

## The focus: community collaborations



Production and rehearsal from Common Dance. Photo: © Susannah Stone.

# Uncommon perspectives

**Rosemary Lee's** Common Dance, performed at the Borough Hall, Greenwich as part of Dance Umbrella 2009, is experienced from three different viewpoints

**Rosemary Lee had wanted to create a new project for Greenwich Dance Agency gDA ever since working with them in 1999 on Banquet Dances, a large-scale site-specific work set in the Royal Naval College Painted Hall.** When the opportunity finally arose it was through a joint commission from Dance Umbrella and gDA in association with Artsadmin.

Informed by notions of shared experience, Common Dance was another large-scale work involving performers aged between 8 and 84. Rosemary (commonly referred to by friends and colleagues as Rosie) led workshops for each of the different age bands to give those interested in the project a chance to experience her way of working. It was also an opportunity for her to select performers. Owing to the nature of the work she wanted to create (having most of the cast on stage most of the time, plus a range of ages and backgrounds and an equality of gender), and due to the size of the performing area (gDA's historic and striking Borough Hall), she could only cast approximately 50 people in it.

The project offered Rosie the opportunity to fulfill an ambition to work with a children's choir – namely, the 70-strong Finchley Children's Music Group. She invited the composer Terry Mann to write three choral works for them based on a libretto Rosie herself compiled. It was a combination of texts from multiple sources including

Rilke's elegies, Pueblo oral poetry, English writers such as John Clare and WS Graham and her and Mann's own words. Interwoven with the live music was an ambient sound score.

Common Dance built a momentum of its own and was sold out for each of its four performance in autumn 2010. As Rosie remarked at the time of the premiere, 'Modern, and particularly urban, society has gradually lost the squares, commons, town halls that provided a shared public space where communal decisions were made and differences argued over. Common Dance represents that gathering, that common ground where we can experience some of life's colour, variety and challenges together.'

What follows is three different perspectives on a remarkable performance from two pairs of observant outside eyes (an academic and a dance practitioner) and an insider's view.

## Stretching silence

**Before his reverie is shattered by the arrival of a noisome party of tourists, the philosopher Michel Serres sits in the ancient theatre at Epidaurus listening to silence.** The return of his own attention to himself in this great stone ear functions, he suggests, as a healing or 'treatment' of the painful coenaesthesia – mixed sensations >

– by which the noise of daily life overwhelms us: ‘Neither voice nor language; coenaesthesia emits and receives thousands of messages: comfort, pleasure, pain, sickness, relief, tension, release – noises whispered or wailing. Aesculapius quietens these messages, and slowly erases them. We are healed better by leaving noise behind than by diving into language’ (1). Where the theatre’s silence might have returned Serres to himself, the touristic Babel that disrupts it does neither this, nor gives of itself in return. A suitably silent treatment might then seem of necessity to be exercised in a theatre free of others. As well as a medicinal cure, however, a treatment is also a mode of attention given to another, a handling of them, a care (or its absence) for their wellbeing.

In golden light, on a blonde wooden floor, a man and a woman carefully lift and carry a young girl; a middle-aged woman catches a boy who is falling; an elderly man is borne aloft on others’ arms. Watching this just behind me in the bleacher seating, a small boy falls silent as his mother weeps. Perhaps, like me, they find their own cares drawn out by the extraordinary way in which the company of Common Dance treat one another; extraordinary in the sense that we so rarely get a chance to touch one another, or be moved, or to take up another’s body with one’s own, with a touch which is neither coercively nor erotically performed.

To attend, to give attention, finds a root in the Latin *attendere* – to give heed or, literally, to stretch toward. But to what should we give heed, or pay attention? Perhaps the silence in which Serres was returned to himself is not so much an absence of sound as it is that flip-side of language in which a listener tries little more than to be with another, making a space in which they might be heard (2). Lee demanded of her dancers that they be ‘continually trying to renew their listening, listening to each other, listening to themselves with everything that they do’ (3). As the old man was relieved of the burden of gravity, and lifted by his fellows with tender care (another stretching), the commonality in this dance was not so much that we all might stretch our bodies thus, but that we might make a space of silence for one another in which to listen to more than just the chatter of our difference.

(1) Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*; London: Continuum, 2008. Aesculapius was the Greek god of healing and medicine within whose sanctuary the theatre at Epidaurus is located

(2) Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*; London, Routledge, 1990

(3) Personal interview 9th December, 2009.

Martin Welton is a theatre-maker and researcher. As a lecturer in performance at Queen Mary University of London, his teaching and research concerns emotion and the senses in theatre training and performance; as a performer he’s currently working on a new project with Klaus Seewald of Theater ASOU in Graz, Austria. **contact** m.welton@qmul.ac.uk



Production and rehearsal from Common Dance. Photo: Lucy Cash.

