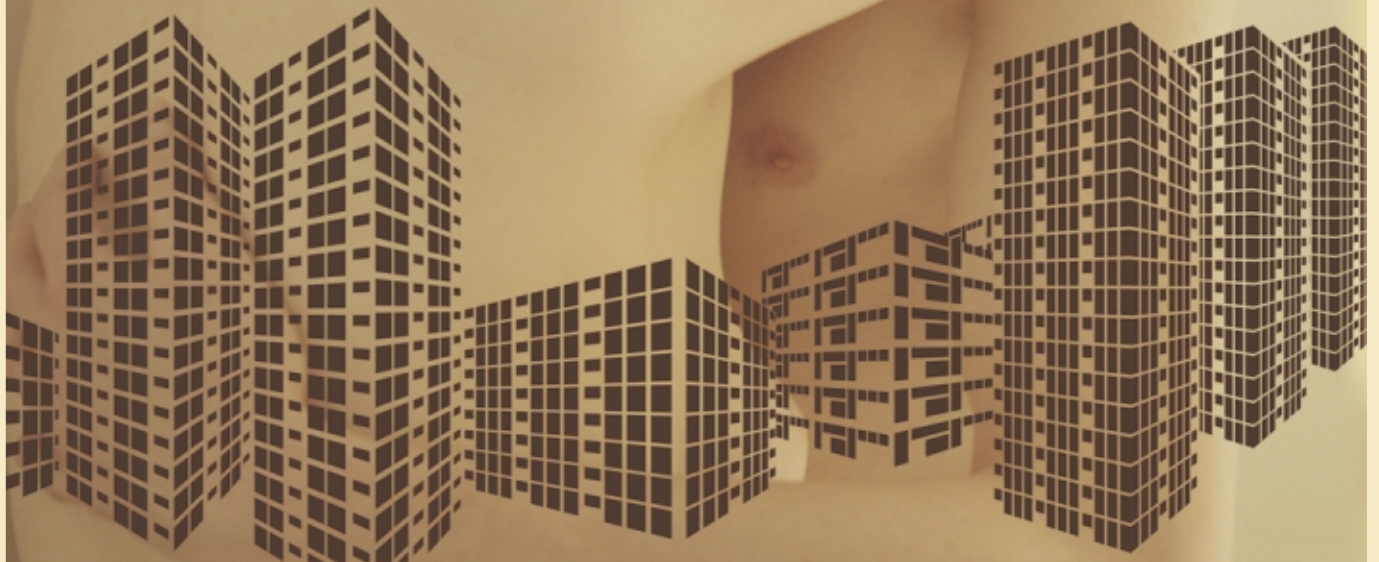


*frantic*assembly

# peepshow

7 little lives in 1 big city



## A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO PEEPSHOW

For students (aged 14+), teachers & arts educationalists.

By Scott Graham & Sarah Quelch

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## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide has been specially created for those studying drama and theatre studies at GCSE, AS and A Level standard. In creating this resource Frantic Assembly have researched the various course requirements of the differing qualifications, and have looked at a variety of exam boards published syllabus. The aim is to create a document accessible and relevant to all.

As teachers and Arts Education specialists, you are more qualified to judge what your students are able to do, and how our suggested work can fit into your course requirements. It is with this view that we have presented a range of activities, ideas and discussion topics that can be scaled up or down to your needs.

Much of the guide charts the development of *Peepshow*, focussing on the creation of the piece. This is in response to many of our teachers asking for advice and help about devising work, and aims to give an insight into the Frantic Assembly approach.

The guide charts the creative process, giving valuable insight into how and why decisions about the piece were made. At various points essay titles, practical exercises, and discussion ideas are listed highlighting the points made and giving useful tools for you and your groups to create work yourselves.

We hope you find this resource an informative tool to support your teaching. As ever, Frantic Assembly remain committed to the value and importance of education within our work. We hope this guide helps to enhance your students enjoyment and engagement with *Peepshow*, and that you find the information an exciting resource for your teaching needs.



*Peepshow* has been supported by Barclays Stage Partners with The Arts Council of England and is in association with the Drum Theatre Plymouth and the Lyric Hammersmith.

FRANTIC ASSEMBLY'S

# peepshow



## INTRODUCTION

### WHY A MUSICAL?

Music theatre is total theatre. It employs everything to hand to create accessible entertainment. We recognised this as being very similar to our own approach even though the work may appear to be different. We have always used music in and around our shows, it is absolutely integral to what we want our audiences to experience. After a performance of *Hymns* (Nov 1999) a member of the audience talked of her favourite moment. She felt that the moment was so heightened and she felt so emotionally engaged she thought we were going to sing. We laughed at the idea, and when we asked her why she thought this, she said 'because you could have'.

We have never felt the need to categorise our work and feel free to be inspired by any genre. We looked at the musical as being an example of a complete theatre experience, packed with potential yet due to the lack of new work emerging, often lacking in relevance to people of our age group or to our tastes. That was the main target really, to create a Frantic Assembly piece of theatre with songs, to put a bit of a buzz back into a genre we felt was often mediocre and over commercial.

One of biggest influences and interests since we created Frantic Assembly has been the music video. We felt that this project was the ideal opportunity to combine our love of Lamb's music with our desire to make a music video for the stage. Lamb's music has always inspired us. They have a frustratingly indefinable sound – somehow unique. Their music is incredibly personal, evoking love, pain and passion. We had used Lamb's tunes in a previous show, but this project would always involve a much closer relationship with the music. We wanted to create a show inspired purely by the sounds of the band. To make it work, we had to sell the idea back to the band, in effect tell them what we felt their music was about!

Getting Lamb onboard was crucial. We were advised to just ask their manager and when Steven finally plucked up the courage (I was probably hiding) we were stunned when they said they were interested. The initial meetings gave a chance to describe our work to them (never easy) but more importantly, it seemed it was an opportunity to meet the people who had been making this incredible music.

Our intention was to make *Peepshow* stand on its own as a piece of theatre. We're not interested in playing to the rules of the musical, where songs are belted out and audiences often signalled to clap at the end of that song. If *Peepshow* is to create its own believable world then it must command the hush theatre expects of its audience.

