

PUBLIC AS MAKERS
NOTTDANCING

PAUL RUSS

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
OF DANCE4

Over the last decade Dance4 has brought communities of Nottingham and the wider East Midlands together with dance artists to imagine, create and present the most extraordinary choreographic works. Nottdancing is our programme that celebrates the choreographic collaborations between artists and the public, taking place in people's homes, their places of work, in public squares, parks, galleries and theatres.

Some of the most prevalent memories I have from my time at Dance4 are those moments when I've been watching the performances co-created and performed with non-professionals.

These projects have stopped people in their tracks in public squares, had audiences in tears whilst visiting a gallery and delighting neighbours as performers emerge from their homes to dance.

This edition of 4WORDS is a collection of voices that have come together during these uncertain times to share their thoughts about projects and what challenges we all face. We still have little clarity about when these projects can happen again, but we wanted to share reflections from artists and participants about some of the works that have celebrated the wonderful and insightful collaborations between artists and the public.

Nottdancing shows us that the power of collaboration and creativity and the ability for such projects to provoke and quietly shift the perspectives of people, places and dance.

They show how important the power of dance as a way to bring people together.

DAVID SEVERN

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER

I am a documentary photographer whose personal work deals with the relationship between people, landscape, work and leisure. Within my practice I am specifically interested in the culture and social life of post-industrial communities, and am drawn to subjects that reflect my experiences growing up in a former Nottinghamshire mining town. My father was a coal miner who moonlighted as an Elvis Presley impersonator on the Working Men's Club circuit; this is where my interest in performance stems from, particularly that which is grassroots or community led. Performance, and more specifically dance, has manifest in my work in different ways; from photographing community dance groups in Miner's Welfares to documenting Dance4's Centre for Advanced Training.

My relationship with Dance4 stretches back many years, to the beginning of my career as a photographer. Observing the way that dancers creatively respond to and activate a space – be it domestic or in the public realm – has informed my approach to portrait photography. Much of my work as a photographer takes the form of environmental portraiture, where capturing the connection between the subject and their surroundings is key to the success of the image. When I make a portrait, the relationship of sitter – photographer shares several parallels with that of dancer – choreographer; particularly in the shared process of channelling the individual qualities of the sitter or dance and harnessing the dynamic between them and the space they occupy. Of course, the key differences are that dance is transient and occurs within three-dimensional space, whereas a photograph seizes a brief moment in time and renders it as an enduring, two-dimensional image.

In 2014 I was commissioned by Dance4 to photograph the development process of Jane Mason's *A Dance At Home*. This was a collaborative project with The Commission Collective, members of the public who became commissioners of a series of original pieces of dance to be performed inside their own homes. As part of the work I made a series of object study photographs of personal belongings chosen by each member of the collective for their sentimental value; a beautiful ostrich feather duster, a miniature paper theatre, a pair of chopsticks and a much cherished coffee pot were just some of the items enshrined in a photograph. It was fascinating how these objects gave insight into their owner's personalities and the homes from which they came. I enjoyed the democratic nature of this project, which echoed my own working methods when making social documentary photography.

Fundamentally, I am interested in the stories of people and places, and in amplifying the voices of the individuals and communities I encounter. The camera is my tool for communicating these encounters, but it is the experience of exploring a place, meeting people, learning from them and understanding their lives that drives me to make my work. Therefore, the concept of the public as makers is highly pertinent to my practice. I am a proponent of a collaborative, socially-engaged approach, where my subjects have a greater involvement in how they are represented. Historically, photographers have held the balance of power over the representation of their subjects and often made photographs that reinforced unhelpful stereotypes. Depictions of the industrial North and Midlands repeatedly focus on deprivation and hardship. While it's important not to gloss over the corrosive effects of deindustrialisation, I'm more interested in making photographs, borne out of familiarity and affection, that celebrate the cultural lives of working class people. It is easy for the privileged eye to define people by what they do not have, rather than what they share in. Instead, I ask myself "what makes this person who they are?". The answer is, of course, their passions and hobbies, beliefs and relationships with others. This is always my guiding principle when making my work.

