

imitating the dog: a story of devising, adaptation and collaboration

Andrew Quick, 2026

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introduction

This essay traces the development of imitating the dog's making process from the company's origins in 1998 through to *War of the Worlds* in 2026. It is a first-hand account of how ITD's practice has evolved – from early devised work to the development of live cinema techniques through to larger-scale literary adaptation. Readers should bear in mind that practice continues to develop: new technology, shifting conditions in the touring industry, and the company's own changing artistic preoccupations all mean that how ITD makes work today will not be exactly how it makes it tomorrow. This essay describes a journey rather than a fixed destination.

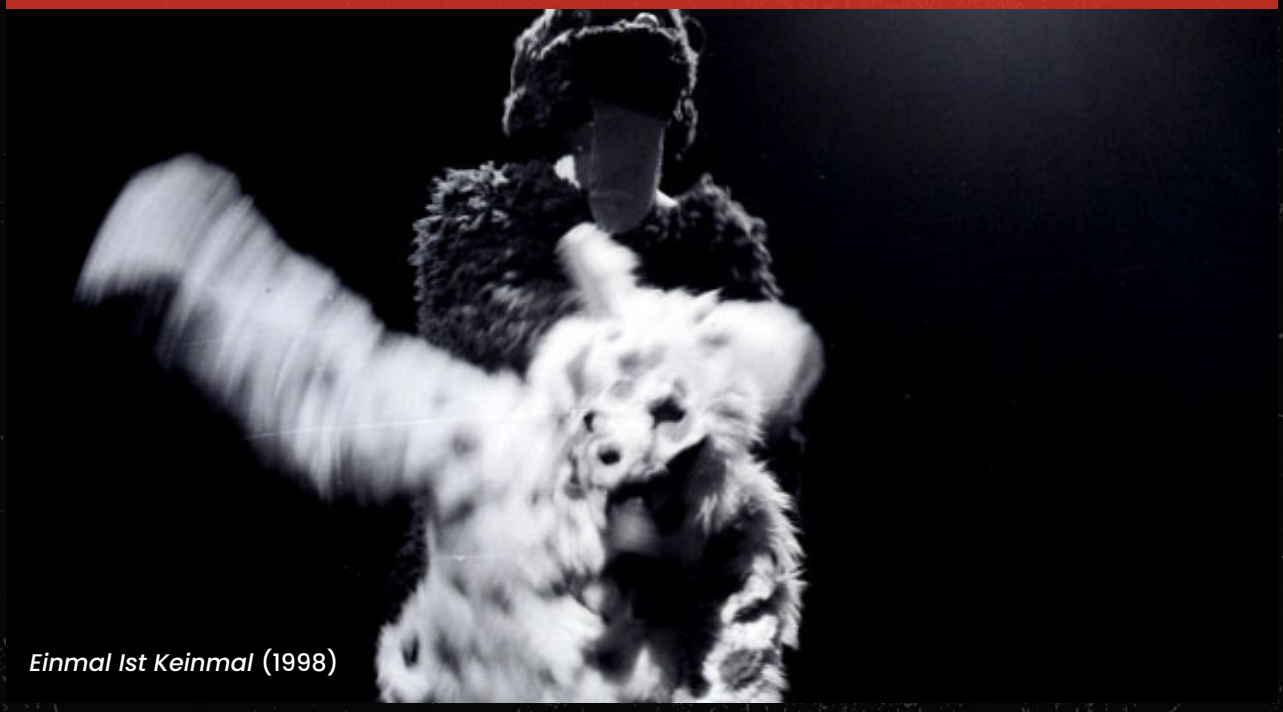


War of the Worlds (2026)

early works & devising

imitating the dog (ITD) began life as a company making original work. Emerging from the Theatre Studies degree programme at Lancaster University in 1997, the company largely devised its work. The first three shows, *Einmal Ist Keinmal* (1998), *Ark* (1999) and *Guilty Pleasures* (2000) drew very specifically from the Lancaster degree experience with their emphasis on creating a visual and physical theatre that had a narrative core but drew from theatre and cinematic texts. Rehearsals included research, improvisation, collage, editing and distilling material and working through dramaturgical and choreographic processes. (Dramaturgy refers to the structural logic of how a piece is put together: the decisions about form, sequence and meaning that shape a performance.) At the centre was a consideration of world-building and the creation of the rules that would hold the piece together.