*Peepshow* would be Frantic's most ambitious project yet – a musical for the MTV generation rather than Shaftesbury Avenue. Yet we have a strong belief in the potential power of the form. And we also believe there is an audience out there waiting for an utterly contemporary musical within which we recognise ourselves, our lives, our relationships.





## CHAPTER 1. STARTING POINTS: HOW INITIAL IDEAS GERMINATED INTO THE BIGGER PICTURE

When we first started talking about the show, we began by considering the idea that we often don't know who our neighbours are. In most cases, we live around others in close proximity and see our neighbours more often than our dearest friends or family, but actually we rarely know much about them, sometime not even their names.

We then sought to dismiss this notion, replacing it with the idea that actually we do know our neighbours. We know what time they set their alarm in the morning, what times they get in from work, what type of music they like to play at 2.00 am. We know if they haven't been getting on lately, if they have been mistreating their dog, if they have something to hide. All of these aspects (right or wrong) are things that we may know about those we live nearest to.

We then started to investigate how this idea could be translated within *Peepshow*. We were interested in an audience snooping into an environment, being aware of both what is perceived to go on behind closed doors and what is really going on. This viewing experience could be fragmented; those they watch could close the curtains at any moment or perhaps our voyeurs might be temporarily distracted by something more interesting unfolding in the upstairs window. The audience may only see something fleetingly or partly obscured and may also make false judgements about what they know. They are witness to things as if by chance, hovering outside the building in the shadows. They are the James Stewart in *Rear Window* (see page 15). They are also the camera view in the Massive Attack video *Protection* (see page 15).

### The Music Video (or Pop Promo) and Advert: Inspiration for the Creation of *Peepshow*.

*Peepshow* takes its inspiration from the most progressive art forms of the past twenty years; the music video and the advert. To begin, discuss with your class the power of these short films and the important definitions that lie within them. In some pop promos the music is performed to (often with artists that heavily rely on their look and celebrity to sell the music - Britney Spears, Westlife, various manufactured pop bands). In others the music is a soundtrack to some narrative or emotion. This latter is the inspiration for *Peepshow*. In a similar way adverts such as the Levis 'Crashing Through Walls' campaign or similarly the many Guinness adverts ('Racing Snails' / 'Horses within the Surf') are short bursts of narrative, with cinematic quality heightened by music accompanying the visuals.

#### DISCUSSION IDEAS

Ask your class what is their favourite video or advert incorporating a 'story' or theme inspired by the music. Why do they like it? How does it enhance the song's impact and meaning? How would the video stand up on its own without the music?

Ask your students about the pop video/ advert elements within *Peepshow*. Were there any sections that reminded them of music videos or adverts they have seen in the past? Apart from the obvious movement sections, were any of the production values stylised to allude to the pop video genre? Useful pointers for you to flag up within discussion could be:

- The blue colour of Richard D's room - could this remind your class of a chrome key wall used to superimpose images onto?
- The neon strips and flashes of light that cross all the characters' rooms at points within the action
- The projection of the sky and the changing images

### Music within Devising

It's important to 'play' with music, to try different tracks under scenes to enhance and add emotive content to your work. Sometimes it is more interesting for an audience to hear a piece of music that might contrast with the emotions they are witnessing. If the music is forcing the emotion, there leaves little room for the audience to invest. By communicating too much through language and words, there is a tendency for the audience to become lazy (and often dissatisfied), only seeing and hearing the immediate.

When singing to the music it is obvious that a character is evoking an emotion, but what *Peepshow* allows us is the opportunity to look into the other character's separate lives, at the same time as taking in the life of the singing character. It is sometimes very exciting to see things through more than one character's eyes.

Take for example *Zero*, the first song of the show, sang by George, Ben and Richard D at the end of scene 12.

The song happens after a gradual build up of tension between George and Ben - they have come home from the party early, and with the aid of a few glasses of wine are discussing their relationship with growing resentment and passion. By this point, the lives of the other characters are also starting to unfold. In particular, Richard D's character has made his first call to an unknown person - "It's me. You probably won't get this. If you do, then, you know call...If you're busy that's OK. I miss you" (sc10)

#### DISCUSSION IDEAS

Ask your group to remember the characters singing *Zero*

- Who did they think George was singing about and why?
- Who did they think Ben was singing about and why?
- Who did they think Richard D was singing about and why?

It should be less clear to your group as to whom Richard D is singing about, as we don't yet know the identity of his caller. But they may also be able to talk about this person with clarity, projecting their image of who Richard D might be calling and why, based on the slimmest information.

Ask your group

- Is it more powerful or effective to know whom the character is motivated by or not?
- Who are we most drawn to in that song, the mystery of Richard's situation or the illustration of George and Ben's?

The same song, (originally written and performed for one voice) is shared among the three characters. The words have resonance with the three worlds, and their meaning can be shared and interpreted. Breaking the same song into three parts gives the audience an opportunity to invest, interpret and create subtext about the character's situations within the course of the song

## CHAPTER 2. THE DEVISING AND COLLABORATION PROCESS : GETTING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD

*'We first started putting into place our ideas a year and a half ago. The first stages were meetings in Spring 2001 with the Lyric (Hammersmith) and the Drum (Plymouth) about co-producing the project. We made our Barclays application for funding in Oct 2001 and found out the following December that we had been successful. From then on it's been an exciting process of engaging the creative team, involving a range of high quality practitioners and artists. Due to the scale of the show, we've a much bigger team working on Peepshow. We usually have about 12 -15 people on a Frantic Assembly project. For Peepshow there are over 35! We were keen to make sure the project had a substantial amount of resources, believing that such an ambitious idea needed to have a strong profile in realisation. It was important that the show was produced as a mid scale touring project, playing a to venues for more than just a couple of days and incorporating a big design element within the show. On average, Peepshow has taken approximately a year more to organise than other Frantic Assembly projects'.*

Vicki Coles, Frantic Administrative Director



### 2a) Design Aspirations: The Director / Designer relationship and the *Peepshow* set

The way in which the piece is presented on stage is integral to *Peepshow*. Unlike any other Frantic Assembly show it has a very literal setting. Whilst being open to light and a certain amount of free movement we still wanted the set to represent separate lives, physically isolated yet all the while reminding the audience that they are voyeurs. We talked to Dick Bird (the designer) about private lives being lived next door to each other, of the sense of being able to spy on these lives, piecing information about them as we go. Together we talked about partly demolished buildings, where we see the bathrooms, toilets, wallpaper – all of the private touches that make it intriguing and difficult to look at. We talked about an outside space that was shared, a lift that might be come a toilet, a shower, a peepshow booth. We wanted to explore a reality that was very naturalistic in its parameters giving clear definition between character's rooms, and between space in the tower block. By setting up this convention, the breaking of such rules would be a very powerful image, helping us to suggest the subtext of the relationships and create a magic within the gritty reality of the piece.



