

REVUE DE PRESSE

SIMON MCBURNEY

The Encounter

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Simon McBurney: 'Ten days to go – and no script. It's absolutely petrifying!'

Dominic Cavendish speaks to Simon McBurney and Robert Lepage - two masters of devised theatre - ahead of their Edinburgh Festival shows



Artistic director of Theatre de Complicite, Simon McBurney

By Dominic Cavendish

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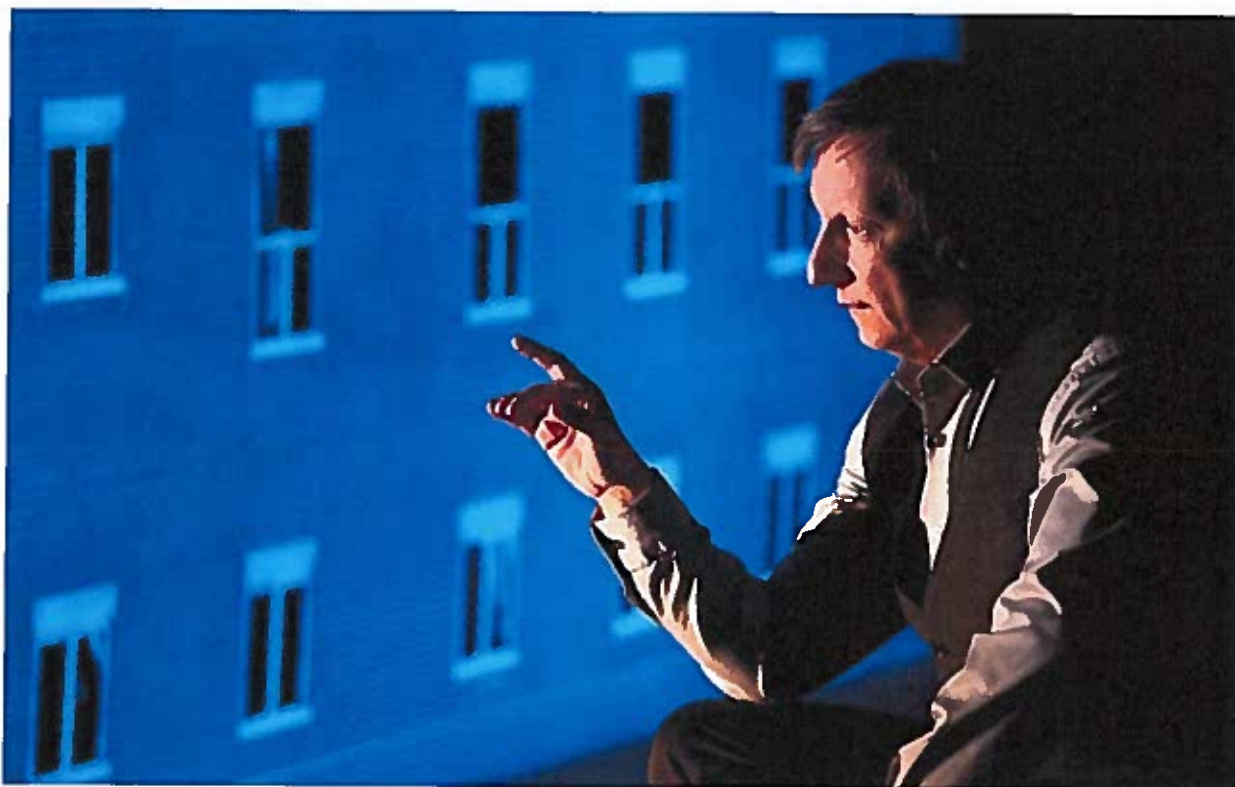
It's not ready yet. That's the word, straight from the horse's mouth, on the opening theatre show of The Edinburgh International Festival, *The Encounter*. The creator of the piece, the man who will be performing it, alone, Simon McBurney – artistic director of Theatre de Complicite (or Complicite for short, a byword for theatrical excellence) – is leaving things so close to the wire you can almost hear his heart pounding as he talks.

"It woke me up at four o'clock this morning and I haven't gone back to sleep!" he says. He takes a sip of coffee, sweeps a hand through his thinning hair. "I'm thinking: 'This is a disaster! I don't know why I am doing this!' My stage manager is saying: 'There are only 10 days to go – when are we going to get a script?'" It's absolutely petrifying. The script will

almost arise in my mouth as the lights go up – like a piece of jazz.”

