

CLOD ENSEMBLE

# The Feast During the Plague

## [REDUX 2020]



Clod Ensemble - *The Feast During the Plague* (1995). Images Richard Nicholson.

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# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Introduction

**Twenty-five years ago today, we began to rehearse Clod Ensemble's first-ever production.**

It was called *The Feast During the Plague* and it was based on a 'little tragedy' by Alexander Pushkin about a group of villagers who attempt (with varying degrees of success) to celebrate life together during a terrible plague.

When planning how to mark our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary we did not imagine that we would find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic. In light of the current circumstances, we have decided to reimagine *The Feast During the Plague* to revisit and rethink the ethics of gathering, as we struggle – both individually and collectively – to comprehend illness and contagion, to work out how to connect and care for each other without physical contact, to quiet the urge to congregate, and to navigate the moral complexities of having a good time whilst others are suffering.



Clod Ensemble - *The Feast During the Plague* (1995). Images Richard Nicholson.

## Background

**Pushkin wrote this ‘little tragedy’ when he was in quarantine during a cholera epidemic.**

*The Feast During the Plague* is a free translation of part of a scene from a rambling historical melodrama by the Scottish writer John Wilson, *City of the Plague*, which Pushkin read, in 1829. It depicts a society living perpetually under the stress of disease. The feasters display a wide spectrum of knowledge and ignorance about the disease, and different attitudes towards their own and others’ mortality. [See page 11 for Historical Context on Puskin’s Text.](#)

Our production transformed Pushkin’s 8-page text into an hour-long performance with an equal measure of carnivalesque revelry, argument, lament, dancing and song - with nine actors and seven musicians squeezed into a small studio at Battersea Arts Centre. The musical score drove the action, inspired by both classical music and British folk song – from delicate passages for strings, through to a riotous percussive jam in which the entire company played saucepans and cooking utensils.

We made this piece in 1995, as a group of 20 something-year-olds (some of us just out of the Lecoq school). We were inspired to do it after seeing a Russian production in Manchester around the time of Freddie Mercury’s death in 1991. Then, we were interpreting the play through a lens of the devastating impact of AIDS. It was the beginning of an ongoing concern and fascination with health, illness, medicine and care which we have returned to again and again over the years in many different ways.

But the reality of a global pandemic is not something we had ever fully comprehended, even though we had all been warned by scientists that it could happen at any moment. Perhaps it’s too soon to begin to try and process what is happening right now and certainly, for many, escapism is the preferred order of the day in challenging times. But because we are struck by how pertinent Pushkin’s 170-year-old text is to our current situation and slightly freaked by the timing of this anniversary, we felt it was fitting to return to *The Feast During the Plague*, and we are inviting those of you who want to dive into this subject matter, to contribute.

# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Invitation to Contribute

We have always created material through a process of transposition – one set of movements becoming another. Pieces develop slowly, created by different people over time, with material mutating and evolving in the rehearsal process to become intrinsic to the final production. So, what we are proposing below is not so far away from our normal work process. We're interested in the fact that movement and music will pass from one person to another in a creative and constructive way. Over the last week, composer Paul Clark has re-built three sections of the show's original score, using new recordings made by musicians currently staying inside and one original cello recording from a rehearsal of the original production in 1995.

We invite you to create either a short sequence of movement in response to one of these three rehearsal tracks, or to add your voice (or another instrument) to the choir of a song. Then, if you want to, we'd love you to record it and send it to us.

We plan to create a live performance and installation sometime in the not too distant future. We'll add all contributions to a bank of source material for our company of dancers and performers to work with. Your contribution may be developed by someone or it may be used in its original form. We also plan to share some of these clips online over the coming months. Everyone who contributes will be listed as a collaborator.

We're all adjusting to new conditions right now, so we are not setting a deadline for your contribution as such. Instead, we will be welcoming your footage for the period that the country is in lockdown over the next few weeks and months.

[Download the rehearsal tracks here](#)



Clod Ensemble - *The Feast During the Plague* (1995). Images Richard Nicholson.

## Instructions for Movement

- Listen to [the rehearsal tracks](#) and choose one to create your movement sequence in response to. You can either choose a section of a track, or the whole thing.
- Please film your movement with the music clearly audible. If possible, please film against a white wall or plain background.
- Please respect physical distancing.
- Send the video to us via [WeTransfer.com](#) to [kit@clodensemble.com](mailto:kit@clodensemble.com). You are welcome to send us some notes about your piece if you would like to.
- Please complete our [Contribution Form](#). Your contribution will be added to a bank of source material for our company of performers to work with in the not too distant future. It may be developed by someone or it may be used in its original form.