## Shadowing Rosie

A door is opened and I’m welcomed in, invited to navigate my way through a spread of bodies – vulnerable, foetal and familiar. We almost step on her, yet she doesn’t flinch. Commitment roots her to the earth.

It’s not often that I watch a dance performance thinking of odd questions about the dancers. Such as, did her foot heal ok? Will he get that bit? I wonder if she got home okay? But then it’s not often that a dance performance, and the process leading up to it, can be such an intimate and revealing portrait of the people within it.

I came to Common Dance after my own research into an ethnographic approach to dance-making and some slippery concepts of relational aesthetics. I sought Rosie out as a choreographer because I knew her to be committed to the intimate and relational processes I’d just started to explore. I observed rehearsals from the beginning, and was also there for the cast selections. I watched as an artist but, wearing my ‘education’ hat, I was also looking at how she worked with a diverse group of people. I left, happily, with questions that challenge my practice in both fields. I share a few of them here.

Much of the work of Common Dance was about leaving behind the social codes of life outside the studio, stripping off rules and expectations of the body. Rather than constantly giving to the group, Rosie works on helping them find. Common practice for the professional dancer, perhaps, but in fact how often do my technique classes seek to add to rather than open up what actually already



Production and rehearsal from Common Dance. Photo: Simon Weir. [www.simonweir.com](http://www.simonweir.com)

resides in the body? I observed Rosie in this gentle unwinding of the group, prising it open, peeling off layers. How often do I give people this kind of space? When did this time for the body become passed off as 'indulgent'? The well-worn ground of 'learning outcomes' becomes challenged as Rosie holds back: in education and art-making am I often too quick to map out the end goals, rather than inviting and trusting the body's capacity to find them? How can I invite more and instruct less?

The bodies swoop, catch and land. Knees and ankles soften into the ground, as the body reaches up from it. They stand still and real, a forest, a narrative, a moment to just look and be, to see people looking and being.

This unpeeling and opening of the group leads to their stillness. In my teaching experience this 'stillness' is often not popular. From dance we expect movement and sweat and impact and contraction. And yet a key image in Common Dance is of a standing group of people who just are. We don't get this opportunity in everyday life where our bodies are constantly holding on. Rosie sets small, intimate tasks for pairs – tracing body parts, gentle contact work. I watched people of all ages talk passionately about these experiences afterwards, gesturing to articulate the experience in their bodies. Tiny, small moments and movements that unleash and unlock. Rosie is resolute in her commitment to this exposure, and I wonder how many classes I've 'fucked-up', how many quiet and internal phrases I've set to Britney Spears in a bid to 'win back' a dance class of young people. Yes, we have to tap into the

energy and drive and exuberance of youth (and in Common Dance we truly see them fly as well as rest), but am I short-changing them if I don't offer chances to explore intimacy, stillness and a deep knowledge of their bodies?

The bodies suddenly explode into pattern - complex, rhythmic, precise. Weave, duck, pull, lean. I try and hold these slippery images, like grasping at reeds buffeted in the current. They don't stick in my hands, but it doesn't matter. Their beauty is in their movement.

How do choreographers hold onto their work without documenting it themselves? Can they access the images and memories recorded by another person, or on video, or in notes? What resonates, and how do we hold onto it? For Rosie the people within Common Dance are the documents, and the relational process becomes her notebook. Conversation is the root of the work, and I observed vital lines of communication between Rosie and her team, the team and the group, the group and Rosie. Through watching Common Dance unfold I see a relational framework in practice, where everything is underpinned by a complex and vital web of people talking.

A door is opened and we're invited to navigate our way through a spread of voices – strong, familiar, vibrant. We step through them. We don't flinch. Commitment roots us to the earth.

Anita Wadsworth is an independent dance artist and educator. As Associate Artist with Suffolk Dance she developed her work >

as a solo performer, poet and choreographer. She has an MA in Choreography from Laban where she collaborated with scenographer Rachel E Stanners to begin the relational art project *Collectanea*. **contact** mail@anitawadsworth.co.uk

## People person

**As one of the professional dancers involved in *Common Dance I* had a privileged window onto Rosemary Lee's essential concerns and processes.** I was struck by how the intergenerational and community aspect of her work is so instinctive and inherent, and how it runs so emphatically through the ways that she delivers ideas and works with people.

Rosie addresses - and requires - a mixed bag of humans made up out of their differences, but focused upon a common flourishing. She divided the cast - I think we were 53 in total, but double that with the choir - into four groups of 12 or so. Each contained a range of non-professional dancers from children to seniors, one professional and an apprentice. Along with apprentice Robbie Syngé, my group consisted of a (stunningly dedicated and mature) 9 year-old, a smattering of teenagers and adults of various ages, cultures and individual characters to whom we were to help Rosie impart the work. Integrating this diversity of people certainly presented challenges. But Rosie had created her groups with care, thinking of interpersonal dynamics as much as technical or artistic aspects.

