

**VIRGIN TERRITORY
STAGE PRODUCTION T.E.A.M. ANALYSIS**



'Brave and unnerving exploration' ** The Guardian, 2015**

CONTEXT

The LIVE production of **Virgin Territory** is staged in the round, with the audience less than 2 metres away from the action. The performance area is a 10m x 10m arena of artificial grass, with nowhere to hide. This intimate staging makes everything visible, acting as a metaphor for how, in the digital age, we perform and capture the minutiae of our lives via social media, sharing intimate details, witnessed, liked and followed by an online 'audience', day and night.

The audience are aware of each other across the performance space. It's a self-conscious set up where watching people watch the work becomes part of the work itself, acting as a metaphor for our transparent, 'over-shared' lives. The performance arena becomes loaded with multiple gazes and viewpoints – a technique that is further explored in the FILM INSTALLATION version of VIRGIN TERRITORY, where the audience is asked to simultaneously watch 4 TV screens, eyes flicking between multiple images and edits of the material from the live work.

VDT's work offers an alternative dance language to 'pure' contemporary dance. It is a language based on real-life experiences, with all its contradictions, physical messiness and emotional complications. Characteristically for VDT's work, **Virgin Territory** shifts from dark to light, from the tragic to the comic with breakneck speed. It is theatrically and compositionally structured to

emphasize the emotional journey of the performers, and consequently the audience because, as Rob says at the start of the show, in the digital age: 'we are all in this together'.

TENSION



ADULT DOGS SCENE (from 00:00:14)

The live production of **Virgin Territory** starts with the loud, disembodied sound of ferocious dogs barking. Shortly afterwards 4 adult performers scramble on stage, barking, rolling, sniffing and snarling at each other and at the audience, seated in the round. This is an unnerving and playful start to the work that puts the audience immediately on edge. The adult performers skilfully make explicit the 'act' of performance. We understand that they are not 'really' dogs, but rather that the barking is a metaphor for predatory and aggressive human behaviour. Seeing humans on all fours also reads as sexual, on heat, threatening to attack, playing rough and tumble, hungry for action, wanting something from each other. 'Bitch' and 'dog' are derogatory terms men sometimes use to describe women. The air is thick with tension as the three white performers (Rob Clark, Janusz Orlik, Antonia Grove) turn on the youngest black 'dog', Valerie Ebuwa. She runs away, leaving an uncomfortable trace of implied racial / gender power revisited later in the production in a NON-CONSENSUAL DUET between Rob and Val.

As three dogs depart, Rob is left onstage, and slowly transforms from 'dog' to human narrator, his first spoken text peppered with snarls and barks in an uneasy delivery that suggests men can be less than human in their behaviour towards women. Rob introduces the subject of children being present:

***ROB:** (Laughing) Hello. Good Evening. It's great you're all here, everywhere, all the way around. There no escape tonight ...no escaping it all. Nowhere to hide here. We're in this together. We're all surrounded. So...tonight there are some performers, as you'd expect, but some of us are adults and some of us are kids. Not just childish but actual, real, children. We want you to take a look, watch us, close up. We're here for the taking, right? We're ready. We all want to feel part of something, don't we? Be together somehow. Follow each other's every move. Like each other. We all want to be liked, right? We love being here, there and everywhere – all over the place, all the time, right? We can do it together – we can all be friends ... we can like each other, can't we?*



CROSSINGS I (from 00:06:41) & II (from 00:36:26)