My recent series, *Newstead Youth*, followed a similar process of sharing authorship of the work by giving creative control over the photography directly to the subjects. Working in partnership with participatory arts practitioner Jo Wheeler, we collaborated with a group of young people from Newstead – a former mining village in Nottinghamshire – to realise a series of portraits of them in significant locations around their community. During sessions at Newstead Youth Club, we discussed how portraiture can be used to tell a story about a person's identity by depicting them in a place that is meaningful to them. The young people were shown examples of portraits from key documentary works and together we talked about what makes the images successful. They were then asked to consider where they would like to be photographed, what should be in the background, who they were to be photographed with and how they should pose. This enabled the young people to share in the photographic process, giving platform to their creativity and real agency over how they are represented.



SIONED HUWS

CHOREOGRAPHER

Performed in Sneinton Market, *Odori-Dawns-Dance: Forest and Clearing* was made with members of the public from Nottingham in collaboration with traditional and contemporary dancers and choreographers from Japan and the UK.

It is a work that reveals the poetry of dance and community as a large family, an aggregate, its situations and friendships. We worked together on emotive patterns, placed in juxtaposition with the Shishi-odori – Deer Dance – an animistic ritual dance from Tohoku, a prayer in action derived from the complexity of community, landscape and mythology and framed by the everyday in Sneinton Market.

The Deer Dance chant learnt and danced by everyone:

Zan zan zan zan zago igo zan
Zan zan zan zan zago igo zan
Zago zan zago zan zago-igo zag otts
Zago zago zago zag otts zago zago zan
Chiki chiki zan chiki chi-ki
Zan zan chiki chiki zan chiki chi-ki
Zago zan chiki chiki chi-ki
Zan chiki chi-ki chi-ki

Culture is an activity we are situated within it, we respond to it.

Workshop: Memory, Person, Place

I asked those in the workshop to bring with them six photographs of themselves at any age, of family and friends – explaining the idea of memory as movement. As each person looked at their photograph, I encouraged them to remember small moments, like the gesture of a hand, a smile, how a person may sit or stand, in a landscape just as we are. By adopting a physical expression, remaining still as long as a memory lasts, the act of remembering is moving, is time moving on, an act firmly grounded in the present.

Patterns

The idea of walking patterns to the count of ten came from a conversation with my sister. We talked about walking patterns in a dance context and how, when we are small, we first learn to count to ten. With participants I expanded on this idea, incorporating linear walking patterns onto a grid or map of human emotions superimposed on to the market square; we enter into this forest not knowing to where or what it might lead.

Why dance/create work for/with members of the public?

I like creating works with members of the public because there are less preconceived ideas about what dance should or could be. Workshop invitations are open to a wide range of ages and experiences. By listening to those little things that move us from the inside, making small discoveries in the studio everyday, we begin a creation process together. In a way, every participant becomes the family I choose for myself in the present: Artist and people of a similar sensibility. We feel something before we see it. I am always surprised by the openness of these conversations and I learn a lot about cultural and individual realities, games played, places, festivals, celebrations, dress and costume, which we then incorporate into the performance, stepping into a clearing, structuring and ordering a memory of person and place.

What were your initial areas of interest for the project?

My interest is in a retelling, a vitality, the format of performance, potential situations, to deregulate expectations and preconceived ideas of dance and performance; exploring ideas of hope, how we make loss count, invoking dance rituals, past present and into the future.

“The first memory that I have thinking about this project was my costume, which was a bright red bow that you had to tie around your waist in a certain way, in a Japanese way. You have a certain amount of time before the performance started and I really like that moment. Sometimes it felt like a song or poetry from a different place but still it was really connected to us because we made it and so it seems to shift between being really us and being quite foreign.”