I’ve followed Complicite’s journey for most of the past 25 years, since its major 1989 breakthrough with Durrenmatt’s *The Visit* – a thunderclap that roused me from teenage cynicism about theatre being a dying art form and woke me to its potential to cascade invention from every pore.

So I’m not enormously surprised that McBurney’s latest project is only just coming together. Every time I have caught up with him before a show’s opening – whether in Sweden 15 years ago for the premiere of an adaptation of Torgny Lindgren’s novel *Light* or in Tokyo in 2003 for the unveiling of *The Elephant Vanishes*, based on short stories by Haruki Murakami – there has been much backstage drama, a frantic race against the clock.



Of course, every theatre production carries with it attendant stresses and mounting pressures as opening night draws near. But high-level, last-minute uncertainty goes with the challenging terrain McBurney and those who have collaborated with him since Complicite was co-founded in 1983 keep venturing into. He and his associates are bold pioneers in the risky art of devised theatre.

Aside from the odd time when an existing play has been staged, the emphasis since the earliest show, *Put It on Your Head* – a comic look at holiday-makers coping with the

unspoken codes of seaside conduct – has been on building new pieces from the ground up, relying heavily on improvisation and animal instinct.

A literary source can provide the creative impetus, as happened with the short stories of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles* – a huge Nineties hit for the company. It has again here. *The Encounter* is based on *Amazon Beaming*, a 1991 book by Romanian author Petru Popescu recounting the remarkable period American photographer Loren McIntyre spent, 20 years earlier, at the mercy of a remote Amazon tribe.

But there's no straightforward leap from page to stage. Work can take months – years – to come to fruition; all kinds of avenues are explored, and dead-ends encountered. McBurney has been mulling over the possibilities of McIntyre's story since the mid-Nineties – almost as far back as *The Street of Crocodiles*. More recently, he thought of presenting it at the Avignon Festival, changed his mind and turned instead to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

One of the most succinct summaries of the devising process was given in 1995 by fellow performer/director/deviser extraordinaire Robert Lepage. The Canadian auteur equals McBurney in terms of international reputation, is the same age (57) and by quirk of intelligent programming is also at Edinburgh this year, also with a solo show, simply called 887.

"Most of the time" he suggests, "a theatrical production is constructed in the following order: writing, rehearsal, performance and, sometimes, translation... In our creations, the process is... reversed: the real writing happens at the end... Writing-rehearsal-performance-translation becomes rehearsal-performance-translation-writing. Seen in a linear manner, the starting point for most creations becomes, for me, their final point."

This upending of theatrical convention – the better to give audiences a different slant on the world – is nothing new. Devising has been around for donkey's years. It was integral to the output of Joan Littlewood's legendary company Theatre Workshop, which created *Oh, What a Lovely War!* in 1963 on the back of collective improvisations and the actors' own research.





Peter Brook picked up the baton – presenting improvisations for the RSC’s Theatre of Cruelty season in 1964, before heading to Paris at the end of the Sixties, where his explorations have continued to this day. French influences are salient: McBurney trained in Paris with Jacques Lecoq (“the first real teacher I ever had”), acquiring skills in clowning, mime and physical theatre and the ethos that “play” mattered more than “the play”. Lepage was mentored in Quebec by a Lecoq-trained teacher and also headed to Paris, briefly studying with Swiss practitioner Alain Knapp.

One can stare long at the guiding hand of Continental practices – and get rather lost in the labyrinth of who did what, when. The key thing is that where devising was perhaps initially regarded as a foreign body invading the Anglo-Saxon model, it now circulates our theatrical system almost without our registering it. It can be a shaping force for excellence – or a road to chaos. *London Road*, Alecky Blythe’s devised musical for the National Theatre inspired by the Ipswich prostitute murders, was hailed as a breakthrough (a film adaptation was released earlier this year). By contrast, *We Want You To Watch*, a recent devised response to pornography, by the theatre dance collective RashDash, was dubbed “random, incomprehensible and plain bad” by the Telegraph’s reviewer.

Between them, McBurney and Lepage have conjured some of the most extraordinary theatre seen anywhere in the world. They can turn the most simple domestic trapping into something universal: the way actors rolling off a table, one after the other, denoted humanity’s thread of connection with the 5000-year-old corpse in 1999’s dazzling *Complicite* show *Mnemonic*, say, or a washing-machine window came to resemble a space-capsule in Lepage’s haunting fiction about parallel lives and the 1960s space race, *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000). “You want everything that happens to be part of the story,” McBurney says. “Everything should be articulate.”