Entrances and exits are fast and furious at times during the show. In CROSSINGS I & II, all 8 performers hurtle diagonally into the space, using all four entrances in quick succession, running past the audience, 'taking each other down' in the centre of the space. This section is pacey and exciting, performed in close proximity to the audience and designed to stimulate adrenaline in those watching as well as those performing. Children collide physically and hold their own emotionally with the adults, pushing, pulling, crashing to the floor in equal partnership, matching the adults' technique and speed. The effect is intense, impactful and contradictory. The audience feels the young performers' resilience and vulnerability at the same time as their resilience and physical strength. At this speed, they are in danger of being hurt. The tension builds as the aerobic effort of both adult and children becomes more visible as the scene goes on. This has a kinaesthetic effect on the audience. At the end of CROSSINGS II, Elysia Natale, (age 12), runs in for her final leap onto Janusz Orlik, no longer in her school uniform but, after a very quick costume change, strapped into in a pink, sequinned ball-gown, that is far too big for her. The music stops abruptly as they physically connect. This sudden rhythmical shift surprises the audience, building tension for what follows, which is a delicate, painful-looking duet, where Elysia is manipulated and thrown around like a rag doll, by an adult male. The atmosphere in the room shifts as the audience realises that the rules of the game have changed from play to danger and pursuit. Elysia is no longer in a resilient position, no longer in control of her actions, as Janusz takes advantage of her tiny frame.

EMOTION



ELBOW DUET (from 00:38:18)

The 'Elbow Duet' between Janusz Orlik and Elysia Natale is a difficult duet to watch, is designed to move an audience emotionally and to incite a desire in those watching to get up to protect the minor in the frame. Janusz has already performed predatorily in the work before this duet takes place, so the remnants of his inappropriate behaviour remain in the mind's eye whilst watching this interaction with the youngest member of the **Virgin Territory** cast.

The duet demonstrates the 'powerlessness' of childhood and how children rely on adults to protect not abuse them. The duet speaks of the power and physical imbalance between man and child - very uncomfortable viewing for people who have suffered childhood physical / sexual violence. Elysia's pink dress reminds us that societally we ask girls to dress in pink, a sexualized colour, and encourage them to develop more passive behaviours than boys through the choice of toys on offer to them, the way we talk to girls about 'looking so pretty', rather than being funny or intelligent, for example. The dress also refers to glossy beauty pageants where young girls dress in clothes too old for their years and refers also to the age old dream of becoming a princess. It's a provocation – are we asking girls to attract the 'wrong' kind of attention from older men online by encouraging this passivity and pink world view? The minimal, stripped back soundtrack, Elysia's gentle, passive, pained expression set against Janusz's quiet, unquestionable, expressionless 'authority' make it hard to watch.

*(NB: Regarding safeguarding the Young Performer's mental health whilst devising / performing this work: Elysia understood that her role in this duet was supposed to look isolated and that it needed to look painful and upsetting from the outside, despite great effort and time taken to train her in partnering techniques, in order that nothing would actually be physically painful to her. Elysia instinctively understood the central concept of the duet, without needing or wanting to talk about the 'abusive' images within it. We consulted her parents whilst making this scene, and although Elysia performs this duet with great depth and theatrical understatement, she came off stage very excited every time she performed it because she loved the feeling of being flung around by Janusz! Elysia (age 12) and Nathan (age 13) have never seen or heard the more hard-hitting scenes in **Virgin Territory**. During the making, performing and filming of VT, they would be chaperoned away from the action, plugged into headphones listening to music or playing games when the 'harder subject' scenes were being performed or filmed).*



CUTIE (from 01:19:11)

CUTIE revisits both the theme of adult to child violence. Robert Clark dons a child's pink dress and a contorted rubber mask. He moves like a lost child around the edges of the space to a soundtrack of a documentary about the epidemic of online sexual interest in young girls by adult men:

SOUNDTRACK CUTIE: 'For the last couple of months a group of specially trained researchers have pretended to be Cutie – this girl up on the screen. She's actually a computer simulation, she's not real. What they are revealing is criminal conduct: they go onto chat rooms, freely available, easy to access, and all they say is that they are a girl, that they are ten, and from the Philippines. Within seconds, men from around the world contacted her, asked her to put on webcam and take off her clothes. We know that there are a lot of predators here.'

