

Frantic Assembly

Scott Graham formed Frantic Assembly with Steven Hoggett and Vicki Middleton in 1994. Having toured extensively throughout the UK, Frantic has built a reputation as one of the most exciting physical theatre companies in the country. The company has worked in 40 countries internationally, collaborating with some of today's most inspiring artists.

The company has also performed, created and collaborated in 30 different countries across the world.

Frantic Assembly can be your chosen practitioner for component 1 but not 3.

In 1994 the company was formed with a desire to 'do something different', and cite their inspirations to be Volcano Theatre Company and DV8, whose energy and visceral qualities they admired and felt they shared.

Though they had clear intentions to offer original performance outcomes, they felt their first official work needed to be linked to something that was likely to attract an audience. They chose John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. This was not without risk as it meant Frantic Assembly ended up performing their highly original physical theatre version to audiences

who were not expecting such a radical reworking of a very well known play. They also hadn't sought permissions to treat the text in the way that they did, and their bold approach could have seen the company closed before it got going. The gamble, though, paid off.

The company grew steadily in the late 1990s, and then in 2001 the two artistic directors Graham and Hoggett realised that whilst it was going to cost more, they needed to step aside from being everything from performers to stagehands, and became directors only. They cite this as a great turning point because they were no longer restricted by their own physical limitations and were able to look from the outside to see more clearly what worked when developing projects.

When Graham and Hoggett stepped aside as performers and technicians, they also started to place new text at the centre of the performances more than they had done previously. Theatre company Paines Plough were amongst their early collaborators and they created two shows together, *Tiny Dynamite* and *On Blindness*. In 2012, Graham became sole artistic director of the company.



Scott Graham

Theories and methods

“The Frantic method recognises the power we possess to tell stories with our physicality. It is not to the exclusion of text. It is about text and movement and the electric moments in between.”

Production starting points

One of the most important and defining features of Frantic Assembly’s artistic process is that the initial ideas come from the director(s). Even if they work with a writer, that writer is often engaged long after the idea has been formed and perhaps shaped.

This process is sometimes blurred, for example when working on *Pool (no water)* in 2006, Graham and Hoggett went into the rehearsal process with writer Mark Ravenhill and the material was developed together. In their award-winning production of *Othello*, naturally the text already existed, but then they brought their ideas and style to it.

What is constant is that though Frantic Assembly is a devising theatre company, they do not go into the rehearsal room with nothing; often the ideas chosen to go forward with as productions will have been a couple of years in development.

Rehearsal process

Graham and Hoggett had not studied drama academically, and therefore they admit to not knowing about practitioners and their processes. This has, they believe, allowed them to be free in their approach and also to vary it to suit the project, though they have generally established patterns.

When rehearsals start, devising doesn’t stop, but material developed will have clear aims to serve, allowing performers the freedom to add to the creative process without the pressure of having to formulate the entire work from nothing. The Frantic method uses simple and easily understood instructions to form creative tasks (Building Blocks) designed to encourage creativity and risk in a safe environment.

The company have actors/dancers whom they work with more than once, but they also get new people in for each production. Graham and Hoggett dismiss the traditional audition process saying that it doesn’t allow them really to know whether the individual fits them or vice versa. Their auditions are unique (and time-consuming) in that they are workshops where everyone gets to find out more about each other’s strengths and what they might bring to the project. They admit to a constant actor-versus-dancer dilemma and sometimes they will look for actors who can dance, sometimes it will be dancers who can act; often the text will dictate what they are looking for in a performer.

The company engage in intensive rehearsal periods over generally five or six weeks. Though Frantic Assembly are known for their physical theatre style, during rehearsals a great deal of emphasis is placed on the text. The company insist on a solid working draft before they go into rehearsals and often spend the majority of the first week poring over its possibilities. Many of the physical ideas that characterise their work come from this. Sometimes it is what the script says and sometimes it is what it does not say that inspires the use of a physicality; Graham and Hoggett have said it often takes a while to get a feel for the rhythms of the text.