The pitfalls are immense – nothing is set in stone, the map is non-existent. McBurney found himself extemporising the extended opening monologue in *Mnemonic* when it first opened; and pulled it off, by the skin of his teeth. Critics were less kind to Lepage when he opened his epic drama centring on the atomic attack on Hiroshima, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, in a very raw state at the Edinburgh festival in 1994. The Telegraph critic railed: “Overran by two hours, the scenery went haywire, and there were long scenes in Quebecois French.”

By the sound of it, *887*, which takes its name from the apartment number in Quebec City where Lepage grew up, and looks back on his Sixties youth, has been getting firm affirmation from reviewers at early tryouts. You never can tell, though. When I caught up with him a few months ago, Lepage jovially likened himself to Christopher Columbus: “He takes a boat, he fills it with people, and he says, ‘We are going to a new continent.’ ‘How far is it? Are there monsters?’ ‘I don’t know – all I know is there’s something there and I’m going to try and lead you there.’ ”

As McBurney scurries back to rehearsals he frowns and gives an appealing, sheepish smile. “I’m not quite sure what it is until I’ve made it. I don’t go, ‘Oh, I’m going to do this with it.’ It’s emerging, right now. I hope there will be something there. I sincerely hope so, otherwise I’m going to be very embarrassed. It won’t be entirely finished but perhaps that’s appropriate. The show is about different encounters. And it asks the question: ‘What do you do when you discover something new?’ ”

The Encounter runs at the Edinburgh International Festival from Aug 8-23; 887 runs from Aug 13-23.

A promotional banner for Telegraph Box Office. The background is dark blue with a subtle pattern. On the left, the text "Telegraph boxoffice" is written in a white serif font. Below it, in a smaller white sans-serif font, is the text "Sign up to receive hot offers on the latest shows from Telegraph Box Office." To the right of this text is a red rectangular button with white text that says "SIGN UP NOW" followed by a right-pointing arrow. On the right side of the banner, there is a graphic showing a smartphone and a tablet displaying the Telegraph Box Office website interface, which includes photos of performers and show titles like "THE AIRS" and "KUNG FAY".

How we moderate

Theatre

The Encounter

Edinburgh International
Conference Centre

★★★★☆

On a good night, theatre can make you see the world through new eyes. And, in the case of this revelatory new one-man show from Simon McBurney and his company Complicite, can make you hear the world through new ears too.

The Encounter is an adaptation of Petru Popescu's book *Amazon Beaming*, which tells the true story of how the American photo-journalist Loren McIntyre got stranded deep in the Amazon jungle in 1969 with an isolated tribe, the Mayoruna. Yet "adaptation" feels too scrawny a word to capture quite what McBurney is up to as he finds a new slant on his quest to slam together staging, storytelling, ideas and technology.

McBurney, beefy yet professorially quirky in his T-shirt and baseball cap, welcomes us as we each test the headphones supplied with our seat. He ad-libs about his iPhone pictures of his kids; about how fiction rules our lives. Around him are microphones, water bottles, unspooled videotape, a packet of crisps.

This, as long-time Complicite fans will suspect, is just the first of a series of beguiling gambits: everything on stage will earn its place as these two hours proceed. Showing off his new binaural microphone that stands centre-stage, McBurney wanders around this head-shaped device, and as he talks we hear him through our headphones as if he were wandering around each of us individually.

It's a novel experience, sometimes a very funny one as he interacts with pre-recorded voices of himself, of Popescu, of his child. Altering his voice electronically in another microphone, he becomes the sonorous McIntyre, who then guides us through his Amazon adventure.

McBurney and his sound designer, Gareth Fry, make this alien world all the more vivid by our complicity (the clue's in the name) in creating the illusion. We see McBurney grab a packet of crisps at home in London that, scrunched up, becomes the sound of a crackling fire deep in Brazil. Water bottles provide squelching sounds; rustling tape becomes rustling undergrowth. "I could die ten times over before anyone finds me," says McIntyre, and his isolation and vulnerability is palpable.