## Instructions for Song

**There are three ways to contribute:**

### **Be part of the choir**

- Download [The Winter Song](#) rehearsal track. Click on the 'More' box and select 'Download'.
- Find the lyrics below. If you can read music, [find the score on page 7](#).
- Sing as many verses as you like – feel free to harmonise or use the score – you can take any line in any register and sing as beautifully or roughly as you like. Composer Paul Clark will mix the choir in different ways for each verse.
- Send the recording of your part (without the backing track) to us via [WeTransfer.com](#) to [kit@clodensemble.com](mailto:kit@clodensemble.com)
- Please complete our [Contribution Form](#).

### **Add an instrument to the track**

- Follow the instructions as above, but add an instrumental part of any kind, electronic or acoustic, to any part of [The Winter Song](#).

### **Be part of the saucepan ensemble**

- Follow the instructions as above, but add a percussion part to [The Winter Song](#), playing on saucepans or other kitchen utensils. You can either double an existing part or add one of your own invention. If your neighbours don't like loud noise, verses 1 and 5 would suit quiet playing.

# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Lyrics – The Winter Song

When great Winter he throws  
At his bitterest foes  
Shaggy legions of frost, ice and snow -  
We'll meet them with the feasting's glow  
Oh we'll meet them with the feast's glad glow.

The Cruel Queen and her hosts  
A rich harvest she boasts,  
And her Spade taps our doors night and day...  
What can we do but pray?  
Oh what can we do now but pray?

Let us shut out the Plague  
Like the Winter's rampage!  
We'll sing and our goblets we'll drain  
To the Plague's reign to the Plague's reign.  
Oh we'll drink to its universal reign.

There's a savage delight  
In the thick of the fight,  
The chasm, the ocean's dark rage,  
The whirlwind the smell of the Plague  
Oh the whirlwind, and the smell of the Plague.

In what threatens with death  
All our mortal breath,  
If we'd only care to see  
There's joy, immortality  
Oh there's joy and there's immortality!

To the Plague then all praise -  
She'll not darken our days!  
Let's drink while the cup overflows,  
To Maid of the Rose, the Maid of the Rose!  
Oh the breath of the Maid of the Rose!

Based on a version by Antony Wood from his translation of *The Feast during the Plague*  
by Alexander Pushkin, copyright © Antony Wood 1982, 1987.

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## Lyrics – Mary's Song

I walked out by myself  
To the sweet fields of Yarrow  
And its heart was so still  
This night of the week  
But the song of the bonny burn  
Sounded like sorrow  
And grief went to dance  
With a laugh on his on his cheek

Sick silence  
Sick lonesomeness  
Were bewildering  
The morning smiled  
But no church bell was ringing  
The church door was shut  
But no psalm tune was singing

In sick thoughts I drowned  
As the moonshine was beaming on the clock tower  
The terrible light on the dial was streaming  
But the still finger told not the hour of the night

In spring time its eerie  
When the land rejoices  
And laughs back to heaven  
With gratitude bright

To listen  
But nowhere hear voices  
When man's soul is dark  
In the season of light

# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Winter Song *The Feast During the Plague*

Paul Clark 1995

Lead Vocal

When great Win-ter he throws at his bit-ter-est foes shag-gy le-gions of frostice and snow \_\_\_ we'll

Lead

meet them with \_\_\_ the feast-ing's glow oh \_\_\_ we'll meet When with the feast's glad glow \_\_\_\_\_

Lead

A

The cruel Queen and her hosts a rich har - vest she boasts and her  
The cruel Queen and her hosts a rich har - vest she boasts and her

Lead

Spade taps our doors night and day what can we do \_\_\_ but pray oh \_\_\_ what  
Spade taps our doors night and day what can we do \_\_\_ but pray \_\_\_ oh \_\_\_ what

Lead

can we do \_\_\_ now but pray let us  
can we do \_\_\_ now but pray let us  
can we do \_\_\_ now but pray let us

# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Winter Song, p. 2

**B**

shut out the plague like the Win - ter's ram - page we'll sing and our gob - lets we'll drain \_\_\_\_\_ to the

shut out the plague like the Win - ter's ram - page we'll sing and our gob - lets we'll drain \_\_\_\_\_ to the

Lead  
8 shut out the plague like the Win - ter's ram - page we'll sing and our gob - lets we'll drain \_\_\_\_\_ to the