› See also: Three Worlds: Understanding Theatrical Form in ITD's Work (Section 2)



Einmal Ist Keinmal (1998)



Ark (1999)



Guilty Pleasures (2000)

Technology appeared in embryonic form in these early performances. It existed as a single black-and-white television screen in *Einmal Ist Keinmal*, was entirely absent in *Ark*, and then became the focus of *Guilty Pleasures* through the use of live cameras, television monitors and microphones, marking a first for ITD.

The devising process was elaborate and painstaking, relying on a relatively long making period that allowed for editing and development. These early performance pieces were built around the support provided by two organisations: The Studio Theatre at Leeds Metropolitan University under the leadership of Annie Lloyd, and The Nuffield Theatre, Lancaster, under the direction of Adrian Harris and, later, Matt Fenton. Without the support of these theatres, ITD would not have survived. This is an important reminder of how vital such organisations are to theatre companies in their infancy.

As with many companies, having had a relatively successful first show, the following pieces experienced difficulty, not least because, despite significant support, all the participants had day jobs and rehearsals took place in the gaps of everyday life. After the tour of *Guilty Pleasures*, ITD began its collaboration with Pete Brooks, whom the company had studied on the Lancaster degree course. Pete had been the director of Impact Theatre Cooperative – one of the most important British experimental theatre companies of the 1980s, known for their physically precise, politically engaged ensemble work – and later with Insomniac Productions in the 1990s Several of his touring works had been performed at The Nuffield Theatre. Pete was also developing a piece called *Hotel Methuselah (2006)*; indeed, he had created a scratch version with Lancaster undergraduate students in the late 1990s.

Hotel Methuselah marked a turning point in the company's development. Pete was a new collaborator, and there was a pre-existing version, albeit in skeletal form, to work from. *Hotel Methuselah* was designed as a film and staged as a performance – a formula we would return to again and again in future work. The set was built around a black CinemaScope-style aperture with a rear-projection screen behind it (see image below). A pre-made film played on the rear screen while the actors, performing in the narrow gap between the two screens, recreated its action live in real time, matching the filmed performance as closely as possible. The aperture meant the audience saw the actors' bodies only through this narrow live frame.

Hotel Methuselah drew on European cinematic conventions and told the story of a night porter in a hotel in an unnamed war-torn city. The story centred on a woman who visits the hotel and dies by suicide; as the narrative unfolds, it is discovered that the woman is the man's wife, and that he is always unable to stop her death across three repeated sections. In short, the hotel is a kind of purgatory – the man, most likely dead, being forced to face the consequences of his actions in life and the impact of his death on his loved one.



Hotel Methuselah (2006)

Hotel Methuselah playfully positions the cinematic within a highly theatrical framework, placing cinematic conventions under the scrutiny of theatricality. In turn, theatricality itself is subjected to the scrutiny of the cinematic. The story of loss and war that unfolds in *Hotel Methuselah* was informed by the conflicts that accompanied the breakup of the Soviet Union and the wars in the former Eastern European countries during the 1990s. The production subsequently toured many of these regions with the support of the British Council, which organised performances in Bulgaria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Beirut and Ukraine. It also toured Brazil, France, Germany and Poland over the following decade.

Unlike previous shows, *Hotel Methuselah* was not a devised show in the strictest sense of the term. We worked to a pre-written script, which was storyboarded and filmed. However, the process was very collaborative. Laura Hopkins designed the set and costume; Neil Boynton was the composer and sound designer; Simon Wainwright and Seth Honor edited the video. Actors and the creative team contributed to the creative process. We worked to a tight rehearsal schedule and it is no accident that this piece was the first time we received an Arts Council England Project Grant – people were being properly paid and deadlines were adhered to.



Kellerman (2009)

Although the rehearsal process was highly collaborative, we worked from a pre-existing script that had been written primarily by Andrew and Pete. Rehearsals did, however, bring many changes and additions, with interventions from the performers shaping both the text and the production. Improvisation also informed a number of specific performance choices. One example was Anna Wilson's contribution to the creation of the cockney nurses' distinctive voice. During an improvisation around the nurse characters, she developed a fragmented dialect based on a variation of Cockney slang. This language was then written into the script and included in the final performance.

