



AMNEMONIC is something that assists or sparks a memory. Simon McBurney's astonishing new show of that name for Theatre de Complicite looks at the way we remember others and ourselves. "I wanted to explore cultural identity, the way we define what is 'home' to us at a time when increased travel and communication have made geographical definitions less certain," he says.

I'm paraphrasing. Since co-founding Complicite 16 years ago, McBurney has taken it from its physical-theatre roots into increasingly profound territory. He has the intensity of a small, burrowing animal: you always get a straight answer from him, but not necessarily a simple one.

Mnemonic is complex, both in its narrative and its conception. It blends together the discovery of the Iceman — the 5,000-year-old corpse exhumed from a glacier on the Italian-Austrian border — with the pan-European search by one character, Alice, for her father, and the peripatetic life of a Greek taxi driver.

McBurney's original ideas were fleshed out with supplementary material from the writer and art critic John Berger, then augmented by the memories of actors from Britain, Greece, France and Switzerland over a four-month rehearsal period. The autobiographical strands give the show its intimacy but it's tied together by the naked, wounded Iceman, an enigmatic figure who unites rather than divides us.

McBurney's own performance — as himself, as Alice's abandoned boyfriend Virgil, and as the Iceman — is informed by the legacy of his archaeologist father, who died recently and whose naked body McBurney had to lay out. Greek actor Kostas Philippoglou, who plays the taxi driver, contributed a harrowing story about a refugee relative who accidentally discarded her baby instead of the watermelon she was carrying. The character of Alice, who discovers that her long-lost father was Jewish, is enriched by the fact that Katrin Cartlidge, who plays her, is of mixed European origin: "My mother is German Jewish. If it wasn't for Hitler she would never have met my father."

A powerful presence in the Mike Leigh films *Career Girls* and *Naked*, Cartlidge is no stranger to the evolutionary process of devising work, but *Mnemonic* marks her first appearance on stage for six years. It is her first production with Complicite, although she worked on the development of

Masters of improvisation Theatre de Complicite have a new show — inspired by a 5,000-year-old Iceman. NICK CURTIS reports

McBurney's *Out of the House Walked a Man*, and appeared in his radio adaptation of Berger's story *To The Wedding*.

Nakedness has often been an issue in Cartlidge's career, from her early striptease in a Mustapha Matura play to her role as the abused and uncovered Sophie in Leigh's *Naked*. "I don't have a problem with nudity," she says, bluntly, "I have a problem with violence." *Mnemonic* removes her nakedness, and McBurney's, from the realm of prurience veiled by "artistic necessity", using it as a defining common factor of humanity. Berger's springboard text for the play points out that "temperaments, imaginations, minds, vary enormously. Bodies vary too, but minimally." Nudity inspires empathy, even with a corpse unearthed after five millennia.

Throughout *Mnemonic*, officials and journalists squabble over the nationality of the Iceman, who died aeons before nations existed. In a chilling final touch, a scientist suggests that the Iceman's wounds and his solitary burial place suggest he was the sole escapee from a local pogrom; the kind of factional massacre that takes place every day across the world today. If *Mnemonic* has a message, it's that we are all connected, yet we continue to persecute one another on specious and arbitrary geographical grounds.

● *Mnemonic* is at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith until Saturday 8 January. Box office: 0181 237 1111.

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