Seraina Dejaco
Participant



Image of dancer Reina Kimura
Odori-Dawns-Dance: Forest and Clearing by Sioned Hews
Photographer David Severn

EMMA LEWIS-JONES

CHOREOGRAPHER

Context. Let's start here. I'll ask you to describe, reveal or explain something; perhaps you could use your body. Is that enough information? We can present whatever comes up in a few minutes time and then talk about shape, pace, associations, questions, emotions, or just scrap the lot. In these deconstructions and decisions lie opportunity.

I grew up in central Nottingham. I am an activist, I am white and a dyke with a non-disabled body and dyspraxic mind. I am a choreographer, as well as a dramaturg and mentor, presently stuck at home in lockdown following the global outbreak of Covid-19. Thanks to this time alone, I am full of questions and propositions, some of which are included here.

I (usually) enable people to realise their own choreographic potential through instructions, games and questions in workshop/walkshop models that I've been developing over five years. At the moment this is happening in watered-down, micro-workshops I deliver to some groups online. Although I'm glad to have had the creative space to be with myself, overall this experience has been undeniably challenging and anxiety-inducing, as I desperately avoid imagining a future of touchless, party-less, kiss-less, sweat-less gatherings between colleagues and collaborators in my communities, whom I miss deeply.

Social disDANCEing is anathema to me; now I am obliged to live a socially distanced life! Ironically, the last work I made at Dance4 included a choreographic instruction for performers to move in equal relation to one another. This meant there was often a large and even gap of 3-10 metres between each of the four artists, as they negotiated landscape together. The residency, *Soft Edges*, was a pivotal point in my practice. Now that I have to take this practice to the shops once a week, I can't think of anything more dull.

Community is about collaboration. However, when I work within communities I try hard to make space for individual voices, for authorship and autonomy. I facilitate just by holding the space; by this I mean ensuring the studio (outdoors or otherwise) is quickly made familiar to you as the 'participants', that you become familiar with one another and that you feel powerful and responsible because of the creative licence I hand over to you through tasks and discussions.

There are elements of my work that are referred to as 'soft skills'. These include developing empathy; understanding positive forms of touch; interpreting body language; finding language to express sensation in direct relation to emotional, socio-political and physical context; developing dialogue that is constructive, concise and critical. 'Soft' implies unimportant, and yet empathy and communication skills are essential in all aspects of our lives. I seek to maximise these qualities through choreography, to benefit and enrich our whole selves in relation to one another and the Earth.

Movement is radical. Your body is political.

We should embrace the idea that 'community performers' contribute profound and personal insights to performance and to the dialogues surrounding contemporary choreography. To nurture the impulse to move (together), we need funding. The arts produce more money for the economy than agriculture, but will the pandemic push the sector to the bottom of the funding pile?

Hate crime and racial tensions, highlighted by the Brexit referendum and movements such as Black Lives Matter are a catalyst for the dance sector to generate a culture of radical inclusivity and engage an ethos of rigorous reflection, action and pedagogy.

When providing the tools to take agency it is useful to think about whether you are creating a community as an agent of change or are entering an established one. I learnt this when I began working with refugees; diverse groups with a multitude of needs, interests and experiences.

Through choreography I set the foundations for positive social interaction and physical confidence amongst the makers, so they may better face the challenges of living in contemporary British society.

A community. A thought, a revelation, an action. An activist in action. That's all I care about now. There's no time to waste. The planet is burning.



Follow Us Walk by Emma Lewis-Jones.
Photographer Matt Cawrey



A Dance at Home by Jane Mason
Photographer David Severn

TOM HUGHES

PARTICIPANT

I wanted to get involved in bringing Nottdance to my local community of Sneinton which I love. I had never performed a dance in public before. I don't dance, I can't dance and yet I did dance.

I was quite involved with things in and around Sneinton partly based on my job and partly because of my interest in the community and the place. When I heard about their being a dance by the community in the streets I just I really wanted to be involved. To do something with my neighbours, to do something in Sneinton to show it off a bit and to be part of Nottdance in my local community. It sounded amazing. I thought at that stage would be doing some kind of group dance thing, but that's not quite how it turned out. I didn't really know what I was getting into, I just knew that I wanted to be part of it.