The narrative arc of *Kellerman* (2009) centred on Harry *Kellerman*, a man in the midst of a psychological breakdown. While in hospital, he meets a woman named Amy, who convinces him that they can travel through time. This classic graphic novel premise gave us the opportunity to explore psychological disintegration against a backdrop that ranged from the Elizabethan court to German-occupied France during the Second World War. Our sources were graphic novels, time-travel films, and Lars von Trier's French-Danish noir The Element of Crime (1984), which provided the framework of a series of hypnotherapy sessions. Together, this eclectic mix created the paranoid and distorted world of Harry *Kellerman*.

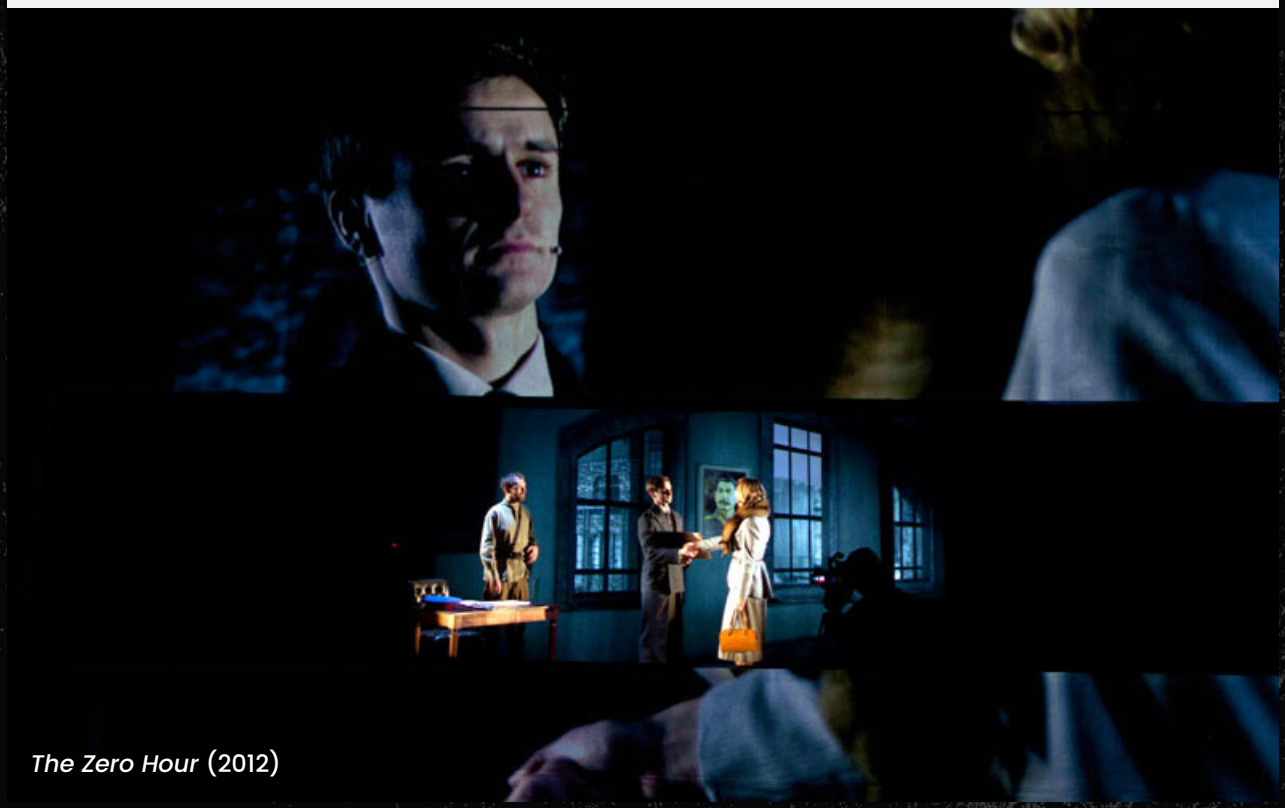


Kellerman (2009)

One of our aims in *Kellerman* was to escape the claustrophobic world of *Hotel Methuselah* and to widen the theatrical landscape of our work. Although time travel existed only in the mind of our protagonist, it gave us the opportunity to explore a wide range of locations and historical periods.

