

A photograph of two women standing outdoors and talking. The woman on the left has blonde hair, wears glasses, a blue scarf, and a brown jacket. The woman on the right has grey hair, wears a black jacket with a red lining and a patterned scarf. The background is blurred, showing greenery and a building.

Lines of pluck

Rosemary Lee and Siobhan Davies, 2011. Photo: Richard Oliver.

Colleagues and friends **Siobhan Davies** and **Rosemary Lee** ruminate together on art and its place in society. Written during a COVID lockdown, they consider it is a positive action to believe in the good. Recognising the suffering of the dance community, they focus on the idea of positivity as one way to step towards a difference

Siobhan Davies (SD): If I need a surge of positivity, I think of the Lion Man, a figure carved from Mammoth Ivory 40,000 years ago. Whoever made it and the community they lived amongst must have understood that the making of the figure was worth the time spent away from other necessary tasks for their survival. A recent investigation thought it would have taken 400 hours to make. That feels like a real commitment to their sense of creating something that supports them beyond their pragmatic needs.

The standing figure has a partly human body with a lion's head; it feels very alert. The fabric of the half human, half creature figure is worn by being held and passed around by the people who made, cared for and respected it. This imagined form has lasted 40 millennia and its presence can still resonate within us after everything our human race has undergone.

Rosemary Lee (RL): Beautiful. What gives me shivers and helps me feel part of a continuum are the Neolithic cave paintings that I have never seen in the flesh. The hands imprinted on the rock wall, and the thought and sense of that human placing their hand there, spitting and blowing the red pigmented earth over their hand to outline it. It's so potent. Not just an image of their hand but their breath too, caught in the act of marking their existence in that moment, so, so long ago.

I'm a bit obsessed with hands actually, maybe that's why they feature prominently in a lot of my work. I'm thinking now of Michael Donaghy's poem Touch, where he is addressing the spirit of Lucy (the name given to a small female skeleton discovered in the 70s in Ethiopia), an early ancestor who lived 3.2 million years ago. The last three lines of the poem are:

“What necessities designed your hands and mine?
Did you kill, carve, gesture to god or gods?
Did the caress shape your hand or your hand
the caress?”

Those lines haunt me. Here we are both in our different ways gesturing and making and sharing our making in the moment of its unfolding with others.

SD: At the present, there are questions around why artists continue to make. Are we simply providing more stuff and is stuff needed and is the stuff monetised beyond its best nature? Have the arts become an industry and therefore have no link to the spirit in which the Lion Man was made? I understand the question but believe that humans have the urge to be occupied not only by pragmatic jobs but by working at something that makes or gives a sense of something beyond the containment we might be living within. An artist or someone working within a community is playing and working with alternative perspectives, other doorways to step through.

I think you and I are trying to better our understanding about the relationship between a performance and the people who come to see it. We hope that their thoughts, feelings and memories are handling what they are experiencing.

I used to make work for the stage, I loved it but at a certain point I was in the audience watching my work and simply not getting the same felt information that enveloped me when I was in the studio. The information involved what I could see, hear, think about, feel, the memories it lighted up in me, a meshwork of overlapping sensations. Some of these were directly to do with what was happening in front of me but often it was touching on something that was at the periphery of my consciousness, a shard of a past lived moment being encouraged to live again.

I genuinely find it hard to talk about how to build a relationship between what is being performed and those watching. Everyone involved seems haunted by our own expectations, our different lives and knowledges. The performer is steeped in a long-term understanding of what they have rehearsed and >>

prepared and the visitor comes with the desire to be stimulated in some way. In the first instance, there is this open situation and ideally all of us want to belong to this particular moment.

RL: Yes, where is the meeting point? Taking myself back in time to being a performer in a theatre setting, I have a sense I felt I was trying to fulfil every facet of the work that was in my imagination and in the choreographers' imaginations. I was consumed by how to manifest it in that moment so that it was visible to the audience. I remember those moments when I felt I was going too far towards the 'make it visible' mindset and not enough to the 'do it and sense it'; how much to reach out further and how much to sit in deeper was always the question.

SD: Yes, the complexity is delicious, dig deep, stretch out. I will tell a story that speaks of being in the close presence of a dancer. Henry Montes was creating a solo for and with me. The work was called Birdsong and we had been experimenting with listening to birdsong to see what would happen if we embedded these inhuman sounds into us and what movement might arrive out of that experience. He asked me to watch a part of his solo twice. I watched both and although the movement was the 'same' each time, the second version was a far better communication.