#### i) The concept of 'The Viewer' and 'The Viewed'

*"I take them. People in the street. I like the way they - they don't know they're being watched. I like the way people behave when they think they're alone"*

Richard D to Kate (sc 28)

One of the most interesting parts of creating theatre is to look at ordinary things in a new way. This process makes you think about things rather than taking them for granted. In general we accept and understand the traditional way of looking at a play on the stage. It is an un-spoken contract: an audience sit and watch as an event (that has been rehearsed) is performed in front of them. The actors are technically aware of the audience in their performance, but within the story, the characters are not.

Within *Peepshow*, we wanted to convey a sense of voyeurism within the audience's experience (something of a paradox when you consider that the very act of creating and performing a play needs an audience to watch it). We wanted to make the audience question the very act of watching, to play the part of the person who has caught sight of something in the room across the road; the argument, the shower scene, the couple making love in their bedroom. At points, we want to make the audience question whether they should be watching this, make them relive the experience of peering into a private world that they are catching an illicit view of.

#### DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Ask your group if at any point they felt uncomfortable watching the piece?
- Which points seemed the most 'private' to the characters? If they were watching this from afar in a 'real' situation would they continue to watch? Why did they act or feel differently to this in a theatre space?
- Ask them if they've ever caught sight of people unaware of them in a house / flat by accident?
- How did watching them make them feel?

What was happening with the people involved? Ask the group to imagine what could have taken place before and after the situation described.

#### ii) The set and its hidden 'Magic'

*Peepshow's* design took clear inspiration from the reality of a 1960s / 70s tower block. The clean, geometric structures within a compartmentalised space give an ordered view, with a direct, uncomplicated slice taken out of the wall allowing the audience the overall picture. On offer to the audience is a rational and uncomplicated design, an efficient diagram of what our real life tower blocks look like from within. This regimented setting enables the audience to walk more convincingly into the world of a voyeur. The reminiscence of reality links with our own true memories of catching glimpses of unaware strangers in our past.



Once we have settled within the *Peepshow* world, the set begins to allow the action to play tricks – using devices such as trapdoors and hidden entrances, the lift shaft / shower room. The reality of the world and the characters thoughts begins to blend and we see the characters explore their subtle feelings and the subtext of the piece.

#### DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Ask your group how many times they can remember a non naturalistic event being incorporated into the action of the show?
- How did they feel when this first happened within the piece? Did it make them more comfortable in the role of 'audience' when the action involved a heightened reality?
- After Ben and George fight and make up (scene 29) their physical action takes them through their own room, into Sarah and Kate's space and then finally up and round the upper level of the set, intruding into all the other character's rooms. What does this section symbolise about the way George and Ben they feel towards each other? Why do you think George and Ben's scene passes right through the bottom level of the building and then along the top rooms? How do the other characters respond to George and Ben's movement sequence taking place in their room? Why do you think their characters are shown in this way while George and Ben's fight is taking place around them? Are there any other moments when George and Ben invade other people's rooms? (Think about the noise they make at the start, the other's reactions to it).



### Exercise 1: Exploring the nature of what an audience does or does not see

There are many tools available to the teacher/director to help performers understand their work and develop deeper understandings of context and subtext. We often 'hotseat' characters in the development of work, but a key mistake we often make is to not 'hotseat' the audience. The audience is often in possession of much more information than the performers. Theatre is not just about actors acting – it is what happens when actors act and the audience watch. Run a scene in front of people. Ask them what they see. Allow the performers to feed off this. It is valid research. The performers need to know the effect they have on an audience if they are to fully exploit this.

Get your performers on their feet. Explore potential first. It is easier to scale down rather than up.

*As the Peepshow quality is so important here is an exercise to bring the power of the voyeuristic element to the attention of the performers. It is a fun exercise in creating choreography that also serves as a brilliant example of how informative music is when used in theatre.*

#### Stage 1

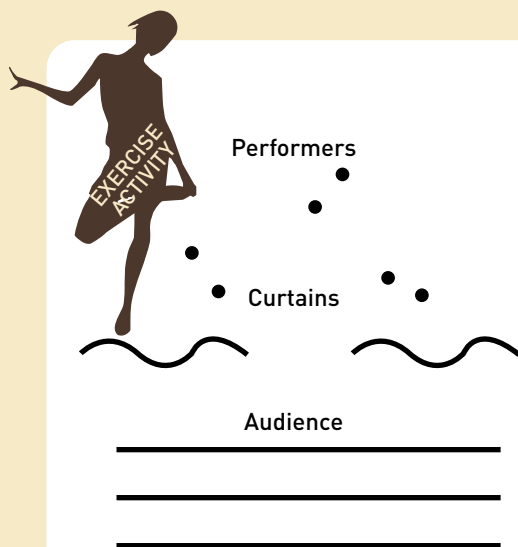
1. Select a fairly meaty dance track with a reasonably lively bpm - beats per minute (*Big Love* by Peter Heller is a Frantic favourite)
2. Split the group into, ideally, 4 small groups of between 3 and 5 performers.
3. Teach the students 2 bars of choreography based on everyday gestures of getting ready to go out. (The choreography is based on similar material used in an earlier show, *Klub*)

*The students should be asked not to 'dance' or 'mime' but to 'perform', not to move to the beat but to use the beat to keep their actions disciplined and on time. They should be looking for a slightly heightened cartoon quality and keep their eye focus on an imaginary mirror in front of them.*

4. In their small groups, the performers then create 2 more bars in a similar style to the original learned section.
5. Once the performers feel comfortable and confident with this 4 bar sequence, and have rehearsed it with the music up to speed (allow about 15/20 mins) position the groups in the four corners of the room.
6. After one bar of music ask group 1 to walk into the middle of the room and face an imaginary mirror between them and you. Getting into this position should take less than 8 counts for them to be ready to start their choreography on the first note of the next bar. As they finish they go back to their corner as group 2 enter ready to start on the next 1.