McBurney is writer, director and performer, and he can't always stop this story from sprawling in its second half. There are invigorating ideas about space and time, past and future, memory and legacy, but it gets harder to join the dots as McIntyre's quest gets more repetitive, then more obscure. Yet even if *The Encounter* needs a bit of cutting and clarifying, it has an ambition, an ability to conjure up other worlds that is truly thrilling. It is, as they used to say back in 1969, quite a trip.

Dominic Maxwell

Box office: 0131 473 2000, to Aug 23



Read all the
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reviews first at
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THEATRE

The Encounter

Edinburgh International Festival

★★★★★

Griselda Murray Brown

Simon McBurney's latest show begins without my realising it. I'm still fumbling with the headphones attached to my seat when he appears. The stage resembles a recording studio, with a cluttered desk, freestanding microphones and bottles of water strewn about. While a technician fixes a mic to his jeans, McBurney chats to us about his smartphone. It contains hundreds of pictures of his small children, he says, scrolling through them, more pictures than were taken of him during his entire childhood. We live by the stories we

create, he muses, "even the United Kingdom is a fiction". This casual prologue, seemingly spontaneous, goes to the heart of what *The Encounter* is about: the stories through which we see the world and the illusion of linear time.

McBurney is artistic director of Complicite, the experimental theatre company known for its use of physical theatre and technology. Previous productions have featured striking video work, but here binaural technology – sounds recorded and transmitted separately into each ear – creates a rich and intricate soundscape. The props are not visual aids but sound instruments, a slurp of water becoming a gushing stream. A highlight of this year's Edinburgh International Festival, this one-man show bursts with colour and life, a seamless blend of technology and storytelling.

The story is that of Loren McIntyre, an American photojournalist who, in 1969, lost his way in the Amazon and came across the Mayoruna tribe. (His experiences are recorded in Petru Popescu's book *Amazon Beaming*, which is McBurney's source.) The Mayoruna are forever dismantling their camp and moving on. But what are they fleeing?

Through the headphones, sound takes on a physical, enveloping presence. We stumble through the rainforest, its damp air alive with insects, journeying across time and space. It's as claustrophobic and compelling as a dream.

Yet the pleasure of *The Encounter* is not purely aural. Watching McBurney weave his invisible web with microphones and instruments is more like watching a dance than a radio play recording. But he never allows us to forget that this is fiction, puncturing McIntyre's narrative with real-life scenes from his own home. It's night-time and McBurney's daughter can't sleep. What are all these microphones, she asks. Can he read her a story? These two strands run parallel until finally merging.

We see McBurney, we see McIntyre and we recreate the Amazon through a hundred second-hand images in our minds. Myth and reality cannot be prised apart, and clock-time is swept aside by the woozy, backward flow of forest time. *The Encounter* is a tour de force that shows contemporary theatre at its most immersive and thought provoking.

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THE SCOTSMAN

THE SCOTSMAN

international

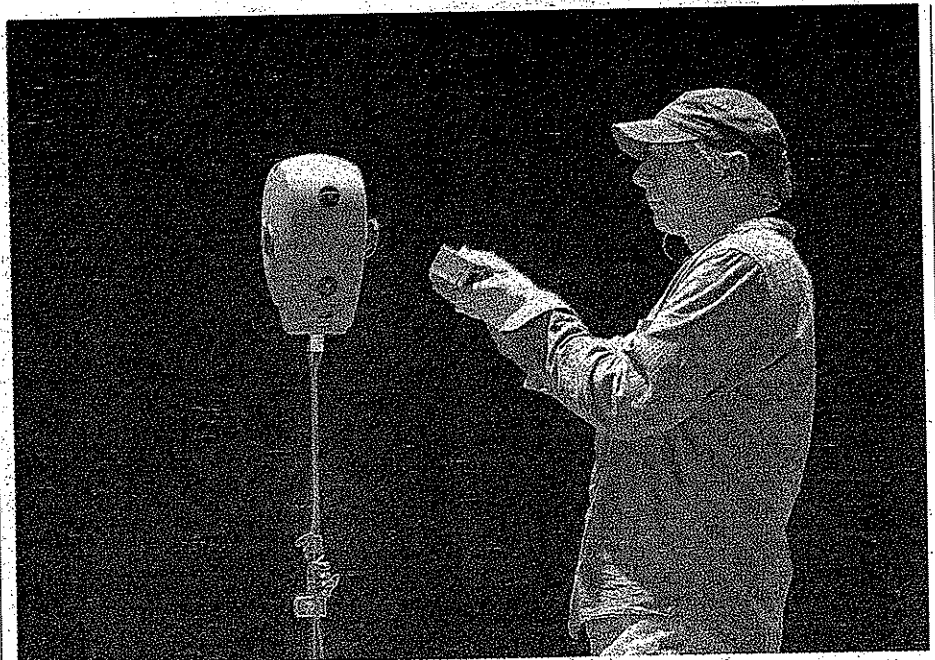
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THEATRE
THE ENCOUNTER
 EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL
 CONFERENCE CENTRE
 ★★★★★

