

Theatre & Performance Conference Paper

The Dance Collector:

An investigation into the value of process in collecting stories & dance moves from local communities to examine cultural contexts for a theatre performance. ONE

I think it is important to begin by saying that although I am The Dance Collector, you should know that I'm not a dancer and I cannot dance.

I can't waltz, I can't salsa, I can't do a pirouette.

There will be no fox-trotting. I can't do the twist, the tango, a tap dance, the tarantella. No two step, one step, hand-jive, boogie-woogie, break dance, dirty dance, morris dance, may pole dance.

I cannot moonwalk.

No street dance, square dance, barn dance, folk dance.

No ballet, polka, flamenco, fandango, vogue or rumba.

There'll be no highland jigging in here.

There is no way that I can do a Can-Can.

The Dance Collector begins with this Polish dance costume, made by my mother 20 years ago. Over 40 years ago, my parents met at the Polish Club in Manchester, where they were paired up to dance in the Polish Dancing class. My mother danced her heart out. My father said she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. They met and married within 10 months. They have been married now for 43 years. Every year, on their wedding anniversary, they dance the Polish mazurka to the sound of a roaring accordion.

My background is in creating studio centred, text based performance. I can't dance – but I am interested in investigating community & dance as a non-dancer,

incorporating the stories around dance and the act of dancing to bring people together.

This paper will present my practice as research into the transition from contemporary performance into community settings, to gather material for performance for both community and theatre audiences. The project is rooted within culture and identity, and stems from my Polish heritage. Drawing upon autobiographical experiences, the project explores the act of sharing memories, anecdotes and dance moves as a means of bringing communities together, finding common ground and building new relationships.

TWO Practical case studies include:

- Public engagement at Preston Market & a residency at The Birley Studios
- Hunt & Darton's Café in both Manchester and Preston
- Over 65's Luncheon Group in a community centre in Crewe

The material generated was originally presented in two settings for two audiences: The community centre in Crewe for the community audience and also Crewe's Axis Arts Centre for a contemporary theatre audience. The findings from this will be considered in terms of audience engagement, participation and investment.

THREE I'd like to begin with a quote from Bishop, whose text *Artificial Hells*, guided my project in an attempt to:

...overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. To put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*. (Bishop, 2012, 2)

Andy Smith, in his practice, picks up on this notion of audience as participant.

FOUR He describes this audience/performer relationship in his work as a ‘gentle interrogation’, where he states the performer doesn’t ‘cover or smooth over but we excavate. We reveal and extract. We guide the play to production trying to keep things open, in the hope that the audience can come in and meet the work with openness too.’ (2011, 410) Smith’s current piece *The Preston Bill* is part of Fuel’s *New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood* programme, within which Smith strives to show his work directly to a wide ranging Preston audience. The content of the piece is rooted in the city of Preston, addressing ideas on identity, location and history. Smith goes on to reveal how conscious he is of the audience when creating and presenting work – to ‘not make them feel ignored, stuck on the other side of an imaginary fourth wall...We want to make the audience feel included here.’ (2011, 412). Bridging the gap between audience and performer is exactly my aim in this project – to make a connection with the audience and begin a conversation, and for that to directly influence the outcome of my performance.

Participation in the process

FIVE Breel, in her paper *Audience Agency in Participatory Performance* highlights the distinction which should be made between participation in process and participation in outcomes. Within outcome shaped participation, the audience are directly involved in creating and contributing to the work whilst the work is performed. For example, Breel cites Walker & Thorpe’s *I Wish I Was Lonely* within which audiences are encouraged to answer their phone if it rings during

the performance, as the piece examines issues of contactability – these live encounters shape the material of the show. There were some elements of live interaction embedded within early versions of The Dance Collector performance, for example, as the audience came in they were offered Polish cake and anecdotes about dance moves are shared, at another point the audience were invited to guess what kind of dancer their neighbour is. But originally, the majority of the piece was designed for the participation to occur in the process of the project rather than during the outcome of the performance. It was only in the act of first showing this piece that I realised that the environment actively encouraged continuous participation and therefore later became rooted within the work through the residency at The Birley Studios.