17

Plague's reign \_\_\_\_\_ to the plague's reign Oh \_\_\_\_\_ we'll drink to its u - ni - ver - sal reign

Plague's reign \_\_\_\_\_ to the plague's reign Oh \_\_\_\_\_ we'll drink to its u - ni - ver - sal reign

Lead  
8 Plague's reign \_\_\_\_\_ to the plague's reign Oh \_\_\_\_\_ we'll drink to its u - ni - ver - sal reign \_\_\_\_\_

**C**

21

There's a sa - vage de - light in the thick of the fight the cha - sm the o - cean's dark rage the

There's a sa - vage de - light in the thick of the fight the cha - sm the o - cean's dark rage the

Lead  
8 There's a sa - vage de - light in the thick of the fight the cha - sm the o - cean's dark rage the

24

whirl - wind \_\_\_\_\_ the smell of the plague Oh \_\_\_\_\_ the whirl - wind and the smell of the

whirl - wind \_\_\_\_\_ the smell of the plague Oh \_\_\_\_\_ the whirl - wind and the smell of the

Lead  
8 whirl - wind \_\_\_\_\_ the smell of the plague Oh \_\_\_\_\_ the whirl - wind and the smell of the

# CLOD ENSEMBLE

## Winter Song, p. 3

27

plague

plague

plague

*p*

Oh

Oh

plague

In what threat-ens with death all our mor-tal breath if

30

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

we'd on-ly care to see there's Joy im-mor-ta-li-ty Oh there's

33

Oh

Oh

Oh

Oh

*f*

joy and there's im-mor-ta-li-ty To the

**E**

Plague then all praise she'll not dar-ken our days Let's drink while the cup o-ver flows to the

38

Maid of the Rose the Maid of the Rose Oh the breath of the Maid of the Rose

## Synopsis

### **Synopsis of our 1995 musical adaptation of *The Feast During the Plague***

A group of Londoners gather surreptitiously.

A Young Man gives a speech in honour of a lost friend and proposes a toast.

The Master of Revels (Walsingham) insists they toast in silence and invites Mary to sing a song 'sad and slow'.

Mary sings.

After her song ends, Mary is attacked by her jealous friend, Louisa, for moaning and for being sentimental. They fight.

A cart passes laden with dead, Louisa faints.

The Master of the Revels leads a song he has written in honour of the Plague - a triumphant celebration of life at its limits.

Enter a Priest, who reprimands the feasters for wantonly disturbing the grieving of the bereaved and the sanctity of the dead.

He conjures the company, upon the name of Christ and the Master of the Revels recently deceased mother, to go back to their homes.

The Master of The Revels insists on his preference for diversion and pleasure despite the pure memories of his buried wife and mother.

The Priest leaves. The Master of Revels remains at table lost in thought.

## Historical Context

### Pushkin's 'Little Tragedy' *The Feast during the Plague*

This miniature drama in blank verse is the last-completed in a set of four similar pieces completed within a fortnight in October-November 1830 when Pushkin was caught up in quarantine in the country during a cholera epidemic. The form of these pieces was taken from the English poet Barry Cornwall's *Dramatic Scenes* (1819), written as expressive actors' showpieces in climactic situations. Pushkin's Little Tragedies investigate problems and conflicts without coming to conclusions: in turn avarice, envy, the persona of Don Juan, death by epidemic. They are the nearest works in stature to Shakespeare that Russian literature can offer.

*The Feast during the Plague* is a free translation of part of a scene from a rambling historical melodrama by the Scottish writer John Wilson, *City of the Plague*, first published in 1819 and reissued in Paris in the original, which Pushkin read, in 1829. Pushkin took the setting, London in the plague years of 1666–67, from Wilson, the characters being young naval officers of the English fleet home from the Dutch wars. But the fragment he lit upon for his treatment concerns an extreme situation ripe for opening up conflicting possibilities. Stark clashes run through the whole of this material: human defiance in the face of nature's murderous hostility, the exhilaration of looking death in the face, Christian mourning vis-à-vis pagan celebration, the choice between faithful love and the consolations of the afterlife on one hand and the life of immediate and damnable pleasure on the other.

There is conflict and situation here that Pushkin experienced to the hilt himself. He was exasperated by being turned back without prior warning from successive borders of quarantined regions when trying to undertake a journey back to Moscow from the small eastern estate he had been visiting on inheriting it from his father, who was trying to give him some sorely needed financial support before his marriage in the midst of protracted haggling with a demanding prospective mother-in-law. At the same time he was beginning to have doubts about tying himself down in marriage anyway; another live relationship was still alive. The two original song lyrics with which he replaced Wilson's, and his judicious editing and pruning of his selected fragment, is a miraculous transformation of literary base metal into gold.