The Frantic method recognises the power of movement to inform narrative. Every moment of touch on stage must be considered. And considered against three separate universes.

1. The Universe before the touch
2. The Universe of the touch
3. The Universe after the touch

Design

All aspects of design are intended to engage with the choreography, and this happens as early as possible in the rehearsal process.

Music is a massive inspiration to Frantic Assembly, and it is used in rehearsals at every stage. It is integral to how they understand and communicate their theatre and they see it as a collaborator throughout the development process. Frantic Assembly use a great deal of

contemporary music because this is what tends to inspire the directors as people and they admit they are huge music fans generally, with eclectic tastes.

Just as music is involved in the rehearsal process early on, so too is the set. If you have seen a Frantic Assembly production, or you look at their work online, you can see how much they integrate with their environments, the set and props. The performers need to know every element's physical limitations and possibilities. Testing this will offer all kinds of choreographic and theatrical inspiration. Therefore, the set itself becomes a kind of creative element in the process and not just something the performance exists on or in front of.

Frantic Assembly's fingerprints

To apply Frantic Assembly's work to the component you are studying, you must show understanding of the relationship between their theory and practice in the work you produce.

Your work is likely to share some of the following characteristics:

- **Physical Theatre**
- Music, which is very important from rehearsal through to performance
- Set used in rehearsals for you to interact with fully

“The Frantic method is a demonstration of the value of collaboration. Together we make work beyond our individual imaginations.”



Othello performed by Frantic Assembly

Visit the company's website at www.franticassembly.co.uk.

KEY WORKS

Hymns

Hymns was originally performed by Frantic Assembly in 1999 and was the company's first collaboration with Liam Steel from DV8.

The piece, which was incredibly demanding physically, even for Frantic Assembly, was intended to be a fresh and honest depiction of four male friends at the end of the century.

Conversations the artistic directors were sharing at the time planted the seeds of the project, together with personal experiences of grieving that year. They were reluctant to pursue the project initially however, in case they be cited as naïve, whinging men. A BBC Panorama documentary and an Observer article on the high number of suicides amongst young males convinced Graham and Hoggett that the time was right for the piece. The play's reception was hugely positive with the production considered brave and revolutionary, as is the case with much of the company's work.

Stockholm

Stockholm, performed in 2007 at the Drum theatre in Plymouth before touring, was inspired by an argument Scott Graham witnessed in 1999 between a couple he knew. The script was written by playwright Bryony Lavery and featured third person narration and Frantic Assembly's characteristic choreographed and stylised sequences. Set and lighting played a crucial part in the telling of the story and the setting of a simultaneously naturalistic and nightmareish scene. The production won the Wolff Whiting Award in 2008 and was nominated for Best Touring production at the TMA Theatre awards in the same year.

Othello

Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett were awarded Best Direction at the TMA Theatre Awards 2009 for their contemporary version of *Othello*. The production was so successful that it was re-worked by Graham and toured in 2014/2015.

The idea for using the *Othello* narrative and the 16th century Shakespearean text was suggested to Graham and Hoggett some years before they eventually went ahead with the project. As an idea it sat at the back of their minds for these years being very different to anything they had considered before. It might have been rejected immediately but for the fact that the themes inspired them.

It was whilst reading a book called *Dark Heart* by journalist Nick Davies, which looked at the deprived council estates, child prostitution and drugs within the UK, that the project came into focus. At the same time they were both working on an advert set in a pub. The stories from *Dark Heart*, and the setting of the pub, with its social hierarchies, sexual **tension** and aggression, became central to the contemporary production of *Othello* that was then put together to such great acclaim.

Selected other work and collaborations

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time by Simon Stephens, with movement direction by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett (2012)

Lovesong by Abi Morgan (2011)

Beautiful Burnout by Bryony Lavery (2010)

Pool (no water) by Mark Ravenhill (2006)

Rabbit by Brendan Cowell (2003)

Klub by Spencer Hazel (1995/96)