In many ways, in terms of scale and ambition, we had already begun to imagine and create theatre for larger stages. *Kellerman* and, later, *The Zero Hour* (2012) were both designed for mid-scale theatres, although we did not yet have the experience of touring work to venues of this size. *The Zero Hour* marked another important milestone for the company, as it was the first time we combined live camera streaming with projection and live camera editing.

Our access to the digital programming system Isadora was vital in enabling this development, alongside the technical resources available through Lancaster University, including high-end projectors, cameras and related equipment. With this piece, we moved beyond the need for performers to lip-sync to pre-recorded video tracks. Instead, *The Zero Hour* brought together all the digital elements of the production: musical score and sound effects, digital projection, live filming and real-time editing of the filmed image. Technology had become cheaper and access to its possibilities much easier and we began to work with it.



The Zero Hour (2012)

move to adaptation

Working on a larger scale, with more and often expensive technology drew us, perhaps unwittingly, to larger venues for a number of reasons. As mentioned above, the sheer scale of the work meant we began to leave the studio and smaller black box theatres behind. The cost of making the work was greater, and this meant we had to try and earn more income from larger audiences. Only the mid-scale could offer such a possibility. The touring culture in the United Kingdom was shifting too. The small-scale touring circuit was shrinking, and venues such as The Green Room in Manchester and The Studio Theatre in Leeds no longer existed.

Adapting well-known literary texts offered a response to what we saw as these challenges, while also speaking to our ambitions as a group of creators. It was no coincidence that, at this point, we embarked on our first adaptation of a literary work: Hemingway's 1929 novel *A Farewell to Arms*.

It is fair to say that in 2014, when we began developing the production, we believed this adaptation would be a one-off, after which we would return to making theatre based solely on our own writing.

What was interesting about this adaptation, and indeed all those that followed, was that we did not abandon our working process; we merely developed it. From the outset, we saw the original, or source, text as a starting point for our own telling of the story. This approach soon expanded into what we called "finding the hidden stories within the original."



A Farewell to Arms (2014).

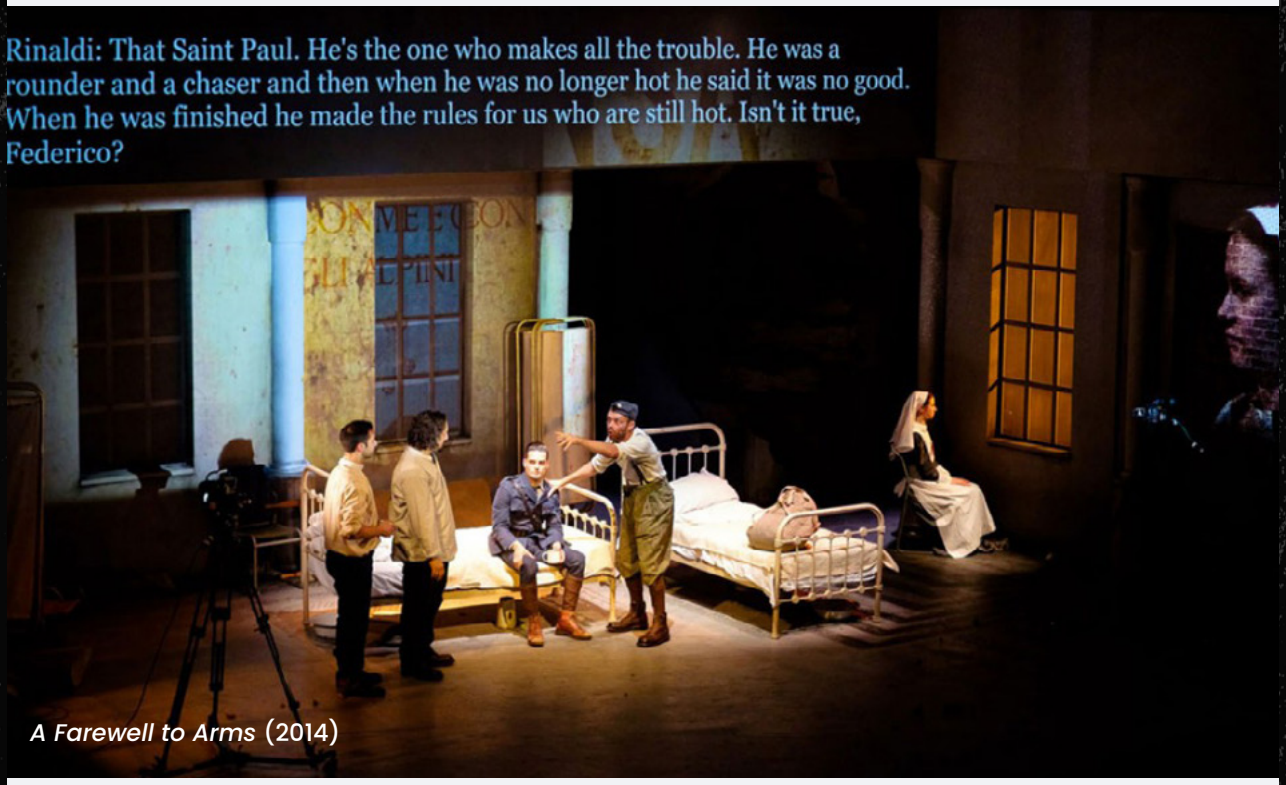
For *A Farewell to Arms*, we began by exploring how the act of reading itself could be represented theatrically. This was supported by Hemingway's self-conscious and stylised prose. We knew that we needed the two main protagonists – the central love interest, Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley – to remain constant in terms of the characters on the stage. They would not operate cameras or take on multiple roles; instead, the other four performers would multi-role, operate the cameras and function as a kind of chorus, framing the entire performance.