IT'S A classic Edinburgh occasion, this first world premiere of the Edinburgh International Festival's 2015 theatre season. On stage at the EICC stands a man in jeans and a baseball cap whose life as an artist took some of its vital first steps here, more than 30 years ago, when Theatre de Complicite was still a young Fringe company working hard to change the face of British theatre with work that was intensely visual and physical.

Today, though, Simon McBurney of Complicite is in his 50s, internationally recognised as one of the great theatre-makers and theatre-changers of our time. And in Petru Popescu's book *The Encounter*, based on a journey in the Amazon made in the late 1960s by American photographer Loren McIntyre, he has found a subject absolutely worthy of his huge theatrical skills, his brave, searching intelligence, and his willingness to push at the very limits of theatrical form – in this case the use of a complex, beautifully-balanced and almost infinitely inventive stream of live and recorded sound, delivered to the audience on headphones, to tell McIntyre's story.

For the story itself – complex,



McBurney holds the audience enthralled during his performance of *The Encounter* Picture: Chloe Courtney

disturbing, sometimes terrifying – it's perhaps enough to know that McIntyre became lost in the Amazonian jungle, made contact with a tribe that had had very little contact with urban civilisation, and went on a very strange and perhaps terminal journey with them.

For two hours though – alone on an almost-empty stage furnished with a desk and microphones, backed by a great, dark, rippling wall of rubber, and supported by a magnificent unseen team

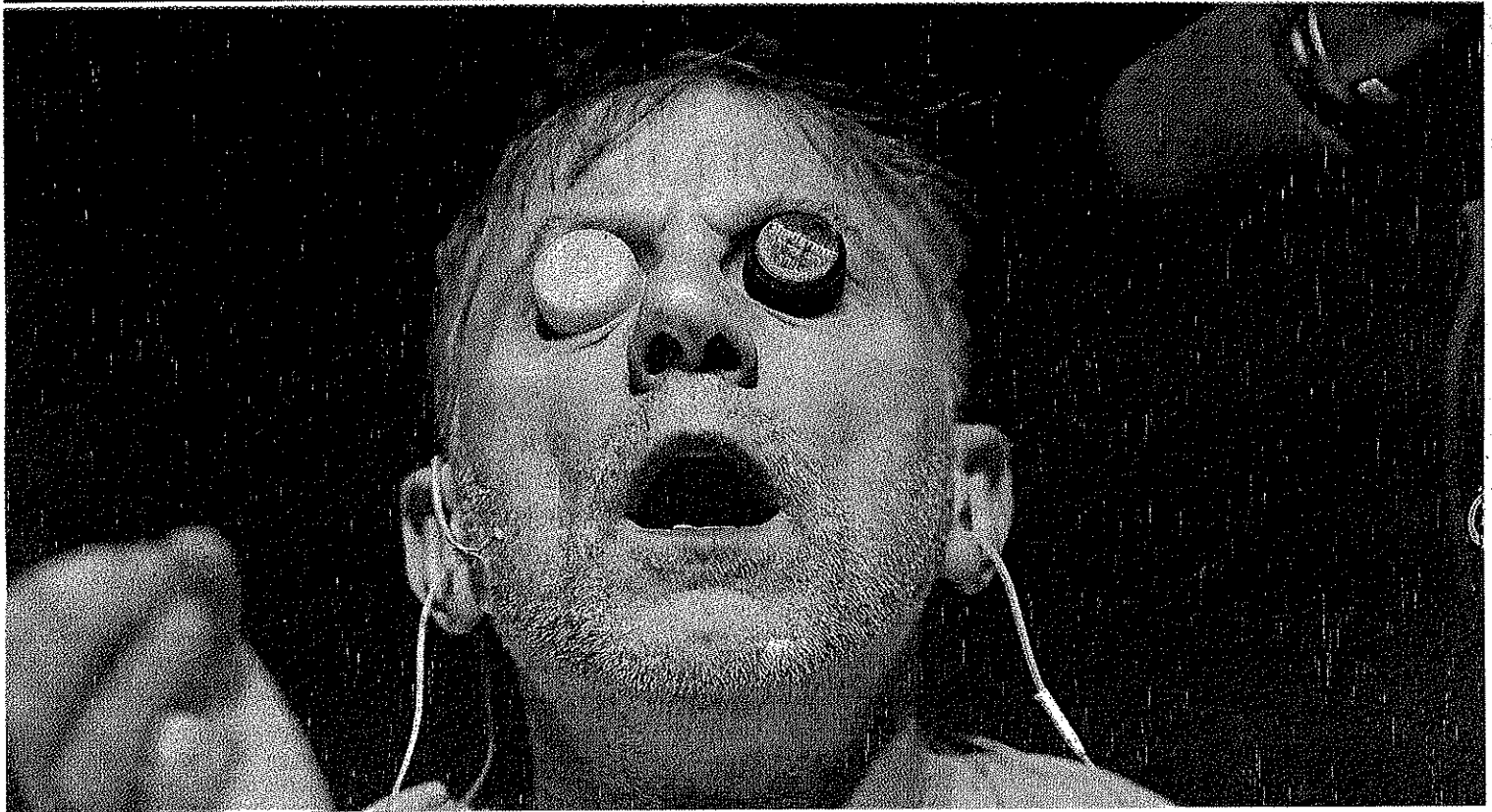
of sound designers and operators, lighting and video designers – McBurney holds us enthralled, as the pattern of sounds circling and moving apparently inside our heads becomes the perfect metaphor for McIntyre's strange inner journey, and McBurney uses his magnificent voice and powerful body to take us through a story that seems to lead us towards the very source of human consciousness, and its connection with that thing – magical, mysterious, ever-

