

**Sound of the underground**  
**NEIL COOPER**  
**Published on 19 May 2009**

Passengers please note. It takes 24 minutes to do a circuit of Glasgow Underground. Just ask Martin O'Connor. He's been going round in circles for weeks now on the city's small but perfectly formed Clockwork Orange, getting to grips with the rhythms of every shoogle and shake between stops, from Bridge Street by the Gorbals, across the river to Buchanan Street and the hub of Hillhead, back across the river to the regular Govan hiatus, all the way to less travelled destinations, including the undiscovered mysteries of Cessnock.

The reason for this is to work out how, exactly, O'Connor is likely to deliver Inner Circle, his latest solo performance which forms part of this year's self-explanatory named Subway Festival. The festival itself takes place over a weekend that will turn passengers into audiences and participants in a range of artistic activities ranging from the sort of guerrilla gigs Pete Doherty used to alight with on London Underground, to ad hoc hair-styling, Japanese drummers and a chance to access a series of 30-second films.

Sitting next to O'Connor at the far end of the carriage as we depart from Buchanan Street, can be a pretty unnerving experience. He may only be reading out loud from a script translated from Italian writer Renato Gabrielli's original, but when he makes eye contact in such an enclosed space to relate his darkly oblique thoughts about a child on the other side of the carriage, even though we're all just pretending, it feels less than appropriate. Especially with director Neil Doherty watching beady-eyed from the seat opposite for every expressive tic, while a worker from Strathclyde Passenger Transport chaperones from the side.

The reason for the discomfort, one suspects, is the inappropriateness of someone declaiming in an environment noisy enough to make speech of any kind nigh on inaudible. While there are no strange looks from fellow passengers, there's a sense that if the SPT representative wasn't on board to legitimise things, undue attention would almost certainly be attracted. There's also the invasion of personal space in a public environment, whereby casual commuters inadvertently become an audience to an unfolding drama that sounds different from those which ordinary passengers might engage in. As it turns out, Inner Circle is fuelled by such everyday discomfort.

"I did it at an Arches Scratch night and it was interesting what people picked up on," says O'Connor. "Some said they thought it was really funny, because these thoughts this guy has were totally the sort of things that went through their heads when they were on the subway."

Exactly what happens, O'Connor isn't saying, though Doherty hints it "takes a very surreal turn, which the guy has to rationalise, and then come up with a way of solving how his whole journey, which normally isn't like this, has come about, and that's when the interaction with the kid happens".

O'Connor and Doherty's production of Inner City came about after O'Connor wrote a piece for I Confess, a compendium of five-minute one-to-one unburdenings. This took place at The Arches own underground space, where O'Connor has also performed longer solo works as part of Arches Live. Dramaturg Maggie Rose later facilitated a production in Milan, putting the plays in the hands of assorted Italian writers and actors to translate, pairing O'Connor with Gabrielli. And it was Gabrielli who gave O'Connor the scripts for a trilogy of plays with the title Death in the City.

The first part, *A Mobile Thriller*, performed in transit in Hush Productions' Herald Angel- winning 2004 Edinburgh Festival Fringe outing. This time, the audience of three were backseat passengers in a speeding car en route to the outskirts of the city as the increasingly agitated performer in front slowly but surely fell apart. Oddly, the second part, *Vocations*, is not set on anything involving wheels or rails. It was the third part, originally called *Number 90's Child* and performed on the circular train in Milan that struck a chord with O'Connor and became the basis of *InnerCircle*.

"I liked the rhythm and I liked the repetition. I suppose I also liked the controversy of this guy meeting a child, and how it questions who's responsible for the child. It talks a lot about other people ignoring the situation that occurs, and looks at who might be responsible in that small society, who's accountable and who's to blame.

"The last piece I wrote for *The Tron* was called *Reality*, and that looked at the future of young people, so it seemed like a really logical step to do something like this. I work a lot with young people just now as a drama worker, and I get very angry about a lot of the stuff I read in the papers, which twists how young people are perceived. But that's the sort of theatre I want to make, about stuff that's real and relevant."

For Doherty, "It reminds me of Robert Bresson. It's got that filmic quality, especially something like *The Pickpocket*, where he goes into those lives and learns to pickpocket. Martin's a really engaging performer and he really knows how to talk to an audience, but I wanted to take that away from him and take him out of his safety zone, so when he does turn to speak to someone directly and address the audience, you really earn it. That makes it more powerful. The piece has got its humour, but it's laced with darkness, and there's an underbelly there, which I like. You can never quite plan things, because different passengers will be getting on and off at different stations, and trains don't always run to time. That should make it exciting, but scary as well."

Given such near the knuckle material, *Inner Circle* clearly stands out from the bulk of a largely fun-based Subway Festival programme. This is something artistic director Phyllis Martin acknowledges, describing the piece as "quite subtle, with a dark edge to it. It tackles things we're all aware of in terms of what can happen on public transport, in that it's a very small space, a very intimate space, but is somewhere we keep ourselves very separate from each other. Having buskers and everything else on the subway is great, but *Inner City* is a piece that shows how much more we can do."

Along similar lines, Martin also cites a soap opera which will take place with the audience wearing headphones as storylines unfold in which it's not clear at first which of their fellow passengers are performing. Outside Partick station, meanwhile, will be big-scale spectacles, including *Sputnik*, an already acclaimed collaboration between actors Garry Robson and Claire Cunningham alongside Sharmanka's magical kinetic sculptures.

"The Subway Festival is a street theatre festival," Martin observes of a weekend intervention that looks set to become a fixture of Glasgow's cultural calendar. "The difference is that most of the time the streets are underground."