After moving to a soundtrack explaining the 'sting' to capture online pedophiles, CUTIE ends with Antonia peeling off Rob's mask and taking off his dress returning him back to a state of boyhood – he looks innocent, young and small, ready to begin again. Antonia holds him close: the first real sign of nurture in the work, just as the production comes to an end. Her maternal approach feels stronger and more useful than the hyper-masculinity the production has displayed thus far. Faced with Toni's tenderness (which could also be read as rescuing or removing the 'child' from an unsafe situation), there is a feeling that men need to let go of the behaviours that are holding them (and women) back. With nurture as an alternative way forward, Toni exits leaving Rob to get dressed, returning with a barrow full of soil - a practical and symbolic gesture to incite change. The space is slowly transformed into a field to be re-sown - a place where regrowth might be possible, different choices might be made if everyone works to 'furrow a new path' together.

ATMOSPHERE

The atmosphere throughout **Virgin Territory** is often charged with threat. The production relentlessly loops around challenging images of how girls and women are objectified, perceived and treated by men, as a metaphor for the sexism that women face every day. The production explores misogyny from a hard-hitting feminist perspective. There are physical duets that indicate physical violation (NON-CONSENSUAL 'RAPE' DUET between Val and Rob; ELBOW DUET between Janusz and Elysia), online grooming and abuse (CUTIE, as discussed above; I'M FOLLOWING YOU scene between Janusz and Maia); scenes about the pressure to look good / hot at all times (MAKE UP scene between Maia and Millie (age 14/13 respectively and SELFIES), and images of the impact of pornography and sexual harassment that thread through the work (Antonia Grove in her BROKEN BARBIE solo / oversexualised, blonde-wigged teenage girls following Antonia in SLOW WALK).



WIGPULL TRIO / CAT CALL (from 00:52:43)

With a soundtrack that placing the action in an urban street, WIGPULL is performed by three adults (Rob, Janusz and Antonia), with 13 year-old Nathan Da Silva looking on, recording the events on his mobile phone. Nathan witnesses the harassment of a girl / woman whose age isn't clear. She stands for every woman who has ever been wolf-whistled or touched up by unwelcome hands on a bus, in the street, in a nightclub, on the underground.

Dressed in a short pink dress Antonia looks vulnerable. It only just covers her bottom. She doesn't talk at all once the attack starts and neither do the men. It reminds us of the ELBOW DUET, but the violence is more obvious, as she is hurled from one end of the grass to the other. The scene is brutal, tense and hard to watch.

What are the adult men teaching this young boy? Do they think their male banter initiates him into the kind of 'harmless' male banter we hear about all the time in the real world? That somehow this serves a purpose in 'holding your own' as a bloke? The atmosphere feels harmful, uncomfortable and rigid. Antonia lets out small shrieking sounds. She tries to cover up her bottom with the dress. She covers her head to protect herself when they take her aggressively to the floor. The audience hold their breath. The scene is designed to raise well-trodden questions: is she 'asking for it' by wearing a short dress? Will the men 'take it too far'? Will they 'know when to stop'?

The scene feels real and recognisable. Towards the end the men lose interest in baiting Antonia, remove Nathan's phone when he tries to call for help, his moral compass still just about intact, then

take an unapologetic selfie of themselves with Antonia dishevelled and curled up on the floor and walk cockily off. It's an ugly moment that speaks of how violence towards women is now captured and distributed as some kind of online game, but the reality of Antonia, left hurt and bruised by the interaction, is what stays with us.

She gets up and tidies her hair as the whole ensemble come on to dance a routine *to An English Country Garden* in an unexpected, sudden shift of atmosphere. The shift suggests how these abusive behaviours are swept under the carpet and normalised by society - how many women feel they have to get up, dust themselves down, shut up and carry on despite being treated as a plaything. Antonia returns to the everyday with the younger girls, without comment on what has just happened. The audience, relieved by the humour of the dance that follows, forget too quickly what has just happened, doing nothing to challenge the distressing violation of someone that has just been witnessed.