The three months overall during which Pushkin was forced to remain in the country resulted in a miracle in terms of his own achievement – the most productive period of his entire life. The other works he wrote at this time besides the Little Tragedies included the last two chapters of *Eugene Onegin*, the prose *Tales of Belkin*, a narrative poem in ottava rima and some thirty of his finest short lyric poems.

by Antony Wood

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## Visual References

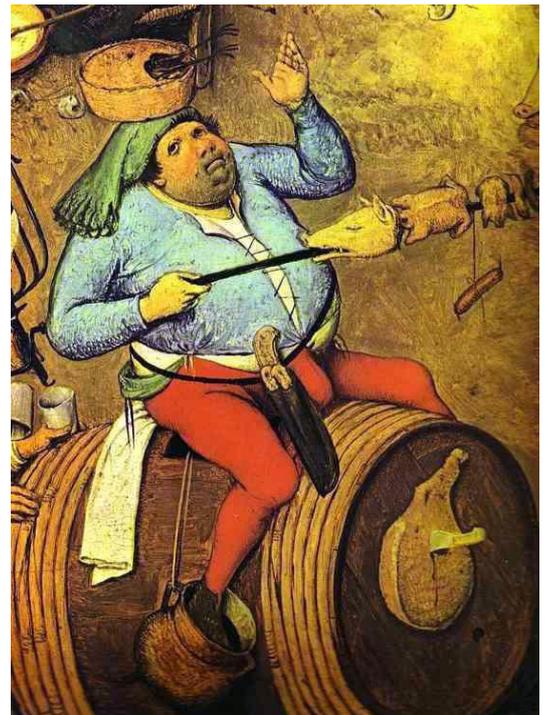
As part of our rehearsal process, Clod Ensemble often draws on paintings to inspire movement and like many other theatre makers (Brecht being one of them), we return to the paintings of Pieter Breughel the Elder again and again. For *The Feast During The Plague*, we particularly drew on *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* c.1559, *Dulle Griet* c.1563, and *The Triumph of Death* c.1562.

“Even though Breughel manages to balance his contrasts he never merges them into one another, nor does he practise the separation of comic and tragic; his tragedy contains a comic element and his comedy a tragic one.”

**Bertold Brecht**



Detail of *The Triumph of Death*



Detail of *The Battle between Carnival and Lent*

[View the images here](#)

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## Audio

You can hear Conor Lovett reading the Priest's monologue from the Pushkin [here](#).

Based on a version by Antony Wood from his translation of *The Feast during the Plague* by Alexander Pushkin  
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## Credits

<b><i>Mary's Song</i></b>	Melanie Pappenheim (vocal), Rakhi Singh (violin), Calina de la Mare (viola), David Kadumukasa (cello)
<b><i>Louisa's Lament</i></b>	Emese Bodnar (cello) (original rehearsal recording from April 1995)
<b><i>The Winter Song</i></b>	Lead Vocal – David Tomlinson Saucepan Percussion – James Keane and Paul Clark Choir – Calina De La Mare, Esme Herbert, David Kadumukasa, James Keane, Nell Keane, Melanie Pappenheim, Rakhi Singh.
<b><i>Priest's Speech</i></b>	Read by Conor Lovett

## Bibliography

- Susan Sontag**      *Illness as Metaphor*  
                         *AIDS and Its Metaphors*
- Michail Bahktin**      *Rabelais and His World*
- Daniel Defoe**      *Journal of the Plague Years*
- Bertolt Brecht**      *Alienation Effect in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Breughel in Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. John Willet, 1957
- Alexander Pushkin**      *Selected Poetry*, translated by Anthony Wood. Released 23/04/2020. Pre-order from Penguin [here](#).

Read Robert Chandler's article 'The magic of Pushkin's verse comes alive in a new translation' in The Financial Times [here](#).

## Support Us

Clod Ensemble have been making work with independent artists and creatives for the last 25 years. We believe that now, more than ever, we need art and we need artists.

During this time of great uncertainty for the artistic community, we will be employing as many freelance artists and creatives as possible to work on new and existing projects.

We are inviting our audiences and supporters to donate to the company so that we can continue to work with our creative community now and in the future. If you would like to help, please consider becoming a Friend, Patron or making a one-off donation.

**Thank you.**

[Donate](#)