An investigation into local communities

SIX But first on process - My project has been focused upon participation and engagement as a process for collecting material for performance. I set up a stall on Preston Market to gather dance moves and the stories behind them in exchange for a slice of cake. Participants were encouraged to document their stories in a book I provided. The act embedded me into the market community – offers to join dance classes around the city were provided, stories of dancing in Preston North End football stands and Northern Soul in nightclub basements. Although material was gathered, at the time, it was not feasible to present a clear performance outcome to this shifting & fluctuating market audience. Therefore, to develop this, I worked with Hunt & Darton as a guest waiter within

their performance cafes to connect my project with audiences but also have a clearer platform or opportunity to present something back to them.

SEVEN Hunt & Darton claim to be ‘celebrating the ‘Cafe’ as an iconic and socially important hub for creative productivity and conversation’ and in this space they are ‘constantly trying to close the gap between performer and viewer opting for a raw, underdone, conversational aesthetic’ over food and drink. <<http://huntanddartoncafe.com/about/>> The audience in this café is made up of both a performance audience and the general public who are genuinely occupying the café. The first time I joined them, the café was a ‘pop-up’ inhabiting an empty shop on the train station approach to Manchester Piccadilly. Here footfall was high, resulting in many patrons of the café not being an art audience, thus providing a genuine engagement opportunity. The second time I joined them was for their take-over of Preston’s Korova Café as part of a festival earlier this year called Derelict. Here, I would argue the audience was mainly rooted within the arts and therefore potentially more open to engaging with performance practice over their food and drink. **EIGHT** The Dance Collector in these two locations worked to a more precise brief than at the market: to specifically collect people’s bad dance moves and these were then collated and performed as a sequence back with titled dedications: The Wobbly Elbow Dance for Sarah, The Secret Moonwalk Shuffle for Tom... Additional material – stories, memories were documented for potential use in future work. In both the market place and the cafe locations, The Dance Collector was a vehicle for getting people to talk to each other and to open up the site around them as holding creative potential. Two things eased this transition – the offering of cake as an act of sharing something or getting something in exchange for your stories, and the costume itself, which often was a point of starting a conversation – people wanting to touch it, to know where it was from, to tell me what it

reminded them of. The costume made a statement that something culturally different was taking place in the market or café space.

NINE These transitions out of the theatre into engaging directly with the community to generate and make performance were the beginnings of a fuller project, where I spent 6 weeks working with a group at Crewe Community Centre called ‘The Over 65’s Luncheon Group’. The intention for this project was to directly engage with the participants of an existing group, to gather their stories and memories around dance, to then use these to create a performance integrating my own cultural relationship with dance. The location for this performance was debated – first, a trip to a local theatre was planned providing the participants with a day out. After some consideration, it was decided that keeping the performance within the community centre would be better due to the mobility needs of the group. This was also their space – the material was as much about them as it was the location.

The material was gathered through conversations whilst engaging in their activities of bingo, lunch, quizzes, singalongs and tea & biscuits. The costume enabled me to be recognisable from week to week, and the majority of the participants opened up to me about their connections to dance. These were embedded into a performance made by them, about them and presented to them. The purpose of this was for them to have the opportunity to talk about their memories, to then be entertained by their own story and to find similarities or familiarity in other people’s stories. Framing their stories in a performance context gave them a sense of importance and put them at the centre of the theatrical experience. **TEN.** Smith quotes of his work that ‘the presence of the

audience are not forgotten' (2011, 412). Here, the audience are specifically named:

I learnt that Les is a plodder not a dancer, that Maggie remembers dancing around the maypole - the beautiful ribbons intertwining & now she dances around the house with her dog Lou-Lou, & Violet who looks ready to dance at a moment's notice & she knows the hand-jive better than any of us.

Etty remembers her husband who was a really good dancer, but she had 2 left feet.

The story of Ruth & her sister Mary, using liquorice torpedoes to stain their lips red before going dancing to The Studio in Crewe on a Friday night, where they met their husbands.

And beyond Crewe – to Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, & Malta – Roland's fighter plane dances through the war torn sky, travelling miles and miles, looping and gliding. And to Poland where girls hold their hands on their hips and dance in circles, with smiles and accordions playing.

ELEVEN A quote from Paulus on 'the idea of accepted audience action':

Essentially, the audience is expected to quietly receive the event, only making noise at solicited moments. The audience is governed by an unspoken code of behaviour: pay attention, don't talk to the person sitting next to you, don't even think about whipping out something to eat...Silence is a premium...So be sure to turn your cell phone off. And God forbid you should ever talk back to the performers (Paulus, 2006, 334)

In this community centre in Crewe, the audience broke all the so called 'rules' **TWELVE** – maybe because they weren't in a theatre so not following traditional theatre conventions, they were in their space where they were used to talking. Or maybe because the content was about them, they felt able to participate in

their own story. ‘That’s not how you apply rouge!’ Mary shouts out mid-performance. Etty can’t hear what I’m saying and repeatedly tells me that ‘she has 2 left feet, it was her husband that was the dancer!’ And when I use a line of text from a popular song from their era, they all shout out the next line. All of these interruptions were live and part of the event/experience.