NB: #VDTEverydayAction – VDT's online campaign against everyday sexism runs parallel to the work: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vincentdt/albums/72157668631453603>

SILLY GIRL (from 00:30:53)

Virgin Territory was made just before the **#metoo** campaign hit the worldwide stage. SILLY GIRL, finds adult male performer Janusz talking to a silent 13 year-old Maia, as she crosses the space alone, looking around nervously and twitching with fear about what she might be getting herself into online. She looks young, lonely and out of her depth, dressed in her school uniform. This scene draws attention to the vulnerability and naivety of young people's use of social media, how much they unknowingly 'give away' via their profiles, images and information posted online.

*I'm watching your every move.
I've been following you for a long time.
I know what you like.
You think you're being safe?
Silly girl...
You're giving it all away.
I know which school you go to.
I know where you go at lunchtime.
I know you can be fun.
I know you can be shy, too.
Remember that photo you posted yesterday?
You like it when your clothes are tight on you.
I know what you like wearing... underneath.
You're making it so easy for me.*

BALLOON PEOPLE (from 00:12:35)

Virgin Territory also contains scenes filled with a dark, edgy humour that give the audience a break from the darker material, whilst still containing important messages. In BALLOON PEOPLE, all 8 performers enter the space to a kind of reggae beat, gyrating and flirting with the audience and each other. It's funny, but also embarrassing, unnerving and uncomfortable. With hugely exaggerated body shapes - balloons creating huge muscles, breasts and penises exaggerated by tight fitted clothing - BALLOON PEOPLE speaks of the unrealistic beauty standards we face every day and the commercialised, plastic, perfect bodies that music videos, advertising and selfie culture advocates.



Atmospherically **BALLOON PEOPLE** provides a deep contrast to the rest of the production, reminds us the people on stage are performers manipulating the audience, to make a point. **BALLOON PEOPLE** quickly descends into wild party scene, where one by one the balloons are burst or discarded and the action gets more racy and out of control. As Valerie's exuberance steps up, (is she drunk, is she high, is she unaware of the potential threat of the men looking at her as she seems to lose all inhibitions?), the young people begin to back away, showing good judgement, as she circles and spins out of control. The sense of threat returns in the shape of Rob looming, tracking, watching Val descend to the floor. He seizes an opportunistic moment to have some 'fun' together. A shift from light to dark is something VDT does regularly and deliberately within the work: relaxing the audience with laughter, then shifting atmosphere quickly - the release of humour draining away back to concern for the performers well-being. This emotional rollercoaster effect increases tension and a strong sense of foreboding regarding what might happen next in the work. It's unpredictable and exciting.

SOIL SCENE (from 01:24:54)

The final scene of **Virgin Territory** shifts the action away from threat, towards the possibility of change. The **SOIL SCENE** at the end of the production comes as a visual and emotional surprise to the audience after the relentless plasticity and dark predatory content of the first 70 minutes of this 95-minute production. Introducing the smell and texture of real soil into an artificial space has a tangible effect on the audience, reminding us that there is a life away from the plasticity and TV screens, where a different kind of play and live, collective 'togetherness' is possible. It's a tentative image – we know the grass that has been present throughout the work is plastic, yet we want to run with the image of planting seedlings, new life, into the space. The cast of 8 work together to build a soil pathway diagonally across the space, a pathway that Antonia has trodden 5 times in various states of female disarray, a path that needs re-purposing, suggests an alternative future, a different route through the artificial mess we have created for ourselves. The lighting changes, a new path is set. Will we take it?

MEANING

USE OF TEXT / SPOKEN WORD IN VDT'S WORK

VDT aims to 'move people and make them think', using physical, sonic and visual metaphors that can be understood imaginatively, cognitively and emotionally. The work describes states, emotions, ideas and atmospheres to elicit universal and personal responses from an audience about a particular issue or theme. Spoken word and text is used to anchor the work in the real world, to impart a more literal meaning than the physical and visual metaphors allow. Words make explicit the line of enquiry, and comment on the 'act' of performance as it emerges on stage. VDT don't make 'plays' as such: the work is multi-disciplinary theatre, a mix of dance, music and performance, and so text / emerging scripts inevitably emerge through the devising process as an appropriate language to say what can't be said so specifically through movement or visual image.