I have a job in architecture that involves me getting up and talking in front of lots of people so I wasn't afraid of getting up and saying things in public but I do not dance, I cannot dance, I don't dance. The idea of dancing in public was quite extreme for me to the extent that I went through the rehearsals and preparation in a kind of little bubble of unreality, especially after I found out I'd be dancing on my own and that they wanted me to kick the whole show off.

I really came to appreciate the way Gary and Jane worked with us to make it personal and take away the performance anxiety. I can't say I wasn't nervous, but by the time it got to it I was just able to go out there and do my thing. I don't know what people thought of it and I don't particularly care because the artists made me feel that it was my dance on my street and that was all that mattered. It was also so carefully and thoughtfully done that everyone who performed whatever skill levels we started with ended up doing something meaningful in public to an audience. I worked with projects with members of the public as part of my job and this really gave me an appreciation of how vital it is to give people confidence to speak their truth live and in the moment. Artists can be really good at this kind of holding space to allow people that freedom, but I never realised that dance could also be so personal and so meaningful.

I came away with this deep appreciation of the value of a live performance. I think that singularly unique moment in our lives when we were there performing our street's dances bonded us and maybe even strengthened and inspired us. I also gained a really deep affinity with the little spot in my neighbourhood where I performed my dance, I got to know it quite intimately and I felt like I took ownership of it even for just a little while. I now associate each dancer's setting with them personally, quite ordinary places that have gained some deeper meaning for me. The artist really allowed us to dig deep inside ourselves and decide what it was we wanted to express and in my case it was my job in architecture which I also love and I actually gained a new perspective on what it is that I do as a result.

JANE MASON

CHOREOGRAPHER

Something happens

There is something that happens when a room goes quiet. The concentration in the air is tangible, there is a charge, an apparent deep attention is at work and this is fertile ground.

I first worked with Dance4 collaborating on Lone Twin's *Street Dance* commissioned for Nottdance in 2010. *Street Dance* was about creating short solo and duet portraits with residents from the community of Sneinton. The choreographies were then sited at particular points along a route that the audience travelled through. Following this I collaborated on *A Dance at Home*, (ten commissioners, four performances, three nights) hosted and performed by the homeowners.

After several conversations with Dance4 around why this kind of work interests me and why it matters, Paul asked me to facilitate a creative process with the staff team: to help the organisation to consider 'through practice' what it meant for them to engage the public in projects. Many new questions surfaced for me during the process and I noticed again the way people become sensitised by the honesty of each other. Observing unexpected risks being taken, with some space around us, is powerful inspiration – subtle shifts in perception can and do occur. I try to trust in a purposeful noticing; focusing on being as practical as possible – gradually empathy and understanding grows. I prepare well but rely on the immediacy of thinking on my feet – bringing curiosity and sensitivity to dig into what's emerged. I often feel as vulnerable as the participants, but something happens in the discomfort and 'not knowing', and when it does there's really nowhere else I'd rather be.

In 2016 we shared a delicate first conversation with a Nottingham hospice about the possibility of working with some of the residents and staff and how I might approach this with care. Permission to explore aspects of ourselves (however small) witnessed within a frame supported by others – for me, this kind of relationship is a validating of who we are.

Through all these experiences with Dance4 I've tried to get closer to articulating what is being negotiated and stimulated in these kinds of contexts. There are many layers but in what follows I'll try to share some of what I've learnt and some of the thoughts, perceptions and questions that linger.

Silence around moments

I like silence and space. I push to make sure this forms part of the language of how we are working and how moments and materials are put together. Sometimes saying 'make sure you wait for at least 10 seconds here before you speak', valuing the quiet spaces and trying to make them understood as necessary choreographic punctuation. Gradually a kind of musicality appears; an awareness of rhythm and the return to silence enables atmosphere.