shifting as we perceive it – that we still call reality.

JOYCE MCMILLAN
 Until 23 August. Today 7:30pm.

MUSIC
EIF OPENING
CONCERT: BBC
SCOTTISH SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA
 USHER HALL
 ★★★★★

AFTER the spectacle of *Harmonium* the previous night, the



Edinburgh theatre
The Encounter
 Edinburgh International
 Conference Centre

★★★★★

Amazon
 adventure
 beamed
 straight into
 the depths
 of your
 imagination

In October 1969, photographer Loren McIntyre was dropped by plane into a remote area of the Amazon rainforest, hoping to make contact with the Mayoruna people for a National Geographic feature. Within hours he had found a tribe, but he was also hopelessly lost. His only hope of survival was to stay with the Mayoruna. But would they accept him? They appeared to be experiencing a crisis themselves, one that McIntyre initially couldn't grasp because he could not communicate with them.

A story seldom has a beginning or an end; it is a continuum that snakes back upon itself. Sometimes you are not even sure when the story has actually begun to be told. That's the case with Simon McBurney's latest piece for *Complicite*. In a solo performance made with many people, most of them creative technicians, he pulls the thread of a story from out of the noise of contemporary western life and the sounds of the jungle to create a meditation on interconnectedness, perception and time.

Inspired by Petru Popescu's book *Amazon Beaming*, based on McIntyre's experiences, McBurney's piece is a Chinese whisper of a show from a far-distant world that is delivered straight into the audience's head using binaural

technology and headphones. Its intimacy is both an astonishment and, at times, a challenge.

Just as McIntyre's conception of the world is tested by every step that he takes deeper into the jungle, so the technology combines with McBurney's complex storytelling to lure us deeper into the thickets of the imagination where time is not just one dimension, where there are many different kinds of language and where jaguars hunt.

The clinical coldness of the Edinburgh International Conference Centre soon gives way to the sweaty jungle. The clock-operated world retreats. The show creates the kind of altered consciousness in the audience that mirrors what McIntyre is experiencing in the jungle. Although at the very start McBurney very carefully shows us how the technology operates - like a magician deconstructing a trick - knowing how it works doesn't make us any less susceptible to its transformative possibilities. Maybe some of the mysteries of the world do not need to be explained, but understood through being felt. Like all McBurney's work, this is a show that will only deepen and get richer. It has all the time in the world.

Lyn Gardner

Until 23 August. Box office:
 0131-473 2000.

The clinical coldness of the conference centre soon gives way to the sweaty jungle



▲ **Jungle book...** Simon McBurney's *The Encounter*
 Photograph: Murio MacLeod for the Guardian