Texts are used in different ways, and for different purposes, in **Virgin Territory**. In the live work, only Robert Clark's role involves *direct address* to the audience. He introduces and frames the action, checks in with the audience during the work and is the only 'persona' on stage to break out of the implied fiction to direct the other performers (he introduces Antonia for her first SLOW WALK; her demands that the kids put down their digital devices at the end of SELFIES to continue with the show).

Real-life testimonies were used as starting points to generate movement during the devising period for **Virgin Territory**, and some stories, gathered through a series of recorded conversations between Artistic Director Charlotte Vincent and young women during the early research phase of this work, went on to form a vital component of the final soundtrack to the production. Testimonies locate the performance in the real world, and, when set against abstract movement sequences, provide a layer of meaning that keeps the politics of the work in the viewer's mind.

WHISPER TEXT (from 00:45:21) is a *spoken exchange* between the two adult female performers, Antonia and Val, stage whispered into microphones and 'overheard' by the audience, as if part of an imagined phone call:

- T - *We need to talk about the kids*
- V - *We need to set a better example for them*
- T - *We need some boundaries*
- V - *We should be more open with them*
- T - *We could be more honest with them*
- V - *Have conversations about sex*
- T - *We need to protect them*
- V - *We could keep them locked up!*
- T - *That's not realistic*
- V - *We could teach them to run, really fast!*
- T - *That's not always possible*
- V - *We could teach them self-defence!*
- T - *We should try not to scare them*
- V - *They need to tell us their secrets*
- T - *Not all of them*
- V - *They need to be able to tell us what's happening out there*
- T - *This is one thing, in here, but out there –*
- V - *Yeah. Out there...*
- T - *We need to talk to the kids*



A teenage *variation* of this text happens later in the work between the Maia and Millie (age 13 and 14 respectively), and through that variation shifts the meaning of the text. The 'repeat' speaks of how kids mirror their parents' behaviour, a theme present throughout the work, especially when considering parental use of digital devices and the peddling unobtainable role models online by celebrity adults.



Using *text as impetus for movement* particularly informed Antonia's 4 SLOW WALKS, which traverse the stage diagonally, getting progressively more broken, staccato and floor-bound as the production progresses. Toni's recurring 'études' of the scrutiny and pressure women are under threads through the work. By the end of the piece, her diagonal route is extended, mirrored and followed by the three teenage girls in identical heels and dresses, in a striking image of how inappropriate adult behaviour can quickly become the next generations behavioural norms. One text that accompanies Toni's SOME GIRLS (from 00:47:41) fourth diagonal was taken from a recorded conversation between Vincent and two 15 year olds about teenage party and 'gang' culture in Brighton:

Boys think that as soon as you go somewhere where there are boys, they think that we want something, but you know we are not.

*We're just going on a social bender,
but no, they think we are going there for like sex, yeah,
but we have no intention of –
you know, I never, but some girls are –
you know, some girls are like that –*

*some girls get drunk or whatever –
 you know younger girls –
 yes, 13/14 - girls that don't really have a clue what they are
 doing–
 and they think that's how you get more popular –
 but then, that's how you get a name -
 and they just think they'll go and they can't say no and
 they have sex with every single one of them or mates' mates or...
 do you know what I mean –
 that's how you get a name...
 they look so old these days, Jesus Christ,*



INSTALLATION VARIATIONS

The above TEAM Analysis is based on the STAGE version of **Virgin Territory**.

In VIRGIN TERRITORY FILM INSTALLATION

(<https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/collections/vincent-dance-theatre/virgin-territory-film-installation>) there are some textual variations in the work, some reduced / removed scenes and some extra scenes, including testimonies from young people that the performers 'channel' via headphones, not featured in the original stage production, but of which informed the making of the work.