We talked about these performers being like the Furies in a Greek tragedy – figures who pursue wrongdoers and drive narratives relentlessly to their conclusions – always pushing the narrative to its tragic conclusion. In effect, this chorus also acted as readers of the material on stage. We tried to signal the centrality of reading in the performance by projecting the following quotation on the set as the show opened:

> *Reading makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient.* (Michel de Certeau, the French cultural theorist, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* xxi, 1984)

We were the transients occupying Hemingway's novel for a while, attempting to bring the novel to a theatrical life, and in the process of bringing the text to life we also attempted to interrogate some of its themes and concerns. We discussed the process of reading in rehearsals: how words, in our reading of them, flesh out into a kind of lived reality. How we create a world from the words and fall into their spell. This was a starting-off point for the projection and visual feel of our adaptation.

We begin the performance in an abandoned hospital – the place where the novel ends, although the audience don't necessarily know this at the time. The performers break through the walls of the room like archaeologists or tomb raiders. They set up the cameras and the show starts. At the beginning the projection consists mainly of the novel's words. These words are always present, sometimes representing rain or snow, even shrapnel, throughout the show. This is a constant reminder to the audience that we are always working from the original source, and that this forms the basis of our adaptation. However, as the story takes hold, the words recede a little and the landscape of the novel becomes more defined. By the end, we are in a hospital, and the projection holds back.



A Farewell to Arms (2014)

This interrogative approach to adaptation has been maintained across all of the novels and films we have translated for the stage. As described earlier, we have always been a rules-based company in the way we construct our performances. These rules are necessary and are often actively sought by performers, but they are equally important for other collaborators, including composers, directors, videographers and others involved in the creative process.

Of course, there are moments when rules can be broken, but we approach those decisions with care. The framework exists to prevent an adaptation from turning into 'mush' or becoming a kind of theatrical free-for-all.

» See also: The Rules of the Game: How ITD Builds Its Worlds (Section 2), and the practical exercises in Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises (Section 4).

In *Heart of Darkness* (2018), for example, we reworked Conrad's original novel while attempting to adhere to the novel's existing structure. Instead of focusing on a white male and a European perspective, our main protagonist was a Black woman from Kinshasa. The "heart of darkness" was no longer the Congo but in the centre of Europe. Our Kurtz was not to be found in the middle of a rainforest, but in the ruins of Greenwich, in London. Our adaptation took the idea of a journey, but it was not limited to a voyage upstream on a steamship in Africa, instead, it was based on driving across the ruined autobahns of Europe before making a final trip up the Thames.



Heart of Darkness (2018)

Our rehearsal process was not straightforward, and the cast contributed to a lively and rigorous debate around the decisions we were making. After a while, we began to include these discussions and write them up into what we came to call a "meta-text" that framed the whole production. In these meta-scenes, we included a staging of how we arrived at certain decisions, casting some as resistors to the changes we were making to Conrad's original and some as originators of the change. These scenes gave us a space to discuss the process and effects of adaptation, to comment on the sources and connections we were making across films and other materials that we felt were relevant to our adaptation. As the performance progresses, the meta and narrative worlds become entangled. What started off as two single strands were indivisible by the end scenes of the main story.

