

LAURA LOMAS

One of the Scriptorium's trio of writers, Laura Lomas tells Greg Morrison about why the Globe's carnivalesque space serves the chaos of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Laura Lomas. Photo: Greg Morrison

For writer Laura Lomas, theatre is all about connection. "Trying to understand your experience through other people's stories makes you feel less lonely," she says. Lomas is one of the writers who, with Sabrina Mahfouz and Sami Ibrahim, makes up the Scriptorium, the first writer-in-residence programme since Shakespeare himself wrote at the Globe. "No pressure," she laughs.

Lomas, who grew up in Derby, has always had an interest in drama. As a young child she wrote, produced and starred in her own interpretation of *Robin Hood* in the local village hall, as the conspicuously omnipresent narrator. Her first visit to London was on a school trip to visit the Globe, although it was when she landed an internship at the Royal Court theatre, aged 17, that her passion for theatre was cemented.

Through guidance from Simon Stephens, then a writer in residence at the Royal Court, she was introduced to works such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Stephens' *Heron*s.

Up until that point, the world of plays seemed removed from real life for Lomas. "I didn't realise that plays were written by people that were alive, and that they could speak to experiences that were inside my world," she says.

While at university in Nottingham, she wrote her first play (second, if you count *Robin Hood*), which confirmed her ambitions to write for a living.

Following the success of plays such as *Joanne* and *The Blue Road*, London-based Lomas is currently involved in a dizzying array of projects, from a commission for the Royal Court to a feature film for Film4 and The Bureau. She is also writing a libretto for an original opera with director Katie Mitchell and composer Laura Bowler.

However, ahead of the Scriptorium's next challenge – tackling Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – it is her critically acclaimed work *Chaos* which seems prescient in terms of its themes. Part of the 2019 National Theatre Connections project, *Chaos* was written to be highly adaptable for schools staging the play, allowing each production to be tailored to however many parts are needed. A collection of short, seemingly disconnected scenes are staged in quick succession; a

boy brings another boy flowers, a girl has tied herself to a railing, a woman jumps in front of a train. Through these brief windows into, at times, baffling situations, the audience is encouraged to find connections. "If you put loads of human experiences together, even if the narrative links between them are tentative, it has its own beauty in itself," Lomas says.

Written in Latin in the first century AD, Ovid's 15-book epic poem the *Metamorphoses* covers about 250 stories and myths drawn from a variety of sources, many of which are no longer known to us today. Each story involves, as the name suggests, a change or transformation; a human becoming a tree or a god turning into a swan. Considered one of the greatest Classical poets, although often regarded as the slightly seedier younger cousin to the more refined Homer, Virgil and Horace, Ovid drew on Greek and Roman cultures. Many believe that no Greek or Roman Classical poet has had a more profound influence than Ovid on European art, including on Shakespeare's work.

The three playwrights-in-residence will be co-authoring the script, which Lomas notes is a rare method. Given the breadth of the subject matter, they have begun to identify a few key themes – "violence, nature, warning, transcendence, the divine, loneliness, revenge" – by seeking fresh readings of these ancient tales. For example, Lomas doesn't find a straightforward reflection on arrogance in the story of Echo and Narcissus. "I think it's just about loneliness, and people who are desperate to connect and meet each other," she says.

The show will be produced with the Globe Ensemble, a company of nine actors who have been working collaboratively on a number of projects over the past year, feeding democratically into decisions at every stage of production. Lomas is looking forward to this approach. "I like collaborating. I like conversation," she says. "The bit where you're on your own can be hard and tortuous."

In light of the nature of Ovid's work – "chaos is really central to it" – and the various inputs from all the people involved, the project presents its own challenges, although

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The Glasgow Acting Academy performing *Chaos*, 2019. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-25

Lomas feels that the Globe’s stage is ideal for just such an undertaking, which she hopes will be “carnavalesque”. “It doesn’t really suit subtext or realism. It’s a magical space,” she says. “You have to relinquish a certain sense of control.” This collaborative process will also provide vital learning about “the mechanics and craft of the space”, which will serve all three well ahead of their final residency projects to each write a new piece to be staged at the Globe.

In recent years the *Metamorphoses* has been scrutinised for its questionable treatment of victimhood. As Lomas says: “The idea of victimhood or punishment and justice doesn’t equate to our moral paradigms.” Taken at face value, charges of victim-blaming within the stories are perhaps justified. However, if we look at the manner in which Ovid approaches such moments across the whole of the *Metamorphoses*, a more enlightening perspective begins to emerge from the chaos.

In the story of Daphne and Apollo (which Lomas finds particularly moving) the beautiful Naiad nymph Daphne, who is spotted bathing and is aggressively pursued by a prying Apollo, is turned into a laurel tree by the river god Peneus

in response to her cry for help. It might seem at first that, as Lomas says, “there’s no clear morality”. But through the jumble of stories that Ovid amalgamated, creating one continuous narrative, truths are discernible. The repeated silencing and disfigurement of the victims of crime perhaps holds deeper comments about the manner in which victims are treated in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Though adapting the *Metamorphoses* will be a complex task, Lomas has experience undertaking ambitious projects. Last year she took up a position with the social justice organisation People’s Palace Projects, working with the Kuikuro tribe in the Xingu region of the Amazon. Venturing into the heart of the jungle to work with the tribe and sleeping in a hammock, the residency was not one for the faint-hearted.

The first part of the Scriptorium residency, which started in September and runs for a year, saw each writer contribute a 20-minute piece as part of a collection of ghost stories, which were staged in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, a fitting space for ghoulish dealings, Lomas feels. “There’s something about the intimacy and energy of the space that really suits it. It feels quite charged somehow.”

Staged as individual collections of five stories (entitled *Deep Night* and *Dark Night*), the venture saw works of horror from the Romantic-era Edgar Allan Poe shown alongside contemporary pieces from writers including artistic director Michelle Terry. Lomas enjoyed the opportunity to experiment, interrogating the role of horror as a genre in today’s society. In her play *The Man Across the Road*, she focused on the interplay of real-life traumatic influences rooted in circumstances such as poverty, and the manifestation of such trauma as otherworldly happenings.

“What a good horror does is excavate and expose some malaise in society,” she says, citing films such as Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and *Us* and their exploration of race in America. “There’s something about writing that is fundamentally about empathy.” Whether it’s an opera or a feature film adapted from a novel, it is this empathy to another’s experience that continues to excite her. “It’s about taking your own emotional landscape and refracting it through the prism of other people.”

Greg Morrison is a writer and editor based in London

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Globe Theatre, 4 September to 3 October

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