The multi-screen film format, watched live in galleries or theatre spaces or on personal devices, offers more licence to include real life testimonies, as viewers watch 4 screens concurrently and the layering of scenes with additional texts is more possible than in live, 'real time' performance.

Below are the timecoded differences in live and film versions of the work:

SCENE TITLE	On Stage	Film Installation
Dogs (adults)	00:00:14 – 00:02:20	
Rob Intro/Toni Slow walk	00:02:21 – 00:06:06	00:00:08 – 00:03:02
Janusz Disinfecting I	00:06:07 – 00:06:40	
Crossings I	00:06:41 – 00:08:46	00:02:47 – 00:05:49
Toni Herding		00:05:50 – 00:06:05
Rustic Porn	00:08:47 – 00:11:39	00:06:06 – 00:08:39

Maia Nervous Walk	00:11:40 – 00:12:34	
Balloon People	00:12:35 – 00:21:16	00:08:40 – 00:16:15 – <i>includes additional testimony</i>
Toni Elizabethan Diagonal (Pretty Girls)	00:21:27 – 00:23:31	
Janusz Disinfecting II	00:23:32 – 00:24:00	
Selfies	00:24:01 – 00:30:52 <i>Includes Dogs (adults) reprise</i>	00:15:16 – 00:16:54
Silly Girl	00:30:53 – 00:36:25	00:16:55 – 00:21:40
Crossings II into Elbow Duet	00:36:26 – 00:45:20	00:21:41 – 00:28:56
We Need To Talk About The Kids Adult Whisper Text / Make Up Scene	00:45:21 – 00:48:23	
Girls These Days		00:28:57 – 00:33:21
Seedy Porn		00:33:22 – 00:34:42 <i>installation only scene</i>
Some Girls	00:48:24 – 00:49:58	00:34:25 – 00:36:09
Elysia / Janusz Laughing Diagonal	00:49:59 – 00:51:38	
Wig Pull / Cat Call Trio		00:36:10 – 00:39:20
Kick Ass Duet	00:51:39 – 00:52:42	00:39:21 – 00:40:45
Wig Pull / Cat Call	00:52:43 – 00:55:08	
English Country Garden	00:55:09 – 00:58:15	00:40:46 – 00:42:57
Maia Nervous Twitching		00:42:58 – 00:43:25
Non-Consensual Scene	00:58:16 – 01:00:30	00:43:26 – 00:47:43
I'm Scared of You		00:47:44 – 00:50:08
Toni Herding	01:00:31 – 01:01:27	00:50:09 – 00:50:40
Elysia Crossing	01:01:28 -01:01:42	
I'm Scared of You	01:01:43 – 01:04:47	
I Know What Boys Are Like	01:04:48 – 01:07:09	00:50:41 – 00:52:21
Val solo	01:07:10 – 01:07:57	
We Need To Talk About The Kids Whisper Text		00:52:24 – 00:54:03
We Need To Talk About The Adults Whisper Text		00:54:04 – 00:55:37
Trauma House / Rape Testimony	01:07:58 – 01:13:10	00:55:38 – 01:01:32
We Need To Talk About The Adults Whisper Text	01:13:11 – 01:14:54	
Toni Leading Line & Herding	01:14:55 – 01:19:10	
Selfies II		01:01:33 – 01:01:47
Cutie	01:19:11 – 01:24:53	01:01:48 – 01:06:20
Soil Scene	01:24:54 – 01:28:37	01:06:21 – 01:15:17
Production Length	1 hour 28 mins	1 hour 15 mins

For further information about VDT's work please visit:

www.vincentdt.com

<https://www.facebook.com/vincentdance>

<https://www.instagram.com/vincentdancetheatreuk>

<https://twitter.com/VincentDT>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Vincentdt>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/vincentDT>

Charlotte Vincent, June 2018