*Allow the groups to run this sequence continuously for a couple of minutes and the comic potential of the moves and music will be apparent.*





## Stage 2

1. Set the room up similarly to the diagram  
*By splitting the room like this you put the audience on one side of a two-way mirror, the characters on the other side.*
2. Create a focus point (anything, a sheet of A4 on the back wall?) for the characters.  
*It makes them look like they are looking at themselves in the imaginary mirror. Behind the mirror the audience become invisible.*
3. Choose about 8 characters, the rest will be the audience. Ask the characters to bring their choreography to the mirror. They can go through any parts of their choreography in any order, at any speed. They do not start acting or exploring any emotional content to the physical movement. It is important to leave the performance empty.
4. Music is now crucial. Use something slow, low minor key. (We often use *Gabriel* by Lamb) When the audience is in position and the characters are behind the curtains, instruct them to begin after roughly 10 seconds of music. The performance is now a completely different experience for the audience.

After watching the sequence, ask the audience:

- How did you feel watching the performance?
- What do these movements suggest?
- What do you feel could be happening in this situation?

*Generally, ideas of hope, desperation and a depth and sense of history becomes apparent within the characters.*

Then ask the audience

- How did you feel watching these characters through the mirror?

Responses might touch upon an uncomfortable, voyeuristic feeling, a sadness etc.

All of this points out a very important aspect of *Peepshow*: Sometimes an audience understands more when a piece shows them less. It is possible to evoke a deeper response to work through suggestion and guidance rather than explicit fact.



## 2b) From Initial Concept to Written Text: Writer / Directors Relationship

A director who knew both of our work very well recommended Isabel (Isabel Wright, *Peepshow* scriptwriter) to us. We read several of her scripts and liked what we saw. We spoke to her about the project, about the way we wanted to work with her. Her responses were really complimentary to the way in which we saw the work progressing. Once Isabel was on board, we sent ideas back and forward every night so that we were all up to speed with developments.

Before the script was written we had the show's synopsis, the title, the poster image, character names, ideas for choreography, lighting, the songs were also in place. In addition we supplied Isabel with various Nan Goldin images (see page 16) which we felt perfectly captured the feel of *Peepshow*. We talked extensively about what we wanted to achieve, gave her copies of Lamb's albums and asked her to watch the video of Massive Attack's *Protection* and subsequently the film *California Suite* for inspiration.

The process of working with a writer is an on going collaboration with a constant exchange of ideas, drafts, edits and responses. We would talk at points through the day and there would come a point where Isabel would want to absorb all the information, take herself away to write and then return with fresh work. As the rehearsals went on Isabel responded immediately to what was happening with the actors and to suggestions of the directors.

When working with a writer on a Frantic show, we have to get them to understand that often action speak louder than words. Our initial conversation aims with Isabel got her to think about the project like a film. That opens the imagination to all sorts of effects, to the notion that anything is possible. We feel that this is never a bad place to start from. We encouraged her to think about the show physically too, we reminded ourselves that there are lots of practitioners involved all bringing their expertise to bring the vision to life. It is important not to overwrite a Frantic Assembly script. It needs space for all the other elements to live in. Rhythm pace and tempo of speech should be as naturalistic as possible.



## Exercise 2: Building Blocks: Using Music as a Starting Point to Devise

### a) Ideas to inspire characters

1. Choose a piece of music to play to your group. It might be best to introduce your pupils to a song they are not that familiar with so that they guaranteed to listen properly, clear their minds of any preconceived ideas and any lingering images from the songs existing video.
2. After listening to the song, ask the group:
  - What does the sense of the song suggest to you?
  - What does the song make you feel like?
  - In what situation could this song be sang?
  - What kind of person could sing this song and who to?
3. Then ask your students to get into small groups. Within these groups, ask them to imagine a character whose mood is conjured by the song
  - What has happened to make that character want to sing this song? Imagine who they are and where they have come from.
  - What environment are they in?
  - What happens after the song has finished? What does the character do next?
4. Ask your students in their groups to improvise 2 mins of dialogue between the character created and one other, occurring as a result of the ideas raised.

The results of this exercise should demonstrate the limitations of this approach. The group will probably act out the song in a very literal way. If the song has little literal content, students might even struggle to find directions for their improvisations. The group will probably show work that is very similar in theme and ideas, with little variation in the scenarios created.

*When asking what the song is about, who is singing it and why, you are always heading towards one conclusion, all guided by the intention of the singer/writer/musician.*

### b) Building an Environment for the Characters

5. Then ask the groups to think about who would LISTEN to the chosen song?

- What does it say about their life,
- How does it affect them, what is going on in their life, etc.

*Asking these second set of section might give you very different results.*

6. Try a new 2 minute improvisation of dialogue again, building in the responses to the listening work. Go back to the music and run your improvisation with and without the improvised words. By looking at both runs you can decide with your students how many words your 'film/video' needs and where those words should be placed for maximum effect.'

With this approach you can escape the narrative of the song and encourage your students to make up different stories, let their imaginations fly and create mini films in their heads. (See the videos of Radiohead for example. Even some of the videos of Aerosmith provide a very simple and clear example of this!)

Once they have done this they can progress to more difficult music, to instrumental tracks. Ask them about mood, effect, etc. Without knowing it they will be responding in terms of key, rhythm, and timing. If they can fly with this then they are very close to how we get inspired by music when creating work. Sometimes songs, tunes, or even part of a tune might be the inspiration for a whole show.

These exercises can either be done in an hour plus session or ideally in a longer workshop situation (a couple of hours, even a half day?) Maybe it is an on going project and can be broken down to accommodate your timetable.

## 2c) The Casting Process: The Actor's Involvement within *Peepshow's* Development

### i) Casting the piece

Choosing the performers was a difficult process. We approached performers on recommendation and then got them together for a series of workshop auditions. The performers would attend one of these and we would recall those we were interested in for a second workshop audition. We would test their movement skills, their acting abilities and at the end of the day we would hear them sing. It was an utterly depressing experience watching brilliant performers storm through the first few stages only to bray like donkeys at the final stage. It was then that it became clear just how much we were asking of our actors. We chose two performers who had previous experience of Frantic Assembly shows. The other five were new to our way of working. Every one of them possesses an incredible energy and an openness to new ideas.