Looking back, it seems that we were learning and working through a language for adaptation. The show was a staging of this working out, and something of this process remains across all the adaptations that followed.

In our production of *Night of the Living Dead*™ – *Remix* (2020), we set ourselves the task of staging the original movie in real time. Using cameras and various props, we would create a show that was a shot-for-shot staging of the original. We would play the original movie alongside the newly created version. What began as an imitation soon turned into a wider exploration of the film. We did not change any of the original – that was one of our rules – but the space of our staging allowed for other material to be brought into play. In recognition of the exploration of racial politics at the heart of the original, we incorporated documentary material from the period in which the film was made, including footage of political assassinations in the USA and civil rights actions of the time.
For us, the staging became an active mode of reading: a way of digging deeper into the material that shaped the original, while also examining the processes through which that material was created.
The original movie wasn't the usual Hollywood studio output: it was self-funded, made by recent graduates, with an underground feel to it. We wanted to maintain these qualities in our re-rendering of the original.



Night of the Living Dead™ – Remix (2020)

Dracula: The Untold Story (2021) was our next major adaptation and the process of its making was heavily dictated by the need to work within the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Once again, we created the production with cameras, although this time each character required their own camera, and the staging had to accommodate two metres of distance between performers throughout rehearsals.

In our version, we focused on Mina Harker as a character. We were drawn to the fact that she survives being bitten by Dracula and that she collated all the material, including newspaper articles, medical records and interviews, that was integral to Dracula's downfall. She is the novel's key, yet somewhat hidden, figure. What if Mina was also a vampire? What might have happened to her after Dracula's destruction? These questions became the starting point for our version of the story. We begin at the end of the novel and explore a possible life for Mina Harker in the twentieth century. What might that life have been? Would she have been a force for good, and if so, were the actions she took truly beneficial?



Dracula: The Untold Story (2021)

In many respects, the production drew on ideas we had explored in earlier work: the time-travel sequences of *Kellerman*, in which Harry moves across different historical periods; the alternative histories that shaped *The Zero Hour*; and the vision of global destruction that featured in *Night of the Living Dead*.
Like *Kellerman*, it also began with the idea of structuring the entire story as a graphic novel, with the projection and set functioning as a giant page that the performers could physically interact with. The opening credits made use of a sequence primarily constructed out of projected pages, transforming the stage into a huge comic book.

The process of making *Dracula* included a pre-written script that was tested out in rehearsals. As often happens, we tested out a number of endings before deciding on how the piece should conclude.

Our next adaptation was *Macbeth* (2023). The post-Covid touring world had become a lot tighter. And, with venues still cautious, we decided to create a version of *Macbeth* with five performers. This restriction created many challenges, but it also forced us to consider how to make dramaturgical sense of the text with only five performers. As in our earlier productions, we decided that the two central characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, had to remain constant as the dramatic focus, just as they are in Shakespeare's original.

Having only three additional performers led us to develop the idea that the world of the play is created by the witches. Their prophecy ignites the Macbeths' ambition, so we decided that every other character would be played by the witches. Although they remained in the same costume throughout, they were never recognised as witches, only as the characters they embodied. In this sense, the witches became tricksters and shapeshifters.



Macbeth (2023)

We also became interested in using them as commentators, drawing connections between the original play and to subsequent adaptations and versions.
At the same time, they were free to construct the world of the play, which was set in a dystopian future shaped by drug gangs and a free-market economy gone mad. The witches constructed this world like a film script – introducing characters, explaining plot twists – relentlessly placing the Macbeths under the scrutiny of the camera.

This approach, although different in tone and texture, drew from the meta-texts in *Heart of Darkness*. Unlike in *Heart of Darkness*, in our version of *Macbeth*, the world of the play and the commentary were completely entwined.
We built on what we had learned from the latter scenes of *Heart of Darkness*, creating a more agile dramaturgy that suited the complexity of Shakespeare's original.

