmospheres the performance will summon up and recreate are:

• the pram race / protest to the dockside of women and children

• A kitchen on Hessle road

• the annual trawler owners Silver Cod dinner dance

• the Three Day Millionaires

• the meeting at the Victoria Hall where Lil inspired a collective of women to take action

• the Children's band of the Hull Seaman's Orphanage

We think it will move an audience of 200 from the steps of the Guildhall through three spaces - the ball room, the dining room and the council chamber - using the corridors, formal staircase and backstairs. Lil will be our guide.

• The ballroom will be the environment in which we evoke the Three-day Millionaires, sea cowboys full on drinking, romancing and fighting.

• The council chamber will be an installation which holds something intimate and domestic. A 1968 kitchen, a family without a father waiting and a soundscape of ship to shore radio messages.

• The Dining Room will be an evocation of the trawler owner’s Silver Cod Dinner dance which is interrupted by Lil and the women and we see their coming together to make sense of the inaction around the trawler conditions. This will be through bits of scenes and monologues where we get to know each of them a bit, the moment their protest takes shape, and the moment Lil becomes the voice for their demands. The trawler men make an entrance and the space is disturbed and Lil is isolated. She then tells the rest of the story in her own words and it becomes increasingly hard for her to speak. Her story then takes the form of a lament which details her isolation and being ostracised, and the decline of her position within the community.

• Lil will then lead the audience back out on to the street

The Unthanks will play 6/7 songs, both arrangements of traditional songs and from 1968 ( Lonesome Cowboy and Lucky Luke ), culminating in Lil's lament- an original song, lyrics by Max.

HOW WILL WE MAKE IT ?

Collaboration will be at the heart of this project. Maxine is in the process of writing a script. It’s not a play but a text that brings to life the journey, and gives voice to Lil and the other women of the Hessle Road. Eight professional actresses will represent Lil and the other three Headscarf Revolutionaries, Clarice the landlady of Rayners Bar, and other Hull women. A community ensemble of 20 men aged between 18 and 40 will create a chorus of trawler men (and seven children.)

The creative team will be include:

• Director

• Choreographer/co-creator

• Composer and arranger

• The Unthanks

• Designer

• Sound designer

• Lighting designer

• Associate director/ movement director/ community ensemble

* Recruit and work over a three-month period with non-professionals
* Two weeks in Manchester with the 8 professional actors
* Two weeks in Hull ( with Unthanks two days a week )
* A production week at the Guildhall

We’re looking to make a show that is around one hour 20/30 minutes long, which will play twice a night.