### ii) The actor's relationship to their characters' development

The ideas for a show exist long before a rehearsal, before a word has been written. When the cast has been put together, we fit them into a sketch of the show that already exists. We were still working towards a rehearsal draft at the start of rehearsals. When scenes were not complete we had a sketch so that we could still give the team a feel for the complete show. As this is a very practical approach, we talked of what the actors will be doing on stage, placing them into the show.

### iii) Why use the actor's names to identify their characters?

When it comes to writing the piece, we have been talking and using the actor's names for some time, and at that point it seems false to try to conjure up new names for those personalities.

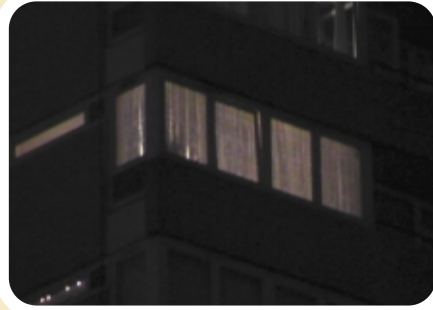
Initially we used our own names on stage because we presented very immediate, non-narrative shows. Being untrained actors we felt more comfortable just presenting ourselves on stage. As we developed narrative driven shows with new writers, the most honest way to deal with the characters still seemed to be to use the actor's names (this is not to say that the actors are the characters though).

In *Peepshow* there are two performers called Richard. This would normally necessitate that they couldn't use their real names (what we initially thought too). Then it occurred to us that if *Peepshow* was a voyeuristic slice of life then there being two Richards was perfectly valid. We decided to use the same names to our advantage. *Peepshow* is about how we understand our neighbours, how we glean information about them by our brief encounters and the scraps of noise that filter into our homes. In *Peepshow* we have created a moment where one character shouts her partner's name 'Richard', in the flat next door a lonely man turns as if it's his name that has been called. A split second later he reminds himself that it is a false hope and he returns to his work. We felt this moment spoke volumes about his life rather than exploring this area of his character within reams of dialogue.

### iv) Performing the songs within *Peepshow*

Technically this is the hardest area to maintain intimacy for the actor. The most important note to the performers was to consider the songs as part of their own lives, existing in their own heads. The songs in *Peepshow* under score the voyeuristic quality for the audience, the songs exist for and within the world of the character's situation, and are not sung for the audience's delight or empathy. The songs are a communication that the audience witnesses, not a clear dialogue between actor and those sat watching.





## 2d) Rehearsal Room Technique: The Leap from Page to Stage

For Frantic Assembly the most important aspect of any devising process is knowing exactly what we want to achieve at the end of it. Before a word was written, or a move thought of we knew what *Peepshow* tasted like, felt like. We could talk about it in terms of atmosphere, effect, emotion – some of the things often considered to be finishing touches. Once we know what we want, we can then devise or instruct improvisation.

Sometimes to get the right results we have to work in a round about way, but to get the best out of a performer's improvisation it is crucial to let them work within strict parameters. For us, it is never about thrashing around in the dark, we see it as the director's job to give the actors freedom within his / her framework.

We allowed the performers time to get used to their partner performers as the believability of these relationships is paramount to the success of *Peepshow*. They then had to get used to their performing space, as they would spend much of the show (and rehearsals) confined to this area. They had to be physically comfortable in their room. We talked about the overall picture, the aims of the piece, the particular feel that we were looking for so that the actors were aware of the fundamental parameters we were working within.

### i) How the scenes were realised:

From initial readings the performers were asked to summarise their understanding of the scene. They condense the scene and act it out without words and no mime – just in terms of physical space and relationships – it only has to make sense for the performers. They then work on a bigger, almost dance version exploring their understanding of the physicality, which they roughly set and perform. At this stage it is amazing what information the rest of the assembled cast can glean from this performance. It is packed with potential meaning and depth and tells a much more interesting story than expected.

From here we change the physical rules. The actors face each other, some distance apart. During this next exercise the actors must never leave this plane. They have a read through of the scene and do not 'perform' anything. They think only about the words and say them.

Before they say a line they must decide whether that line is sympathetic to the person it is directed to, i.e. their partner opposite. If the line takes them emotionally closer to the other person then they can step forward, several steps if it seems right. The reverse is true if the line is considered unsympathetic. What this simple exercise gives is a clear starting point and an end point to a scene. We see the ground that a character might have gained or lost within a short space of time. We also find that rich subtext where a character discovers they may be saying one thing but they are actually meaning another. We find that the characters parry and thrust with their dialogues and, fascinatingly, that the upper hand is often gained through retreating, by creating a vacuum that the other character feels compelled to fill. Through this exercise we see written large the often subtle war-games that exist in everyday conversations.

These exercises make the words on the page explode with subtext and meaning. It is the performer's next task to almost forget all the physical and textual information, or rather, let it seep down into the subconscious and return to a simple performance of the text on the page. While not applying any of the previous interpretations directly to the performance, what the performers do have at their disposal is a vastly improved knowledge of what is going on and a feel for both the physical and verbal potential of the piece.

One of the most important lessons for the performers and the director comes from all the information that has cropped up through this process. The assembled cast (those not in the scene) have commented and shared their thoughts on what they found from watching the simple exercise. Their comments often show a deep understanding or impression of the characters lives together, often without them saying a word. The creative team must recognise the amount of effort an audience is willing to invest. Often less is more. It is the director's job to guide an interested audience towards his/her desired conclusion / understanding / effect in the most economical way. Understanding that an audience desperately wants to be part of that process and make all the connections is the crucial first step. The audience is your friend. If you are in control of what you want to say the audience will help you say it.

The character work with the performers comes from an understanding of the overall intention. This is a particular performance style and relies on bringing the audience to you. It is more 'fly on the wall' TV documentary than theatre.