It was no surprise that we followed *Dracula* and *Macbeth* with a version of *Frankenstein* (2024). This adaptation juxtaposed two narratives: the story of Shelley's novel and that of a young couple living in a flat, grappling with an unexpected pregnancy and uncertain whether to bring a child into a world that seemed to be on the brink of collapse.

Whereas *Dracula* had relied heavily on cameras, we chose not to use them in *Frankenstein*, instead using projection to create texture on the walls of the set. Part flat and part hospital, the set also included TV screens secreted in cupboards and mirrors, allowing us to animate certain parts of Mary Shelley's Gothic novel. Having only two performers limited our use of cameras – how would they be operated? More importantly, we could not locate a rule for how to use them.



Frankenstein (2024)

In *Frankenstein*, we turned to choreographer Caspar Dillon to provide a different dramaturgical texture to the piece and to find a way to link the two worlds through movement. Although the main text was pre-written, the movement was devised in the rehearsal process. Gestures and themes from the main text rehearsals were abstracted and sequenced in the movement sections. These sections also allowed us to move across the two stories, giving us a bridge between the two strands. It was exhilarating to return to a devising methodology for these scenes, although it undoubtedly put pressure on our relatively short rehearsal process.

War of the Worlds, which toured in 2026, was possibly our most ambitious adaptation to date. It undoubtedly drew on over ten years of adapting well-known texts and went back to a number of previous works in terms of staging. We kicked off by creating a film script. Drawing on *Night of the Living Dead*, our central staging premise was the creation of a film, live, in front of an audience. We wanted the production to have a sense of scale and to work like a disaster movie. Once again, we worked with a smaller cast: four performers this time. In terms of dramaturgical structure, we returned to the idea of seeing the world through the perspective of the central protagonist – a figure we named Will Travers. And, as in *Macbeth*, we returned to the concept of all the other characters in our story being played by the remaining three performers. We started with Travers in hospital, having been seriously injured while attending a far-right rally in Trafalgar Square. The doctors are attempting to save his life. As he slips into unconsciousness, the dying Travers constructs a purgatorial world in which the doctors play every figure in his paranoid and hallucinatory attempt to hold on to life.



War of the Worlds (2026)

As in previous shows, the non-central characters film the action. They construct the world around Travers using props, models and trick shots. We did not reconstruct Wells's original story as told in the novel; we used the novel's structure to explore current anxieties around migration and national identity.

collaboration

One of the features that most clearly distinguishes how ITD makes work is the nature of the collaborative process in the rehearsal room. From day one of rehearsals, the full creative team is in the room – not just called in once the "theatre work" is done, but present throughout, shaping the piece as it develops. Understanding this is important for anyone studying ITD's working methodology, because it means that the design, sound, and projection are not applied to a finished piece of theatre: they are made alongside it.



War of the Worlds (2026) rehearsals

> The Design and Technical Team

The composer sits in the rehearsal room with the keyboards and instruments. He creates and hones the score as the production progresses. Importantly, the core is shaped by him, but the score is developed collaboratively with input from the whole creative team. For nearly ten years this has been James Hamilton, who works closely with sound designer and technical manager Rory Howson. Rory both contributes to the sound design in the making process and takes primary responsibility for operating the sound during performances and on tour.

Set and costume design are integral to our process from the very beginning. We think scenographically, taking all of the elements of the stage picture into account simultaneously when creating the worlds we want to explore. For many years we worked very closely with designer Laura Hopkins, who often contributed to the visual projection with her watercolours and drawings – our turn to the graphic in several productions is partially down to her influence. More recently, we have been working with designer Abby Clarke, whose contribution extends beyond the usual parameters of set and costume design. Like Laura, and all our collaborators, she brings ideas into the room and contributes to the development of the work at all stages.

Simon Wainwright, one of the company's co-artistic directors, focuses on projection and the screened image. He brings a highly developed visual and sonic sensibility into the room, coordinates all things technical in our work, and shares a preoccupation with the graphic novel as a source and visual reference. Lighting designer Andrew Crofts has worked with us for over twenty years. He is present throughout all rehearsals, slowly developing the lighting design as we progress. Lighting a stage that uses projection is complicated – especially when you want a design that does more than simply make the projection visible – and the close working relationship between Andrew and Simon across the making process is central to how ITD's productions look and feel.