Listening to participants

I'm tuning into someone, am intuitive, responsive and practical. I have to be intuitive to be able to listen. Latching onto something, a sentence or an image; always on the look out to make the task practical with an artistic shaping going on all the time, working with people as individuals.

Being open and specific

What shape a process might take or where a conversation might lead is unpredictable. I try to offer a clear frame to start with; often these are very simple tasks that anyone can do but with a lot of freedom in them. Then I layer the tasks up, inviting working with more than one instruction at once. Trying to be as clear and precise in my communication and instructions as possible – managing issues of responsibility as best I can.

Doing and structure

Combining words, movement, space, objects – creating a landscape of multiple possible readings. It's not about saying 'this means this...'; it's more that the interacting with the materials rides on presence, on being 'in question'. Placing different ideas in relation to each other that might not seem to go together structurally offers something new, and patience for the unexpected to arise means letting go, not forcing what things are. Building sequences, listening out for meaning in the spaces in-between. I need to generate enough content to be able to deliver the final outcomes, but mostly it's about exploring how to grow choreography – to try and follow something through.

Space

Making space, leaving space, opening up space, activating space – it all interests me and is happening all the time, in different ways and at different stages of the process. Initially maybe it's in the 'slowing down'; later it's in the spaces where different choreography meets. More detail emerges, the sense of space expands and new relations between things can grow in the gaps; it's as if the work takes on a life of its own if we just pay attention.

A heightening of the everyday

Extending ways of moving that feel truthful, rooted in the particular identity of a person, not acted/pretended but spoken or moving as themselves. Increasing visibility around 'where we are' and 'who we are' in a communal space means all sorts of physical information becomes amplified. Anything we discover can only be a small glimpse from a far more elaborate personal narrative, yet somehow from a few 'small shaped moments in time' we can 'see' a person. It's a kind of portraiture.

Feeling

I want to create space for feeling, for intimacy, ambiguity and for the body to be foregrounded. Not to make a person 'bare all', but to feel closer and to open the imagination. Vulnerability is often present, for the participants (as well as for me), and as our shared sensitivities accumulate it can become easier for someone to be open in what may have felt like a scary situation to be in, no matter who you are.

Inspiration

Sometimes inspiration presents itself unexpectedly so I try to capture it, make a physical translation with it. Sometimes it's more engineered. All the while we're trying to find connections between things and between each other – memories, fragments of story, physical interactions, touch. I always return to the body.

Getting people to where I feel they need to be

To create a performance event that will have structure, clarity and detail, sometimes I push people to take on a lot of information, at the same time taking care, making sure people are supported. But there is also in this way of working the awareness that the practice is ongoing; it is not about perfection or arrival, it is about being present. The measure of success for me is that people feel enabled at the end of it. Above all I hope that the work increases feelings of connectedness. Both process and performance are valuable; they work together and off each other.

The list goes on...

And so do the questions...



Street Dance by Lone Twin with Jane Mason
Photographer David Severn

JANE MASON

CHOREOGRAPHER

How might it be possible to say that this is possible, relevant, that this can become meaningful, when there is doubt and fear and resistance to being truly seen?

What can we do to encourage the idea that 'trying' might be worth it? Is it really always worth it in the end? What makes it worth it?

Why might it not be worth it? What is the perceived cost of risk? And how to enable any invitation to be given and received, as well as possible?

How can we really know or find out how much discomfort a person might be experiencing? How do we value vulnerability?

What do we learn from taking part, about ourselves and through observing each other?

Is 'who is it for?' a necessary question?

Is it possible to prioritise 'learning through experience' as being enough in itself, and that it can be acceptable not to name 'outcomes'?

Can we allow uncertainty to be a terrain that we are in, and recognise that a fuller clarity, or some kind of language for the experience, will probably only be produced later?

Or is it about keeping a focus on asking the questions?

That the asking of the questions 'is' the work?

That we do not need answers, that the culture we wish to grow is made clearer by the questions it asks of itself no matter who we are working and dancing with...

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