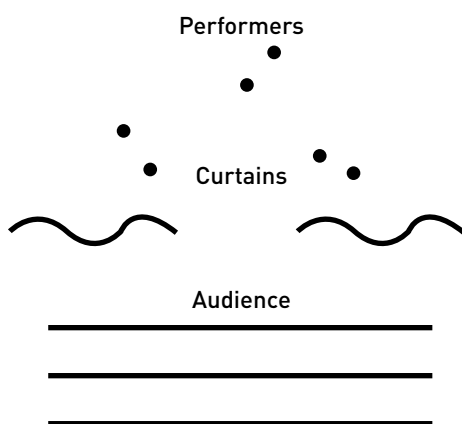
### EXERCISE 3

#### Stage One

1. Ask a couple of students to improvise a domestic argument in front of the rest of the group. At a point in the argument one of the characters must say "Sshhh keep your voice down".
2. Run it again. Try thought tapping the performers and the audience. Ask what is happening here? If you want you could grill the performers as their characters, asking after motivation, relationships. I would guess that the initial responses may not offer much more than what is instantly apparent: Two people are arguing. They are not getting on etc.

#### Stage Two

1. Set the space as before.



2. Place the couple behind the curtains (so that they are now partially obscured).

In front of the curtains (and in full view of the audience) place a third performer on a bed (or something similar)

Give them a book to read, or a mundane task like brushing their hair or getting ready for bed.

Place a stereo in their 'room' and play a piece of music at a medium level

3. Instruct the 3rd performer that they must only be absorbed in their own task.

Ask the couple behind the 3rd performer to run their argument improvisation again, but they must not respond to the 3rd performer and vice versa.

4. After roughly 1 or 2 minutes ask the 3rd performer to go to the stereo and turn the music up, and then return to their task.

Once this sequence has been run ask the audience about what they have seen.

Ask your students:

- Why did the 3rd character turn the music up?
- Why didn't they tell the other characters to stop arguing?
- Why did the other characters not want to be heard?

This time they will probably answer in much more depth, implying a sense of history. They may sympathise with the 3rd character, talk about aspects of their life, etc. They might even suggest that they understand or sympathise with the arguing couple. You could try running the scene again, this time with a contrasting piece of music. How does this change the audience's response? Do the actors feel different with this change of tempo around the scene?

#### Examining the difference between the two stages:

On offer to the audience in stage one was the immediate situation and very little other sources of depth to the situation.

In stage two, the audience see less of the argument but consider its impact within a much more detailed context. The audience have been asked to invest in a situation, to become part of the creative process, making connections / meanings.

Ask the actors how they feel after hearing the responses to Stage 2. Hopefully, they should feel excited and rewarded that their work had evoked such a range of emotional response.

This layering of techniques and tools should not be seen as a disempowering process for an actor. It is a key experience when exploring that performers relationship with their audience, and is a strong and emotive tool to learn. Sometimes it is right to reach to your audience, but sometimes it is right to let them come to you.

## CHAPTER 3. THEMES, IMAGES AND DEVICES

The sections below give an idea of areas of particular interest within the realisation of *Peepshow*. You may want to use these pointers for discussion topics within your classroom, or essay based work for coursework requirements.



### A) COMMUNICATION

#### Suggested Essay Title:

*"Within Peepshow, Frantic Assembly portray a world of relationships brought to breaking point by the pressures of communication. How do the characters present this ongoing theme within the piece and what tension does it cause?"*

*Richard D "I want us to talk properly"*

*Sharon "I want us to tell the truth"*

*Richard M "...What have you got to tell me...You gonna be honest at last?"*

All the characters have problems or issues that they hold back on within *Peepshow*, and this lack of communication drives the main tensions and conflicts of the piece. A line from *Bonfire* (sc19) is one of the rare occasions that all the characters sing in unison and highlights this theme: "The time is long overdue for a house clearing of the soul". This is a sentiment obviously shared by all of them, and a symptom of their problems and hidden thoughts.

Within the relationships, lack of communication can be seen as the main point of breakdown and tension between all the characters. Two of the characters actually talk about or are seen learning new languages with a hope of improving their situation: "I'm going to learn some languages. That's the future. I'm going to learn to say 'hello, its very pleasant to meet you' in ten different countries" (George to Ben, sc 11) and of course Richard D is seen doing this while he learns Lithuanian in his room. They fail to spot the fact that you can learn to talk in a variety of ways, but you still need to communicate your feelings to improve connection and your relationship.

Sharon and Richard M are growing apart, his main drive being his shady dealings and secretive lifestyle. Sharon never knows where he is, he's always on the phone to mystery people and is reticent to state that Sharon's flat is his permanent address. In the piece he is often removed from the action, loitering on the top of the stairs and not connecting with his girlfriend, who spends more time looking at the TV screen than with him. He sets Sharon a challenge, testing her trust by placing the box in her room and effectively keeping a secret from her to challenge her belief in their relationship and him. His lack of communication about his life is causing Sharon to retreat further and further into a life of fantasy, escaping into dream worlds, songs and the TV.

*"I just want a conversation - All day at work its like I'm invisible. Its like no one's gonna stop and ask my opinion"* (Sharon, scene 33)

Ben and George have stopped communicating rationally and calmly, pushing the couple to breaking point.

*Ben "I'm not going to be the first to speak"*

*George "Neither am I"* (sc 9)

Their conversation goes round and round, the same argument happening two or three times during the piece. Their conversations are emotionally draining (as explored within their physical scenes). Their characters can talk, but seem to lack the logic and pragmatism to develop this further from their initial gripes and moans. They seem to be giving up on the relationship, stuck in the paralysis of familiarity and routine. Finally the catalyst for progression within their relationship is again about communication, as George explains the real reason she blew up at the party that evening:

*"I watched you and Sam from the doorway, this silent communication of glances and gestures. The way you two can share a thought without saying a word. And I knew I'd never seen you be that free with me"* (sc 24)

Kate and Sarah have moved in together but both have very different objectives within the new situation.

*Sarah "If you two get together, I'll miss talking to you"* (sc 25)

Sarah obviously finds it difficult to not communicate her feelings, at first talking in code to Kate and using her brother to veil her own feelings.

*Sarah "You have to tell him how you feel. You have to"*

However, when the truth about Sarah's motivating thoughts emerges, Kate responds with silence, refusing to talk about the situation.

*Kate "say something for fuck's sake"*

*Sarah "I lost it"*

*Kate "I don't even know you do I?"*

*We don't even know each other at all"*

*Sarah "I was jealous"*

*Kate "I'm going out"*

*Sarah "Kate - "*

*Kate "I don't understand"*

(pause)

*Sarah "You do understand"*

(Sarah tries to touch Kate)

*Kate "Get off me! Just fucking get off me!"*

(sc 32)

Richard D at first appears a loner and initially seems the most reclusive and uncommunicative of the characters.