Macbeth (2023)

›The Performers

The performers are, of course, central to the process – in a very real sense, everything circulates around them. ITD makes significant demands on its performers: they operate cameras, shift scenic elements, manipulate props, and act. Their work offers little respite. They are often on stage for the entire show, wearing in-ear devices and listening to a soundtrack in which beeps act as cues or sometimes as direct instructions about movement and positioning. Performers have sometimes spoken of interacting with the technology as if it were another actor, a co-presence in the room with its own demands and tempo.

The company has worked regularly with a number of Associate Practitioners and performers over many years, a full list of whom appears in the Company Biography.

› What Collaboration Means in Practice

Collaboration in ITD cannot be reduced to a set of fixed concepts or premises. But some things have remained constant across the company's history. We have always believed in being able to pursue independent research around the piece being made. We have always valued the ability to listen and to interrogate ideas and approaches constructively. We have also sought to remain adaptable and open to ideas as they develop. When questioning an idea, it is important to arrive with a proposal of your own and, equally, to be able to let go of an idea if it isn't working or doesn't fit the context.

Most importantly, ideas need to have a practical dimension that can be tested in the room. Testing ideas in the room is where the work gets made, and this testing is always fundamentally a collaborative process. The financial pressures on theatre and its making are becoming more and more challenging, but we can't see our process changing under these pressures. Collaboration is how we make our work.



Frankenstein (2024) rehearsals

key terms

The following terms appear in this document and across the ITD learning resources suite. Where a term is defined in more detail in another document, that is noted below.

Adaptation: The process of taking an existing text – a novel, film, play, or other source – and creating a new theatrical work from it. ITD's adaptations are not translations or straightforward stage versions; they treat the source text as a starting point and search for what the company calls "the hidden stories within the original."

CinemaScope: A wide-screen film format developed in the 1950s, characterised by its broad horizontal aspect ratio. ITD has used CinemaScope-style staging in several productions to create a visual language that references film rather than conventional theatre.

Cinematic turn: In art history and visual culture, this term describes the moving image's migration from the fringes of contemporary art to a central place within it: a shift that began in the 1960s and gathered pace from the 1990s, as galleries and museums increasingly filled with film and projection. In theatre scholarship, the closely related idea is discussed as intermediality. Used of ITD's work, it describes the company's own version of that shift: from *Hotel Methuselah* onwards, making theatre that adopts the language and conventions of cinema (framing, editing, the screened image) as core elements of its stage vocabulary.

Devising: A process of creating a piece of theatre collaboratively in the rehearsal room, without a pre-written script as the starting point. Material is generated through improvisation, research, and experimentation. ITD's early work was more explicitly devised; their current process is script-led from the outset, though collaborative throughout.

Dramaturgy: The structural logic of how a piece of theatre is put together – the decisions about form, sequence, narrative, and meaning that shape the overall performance. A "dramaturgical rule" in ITD's practice is a decision about how the piece will work that all collaborators commit to and test against throughout the making process.

Graphic novel: A long-form work in the comics medium, typically telling a complete narrative through a combination of sequential visual panels and text. ITD has drawn on the visual language and page-like spatial organisation of graphic novels in several productions, most extensively in *Dracula* and *Kellerman*.

Isadora: A digital media server software used extensively in live performance. It allows video, audio, and other media to be triggered, manipulated, and combined in real time during a performance. ITD began using Isadora from *The Zero Hour* (2012) onwards.

Meta-text: A layer of commentary within a performance that reflects on the process of making it: scenes or moments in which the performers step back from the story to discuss the adaptation's choices, the decisions behind them, or the material that has shaped the work. Used extensively in *Heart of Darkness* and, in a different form, in *Macbeth*.

Scenographic / Scenography: The combined visual and spatial design of a production, encompassing set, lighting, costume, projection and sound, treated as a unified whole. In ITD's work, scenography is conceptually motivated from the earliest stages of making rather than being added to a finished piece of theatre. Each element carries meaning, not just atmosphere.

Source text: The original work – novel, film, play, or other material – from which an adaptation is made. In ITD's practice, the source text is a starting point and a set of constraints, not a blueprint to be faithfully reproduced.



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Photography of *Kellerman, The Zero Hour, A Farewell to Arms, Heart of Darkness, Night of the Living Dead™ – Remix, Dracula: The Untold Story, Macbeth, Frankenstein, All Blood Runs Red* and *War of the Worlds*: Ed Waring.