But what happens if you move this piece into a theatre to a theatre audience – does it translate? **THIRTEEN** Does it mean something different to be performed in a different space to a different audience? Smith talks about removing obstacles between the audience and performer (2011, 411), and I was interested in how I could do this with The Dance Collector’s performance material in a theatre space – how I could transfer the experience to a theatre audience. **FOURTEEN** I performed the same piece at The Axis Theatre in Crewe, to people who hadn’t been involved in the process and therefore didn’t know Mary, Etty, Roland and co. Here, I was asking the audience to actively participate through imagining the people and stories I was presenting. The way this audience was integrated into the piece was by embodying the role of those members from Crewe Community Centre, by wearing name-badges, in an attempt to, as Matthew Reason states, ‘reformulate the performer-spectator relationship and invite a different more active, kind of audience engagement.’ (Reason 2015, 271) This device integrated the audience into the piece as well as enabling me to remember who was representing who when I returned to a person, to a story, to a narrative. The audience in this space behaved much more formally, although again with the song lyrics, I witnessed people nudging and whispering, having got the reference and wanting to show that they knew what the song was that I was quoting. But these moments were largely covert and kept for the post-show discussion – the organised space allocated for the

audience to respond, so as not to ‘disturb’ the performance. In the community centre there was also a post-show discussion of sorts, but one which blended into the performance itself, chatting over coffee and cake as the audience return to their usual activities – there was no set beginning or end to that piece. From arriving in the morning with my props and setting up, taping down wires, testing sound levels, the people in the community centre were talking to me, asking me what I was doing, what was going on? Because the engagement with the community centre was more than just the performance that was presented to them on that day. It was a piece which began weeks earlier with our joint investment. And after the piece, the project continues – The Dance Collector attended their Christmas party, their stories are documented on an online blog for the people to stay connected. Bishop states that participatory art places a value on what is often invisible: ‘a group dynamic, a social situation, a raised consciousness’ (2012, 6). **FIFTEEN** Outcomes from this project resulted in community group members talking more to each other. Two people who sat opposite each other every week, realised through reminiscing childhood dance classes with me, that they were friends in school 70 years earlier. Others embraced this as an opportunity to share their cultural connections through Irish dancing or African dancing, and others still how they were able, and not too old, to show me their dance moves for how to do the Quickstep. The majority of people in the Crewe community group met their husbands and wives through dancing, and this project was very much a celebration of their relationships as well as a celebration of the landmarks of Crewe – an opportunity for them to remember the dancehalls and the bands that occupied them – Billy Fury, Slade, Screaming Lord Sutch.

Last month, The Dance Collector began a residency at The Birley Studios in Preston, which is a gallery overlooking the market where the initial audience engagement for this project began. Drawing upon the experiences outlined, and to mark the beginning of the residency, I presented an open performance to an ‘arts’ audience and the general public on a busy Saturday afternoon market day. On a dance floor in the gallery, accompanied by a live accordionist, I performed the original stories I had gathered mixed with new ones from that day. The audience interacted with the performance by requesting their own suggested dance moves for me to perform & I imagined the dance moves of the audience. Some people stayed and watched for an hour, some watched from the safety of the doorway. Some recognised the names and stories of Preston’s market traders. Some had the delight of watching me attempt the breakdancing they had taught me earlier. Some entered the dance floor to show me how to do it.

SIXTEEN To summarise, each outcome for this project strives to put the audience at the centre of the experience, to bridge the boundary between audience-participant and performer. I’ve been considering how a space helps to do this, and how although community centres are not ideal spaces to host theatrical work due to lighting, sound constraints and not being able to rig large sets – they are convenient in that the audience is already there. The Birley Studios worked as a great bridge between a community & theatre venue as passing people on the market were attracted over to see what was going on. The interaction which takes place before, during and after a performance in the community centre or theatre is an opportunity for communication and interaction. However, this type of project can have a sense of incompleteness – as there are always more stories to tell and more dance moves to share.

SEVENTEEN