*Richard D "I'm not very good at..."*

*Kate "forming sentences?"* (sc 17)

He spends his time learning Lithuanian, bonding with an electronic voice and seeming dysfunctional to the outside world. Eventually a ray of hope shines through the four rooms, as Richard manages to speak on the other end of the phone to his unidentified friend.

*"Hello? Its - Its great to speak with you."*

Finally someone in the piece is communicating in a measured, honest and generous way. It seems the character that appeared the most distant and isolated has the most balanced relationship of them all.





## B) PRIVATE LIVES – WHAT THE CHARACTERS SHARE ABOUT THEIR OWN THOUGHTS AND DESIRES

### Suggested Essay title:

“In Frantic Assembly’s *Peepshow*, the audience witnesses elements of the character’s hidden desires that other characters around them do not see. How is this portrayed and what stage devices are used to share this information with the audience?”

Most of the characters have hidden desires that become fairly obvious to the audience, but not necessarily to those around them. Richard D wants to talk to someone special who is far away. Sharon wants to have a heart to heart with Richard M, and holds a secret flame for someone else. Sarah is secretly in love with her best friend. Richard M wants to be rich and successful, if only Sharon can hold on until the big deal comes along. George desperately wants the passion back in her life. Ben knows there is someone out there better suited to him than George. (These in themselves are not the only desires these characters have. Nor are they the most important. They are probably just the most obvious).

The audience are sometimes party to the secrets that the characters covet.

We are also, at the time of writing, playing with an unexplained element in the characters lives. We are thinking about a warm glow that enters his or her room, something that no one else knows about. We are not interested in defining this. It is purely left for the audience to figure out. There is no definitive answer to what it means. Each event is a moment of mystery that we happen to observe. They might be indicative of other stories existing in the characters lives, ones that we are only partially aware of. It serves to remind us that even as voyeurs we never get to see the whole picture.

Even if this idea never makes it to the final piece it is an interesting reminder of the audience / ‘Peepshow’ relationship.

Other secrets suggested within the production that could be of interest to explore with your group:

- Is it Kate’s ‘character’ in the peep show booth at the start? If so, why? What does she (Kate/the woman) do in there? (Remember Kate is the only character that is comfortable being watched) What does this image say about her?
- Do you think Sharon is actually in love with Ben or is he just symbolic of the kind of man she wants, or even the kind of man she wants Richard M to be?
- In the physical sequence based around the lift (after Sc16), are the characters playing themselves or does this sequence become something else within the piece?



## C) MAGIC

### Suggested Essay title:

**“Within *Peepshow*, Frantic Assembly play with the conventions of realism and fantasy. How is the overall theatrical experience enhanced by the contrasting use of these conventions, and in what ways do the company use them to explore the dreams and aspirations of the characters?”**

Within the gritty reality of the relationships within *Peepshow*, the piece uses magic and fantasy within its stage device to unfold much of the plot, the subtext and the character's dreams and aspirations. Coupled with the use of the set (with its trap doors and constantly changing lift area) there are events within the script and the action that make the leap from reality to fantasy.

Richard D is learning Lithuanian in his room. This very ordered and clear voice tape shows his character as slightly eccentric, but also intelligent and logical in his approach to life. The tape player that spills out the Lithuanian language is robotic and factual, and at first seems an example of Richard D's loneliness and inability to communicate with anything other than a machine. This preconception is turned on its head as the tape slips into a more personalised message to Richard:

*“I want to make love to you Richard... You know you want to, all you have to do is believe”* (sc 26)

Are we in Richard D's dream world here? Is he fantasising about the voice on the tape or is it really an echo of his relationship with the person who owns this voice in reality? Is Richard really listening to the Lithuanian to learn the language or have a pseudo-conversation with the person talking?

The songs are a hyper real element of *Peepshow*. They are used to underscore the feelings of the individuals and to create possible subtext within the character's journeys. The first song (*Zero* – sc 12) happens after a long period of dialogue at the beginning of the piece. The directors have asked the audience to acclimatise to the peep show environment. They have first allowed the action to unravel without songs. This establishes a world of dialogue for a considerable period of time, the audience grow used to what they see. When a song arrives, the new device comes as a surprise, a welcome added dimension to the piece and to the character's lives. The songs are sang in a 'realistic' way – drawing upon the everyday style of singing along to a song whilst putting our clothes away or moisturising our face. The fantasy happens within the world of the play, as characters sing together, or at differing points within the same song, symbolising the overall themes and enveloping the piece within one vision.

Sharon is the character whose inner dreams and fantasies are most explored within the action of the piece. The sex scene with her, Richard M and Ben explores the confusion within her own mind, symbolising how she feels about her existing relationship and her fantasies about other potential ones. This again is explored in the lift – the music cutting abruptly from one song to another as we see her address the audience directly and use Ben as a silent image of her desires.

*Sharon “He makes my mind stray*

*He makes my eyes wander*

*It's him*

*It's the way we kiss and all I can taste is the disappointment*

*But when we meet in the street. I know.*

*You can sense it too.*

*You're meant to be with me.*

*You're meant to be with me.”* (sc 36)

Richard M's box is a clear mixture of reality and fantasy within the piece. It is used as a device for tension and suspense. We know from the offset that Sharon will not be able to resist opening the box. It is a test that she will surely fail, and signals an inevitable hiatus within their relationship. When the box is opened and we see the bubbles streaming out, the action takes a clear step from fact to fiction. Storing bubbles in a box is impossibility, but this very fact symbolises the futility of his test. We see the future of their relationship escape before our eyes, never to be replaced or recaptured again.

Richard M's character talks about the moon and the sky within the piece, symbols traditionally linked with magic and strange events.