Rosie is idealistic without being naïve, and quick to pull up (extraordinarily skillfully and appropriately) poor behaviour of any kind. Wise to the limitations of each phase of life, she appreciates and makes apparent both in rehearsal and on stage the strengths of different sectors of society - the magnificent physical power of the young, the innocence of children, the wisdom and authority of elders. As well as displaying our strengths, being all together allowed us to dance - to behave - in ways we normally don't. I moved at times with the memory of my childhood running over the Shropshire hills. The teenagers found a



Production and rehearsal from *Common Dance*. Photo: Simon Weir. [www.simonweir.com](http://www.simonweir.com)

simple openness and a quiet, focused concentration perhaps unusual to them, and the elderly were lifted, soared and lay down on the floor. Rosie sees people fundamentally as part of a greater good, and in need of each other. She brought us out of our insular selves and groups and into a common space where more possibilities and truths are available to each one of us.

Although a very shared and inclusive process, *Common Dance* was by no means a devised work in an obvious sense. It was more a kind of lived philosophy of community gathered around a personal artistic vision. Perhaps that's what made it so successful both as a work of art and a function of human interaction.

The speed at which this massive production came together was astonishing. Rosie planned it incredibly well beforehand so that even before rehearsals began the structure was laid out, a musical and lyrical score written and the movement substantially choreographed. What was finalised in working with the cast were the mechanics of timing, patterns and responses to the space and group, and also several details of movement.

The creation process was incredibly tight. I believe we made a more than hour-long performance - and with a monumentally huge and varied cast - in about 19 rehearsals, many of which weren't whole days. This, however, didn't include the five rehearsals with Rosie and only the team of professionals and apprentices. We created some of our own movement phrases to given instructions. She taught or worked out the vast majority of the material on and with us, and we later demonstrated it and passed it on to our groups. This, too, saved masses of time in terms of deriving the right focus and sense from an image.

It felt as though Rosie gave us as careful guidance about how to work with people as she did about the material itself. The most persuasively effective approach she indicated to me was not to criticise or correct what was wrong or lacking, but rather to praise what was successful. It was this that enabled every performer to have a sense of ownership and belonging in relationship to the movement and the project itself.

It was, mostly, quite simple technically, but it's often the quality and timbre which defines Rosie's movement - coupled with the diversity and presence of her performers.



Production and rehearsal from *Common Dance*. Photos: Simon Weir. [www.simonweir.com](http://www.simonweir.com)



Production and rehearsal from Common Dance. Photo: © Susannah Stone.

She taught us how to use language and imagery when describing the same material to different age groups, employing references and associations that a varied group could all understand. One particular piece of movement became the sun glittering on the feathers of a golden eagle for a little girl, or trickles of mercury splitting and rolling apart for some performers and small electric shocks for others. Another dramatic phrase was described alternatively as a belly in the act of sobbing, a car kangarooing and stalling, and the seat of an office chair being shifted downward in stages.

Common Dance was in many ways a proficient paradox - prosaic and rapturous, sophisticated and raw, elaborate and plain, tentative and bombastic. It was full of references to Britain or Englishness both new and old - from the English bagpipes and indigenous birds in the soundtrack, and the country dancing, to the quirky venue and the vigorously multi-cultural cast. Yet it was also immensely universal. It followed a simple and archetypal narrative depicting a cyclical journey: tracing a life from birth through growth, towards action and celebration, and on to decline and death, or following the course of a single day from dawn to noon to night. Through varied aspects in the movement and text these cycles registered as humanity, plant life, geology or patterns of spiritual or emotional experience. This was an exceptionally long-sighted view on life and the cosmos, and its message a fundamental sense of faith in change, growth and exchange. The people involved were also expected to - and, indeed did - grow, change and exchange.

Very little time was spent talking about concepts, and

I think no time at all exploring movement that hadn't already been planned and placed within the overall structure. And yet everybody made a unique contribution. Rosie somehow really saw us, absorbing our feelings and ideas and pushing the patterning of material around to emphasise variations and individualities with a fantastic naturalness and precision. We didn't all do everything; each did certain bits well, delivering the work to the audience with commitment and flair. And yet it belonged to us all. In maintaining an exceptionally firm creative hand Rosie also managed to make us feel like co-creators, which brought a fullness and richness to the finished performances.

It's essentially a passionate understanding and affection for people that drives her, I think. With an invaluable sense of humour, and an awareness of the darkness in us all, Rosie sees us as fundamentally positive and equal and grasps the necessity and achievability of creativity. In Common Dance she brought people together in an ecstatically coherent, expressive, poetic experience that nightly moved people - in rehearsal or in the audience, and including me - to tears.

Lizzy Le Quesne is an artist and writer. Her work has been presented in galleries, theatres and specific sites internationally. She writes about dance and the visual arts, and lectures at Brighton University. She also performs, most recently for Ricochet Dance Productions.

There is a book of Simon Weir's photography available. Please visit [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com) and search for 'Common Dance'.