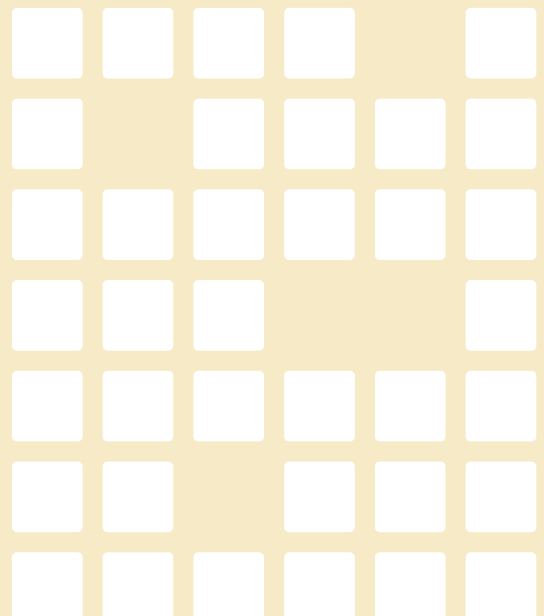
*Richard M “You seen the moon tonight?”*

*Sarah “The moon?”*

*Richard M “Its amazing. A full moon. Weird shit happens when there's a full moon”* (sc23)

He even describes himself as “Moon boy” as though this is something he has regularly been called in the past. This could be because he stays up all night, or perhaps is a telling comment on his mental state. He obviously feels he has something to prove to the world, promising Sharon she will “Live like a princess” (sc 38) as he feels her slipping further and further away from him.

The sky and the projections are used in a magical, 'unrealistic' way, changing and moving to show time and to symbolise tensions and energy within the piece. The skies add a further dimension to the world of the characters, an ever present reminder of the bigger picture, the world outside and of the seven little lives.





## D) WATCHING AND SPYING

### Suggested Essay title:

**“In Frantic Assembly’s *Peepshow* the audience exists as voyeurs watching the character’s lives. What other examples of spying and watching occur within the world of the play, and what do these instances show about the character’s relationships to each other, and the status games that they play?”**

Most obviously, the experience of *Peepshow* for the audience is one of voyeur – lighting states drive the focus of the action around the four rooms of the set, snapping from story to story and dictating what the audience sees and when they see it. Some conversations happen in the dark, some bounce between rooms, showing the similarity and empathy between character’s situations. The audience is made to feel that they are illicit in their role, snatching a glimpse of private lives or thoughts of these seven people.

The audience is not the only party to spying within the show. Richard D enjoys taking Polaroid snaps of people when they aren’t looking, enjoying the sensation of peering into someone else’s world unannounced. When he is given the opportunity to take a photo of Kate whilst she is posing for him, he can’t – for him the thrill of watching is the driving force behind his strange hobby.

Richard M spends much of the piece watching from the safety of the flat’s balcony, keeping watch suspiciously and on the look out for potential trouble that might result from his shady dealings. Always ready to run, he lingers in the lobby area, allowing himself a temporary status as resident in the flats (“I’m here a lot. But this isn’t my permanent address” – sc 22). He silently hears and sees much of the goings on around him in the other rooms, but keeps himself to himself and is reluctant to give much away.

Sarah watches Kate and Richard D from the outside of this flat before she bursts in on them and breaks up their dancing. She also watches Kate as she dances in her red dress and then changing afterwards into her relaxed clothes. Although it is Sarah who has hidden feelings for Kate, the status within these scenes balances with Kate, rather than Sarah. We have to ask ourselves how much Kate enjoys being watched? How unaware is she really of Sarah’s intentions and feelings? Does Kate lead Sarah on when she undresses in front of her? She turns towards her (rather than away) when she changes out of her red

dress. Kate is the only character to alluringly pull a blind or curtain in her room, creating a privacy between her and Sarah at that point (or is she lingering by the window for an outside observer?). Who is in control here, Kate or Sarah? If we took the words out of these two ‘changing’ scenes, what would that reveal about the true status of the characters?

George tells Ben that she watched him at the party. Overseeing his interaction with Sam has been the catalyst for the stormy night of events between them “I watched you and Sam from the doorway” (Sc 24). Ben is the character most aware of being watched or overheard within the piece (sc 5 Ben “Keep your voice down”. Sc 8 Richard M “You live downstairs?” Ben “Yeah. You might have heard a bit of noise earlier?”)

Sharon’s life is one of a perpetual voyeur. She uses the TV to escape her world, choosing to watch the lives of others rather than face up to the stresses of her own world. By placing the TV on the wall above the bed, we are able to see the reflections of the images in her face, flickering away. She peers into a world she is removed from, watching the stories of others unfold, guided by the choices of the cameras and director. This image echoes the experience of the *Peepshow* audience, peering into her world – compelled to watch but at the whim of the production as to what and when they can see events unraveling.

In the final scene, Richard D pulls his curtain across the bed and talks to his mystery voice. By doing this, the audience are consciously excluded from the action with his move. This final image underscores the fact that as voyeurs, the audience are never in control of what and when they see things, and that it’s only by chance that they have witnessed the unfolding events of *Peepshow* at all.





## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND INSPIRATION SO FAR

Member of the audience for Hymns thought that we should have sung at a particular moment in the show.

Georgina Lamb's Dad's continual suggestions that a couple of songs would do wonders for our shows

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FRANTIC ASSEMBLY'S

peepshow

# FRANTIC ASSEMBLY

For more info on booking workshops or participating in a series of INSET days in Spring 2003 check out details on the education page of our website at [www.franticassembly.co.uk](http://www.franticassembly.co.uk) or e-mail us at [education@franticassembly.co.uk](mailto:education@franticassembly.co.uk).

## PEEPSHOW CAST

Kate **KATE ALDERTON**

Sarah **SARAH BEARD**

Sharon **SHARON DUNCAN-BREWSTER**

Richard (Loner) **RICHARD DEMPSEY**

Ben **BEN JOINER**

George **GEORGINA LAMB**

Richard (Thief) **RICHARD MYLAN**

Lithuanian Voice Over **INGEBORGA DAPKUNAITE**

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Written by **ISABEL WRIGHT**

Devised by **FRANTIC ASSEMBLY**

Directors **SCOTT GRAHAM, STEVEN HOGGETT**

Songs and Creative Involvement **ANDY BARLOW, LOU RHODES (LAMB)**

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Design **DICK BIRD**

Lighting Design **NATASHA CHIVERS**

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Company Stage Manager/ Video Artist **JEREMY NICHOLLS**

Sound Engineer **MARCUS WADLAND**

Re-lights **MICHELLE GREEN**

Technical ASM **NICHOLAS SHAW**

Production Runner **JENNY MADDOX**

Set Build **PLYMOUTH THEATRE PLYMOUTH WORKSHOP,**  
At Theatre Royal Plymouth

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