I felt what was being done. I was not able to language the difference but in the second I knew what I was in the presence of without needing to language it, it was satisfying. He explained that in the first, he did the movement as he had remembered it. In the second, his imagination and knowledge conjured the sound of the bird throughout his body. It took huge concentration but there was no doubt in my mind that far more of me was with him when he performed the second time. His total immersion, digging deep and reaching out, gave me, as an observer, more to engage with; in a curious way, I had a part to play amongst his various concentrations on sound, movement, purpose, the otherness of the bird sound.

RL: I am not surprised. What I learnt early on working with all ages was that to help them as performers and to help make it possible for the audience to receive them and the work, I had to find ways to enable the performers to continually taste the movement. Not in its physical mechanics but in its quality. That quality might come from an image or intention but that has to be there still in their imagination, which infuses and floods through their body. As you describe, total immersion. That way,

“I am so fascinated by the relationship between, on the one hand, seeing yourself as an individual forging your path through life and, on the other, being part of the bigger society, part of the collective, and how those two ways of engaging with the world might relate.”

the audience, like you, gets it – they feel it.

I remember once working with little ones at the Festival Hall on a project called Gigantic Ticks – Andrea Buckley and Simon Whitehead were dancing and I was presenting participatory lecture demonstrations with the children. They would ask the dancers to embody different things and a very young little girl asked them to dance a peach. They really struggled, so gently I asked her if she could show them and she stood up and quivered right at the edges of her skin. Just like the furry skin of a peach. We couldn't believe it. She was truly a peach and we all knew peach with her.

In that project, I was really trying to share the wonders of dance with families in a light playful way. Later, I began to try other ways to share the intimacy of the studio in the suchness of Heni and Eddie, for example. Yes, we are both curious about this place of encounter, between audience and the work. Perhaps we both wanted to get literally closer to our audience, tearing down the fourth wall in different ways. I am remembering Table of Contents, for example, where you are actually in conversation...

SD: And that was sooo delightful, we felt as performers that we could temper what we did next, because we had touched upon each other, the performer and visitor, the lines of engagement, the lines of pluck between us, which were more present because we had already shared a conversation, shared common ground.

RL: Oh, I love that – lines of pluck. Yes, we both jumped into that area of discovery in changing our relationship to the audience, things have changed so much in the last 30 years in terms of what performance can be.

Over the last ten years, I have been enjoying thinking that the way I approach the audience is the same way I approach a participant. Maybe because I work with non-professionals and professionals. I try to help them blossom – if I am trying to do that with each participant then I feel as if I am trying to do that with each audience member. I hope that doesn't come across as patronising. It is more that I believe we have potential to be open, and curious, and often times we don't have those chances to be that way in ourselves in the everyday due to the demands and expectations most people have to meet. I think I am trying to set something up in the work – in time and in space – that allows for this expansion, this blossoming. You become more expanded. That's what I hope for in seeing art.

SD: At our best, when we reach an audience... or when I have been reached as an audience, I feel my capacity to be part of not only what is in front of me but something other as well, there has been an expansion. There is that thing that has loosened within me and let more in.

I feel as if I have been allowed, I feel as if what I bring to this is present and is alright.

RL: Yes, yes!

SD: I've been able to be opened up because I have felt it was okay to be there. I didn't feel as if I was obscure.

I am realising more and more that the political dimension that continually interests me is how dance can encourage ways of working well within the complexity of each person contributing to it. Each performer brings very different perspectives and histories. The work being made begins to become the story of its own making as well as what it is trying to get across. And the story of its making continues with how the audience receive the work and then hopefully hold a memory of it.

RL: There is most definitely a political dimension to how we work and why we make work. At its simplest, we are asking how can the world function better? How can we, in our small lives, through the ways we work with each other, address those bigger questions?

SD: I was a post Second World War child and gradually I became aware of the huge effort that was happening to mend a society after the trauma of war. The NHS was being put into place but also technological, political and economic change were needed. My family and their friends were involved in the emergence of the arts, crafts and manufacture during this period and only recently have I felt the

impact the excitement they were experiencing had on me. I realise that I was young and innocent but it seeded in me the idea that the arts can be a positive excitement and create fresh exchanges and opportunities amongst people.

And of course, the idea is wonderful and the practice hard! I hover between thinking I can be part of exciting work and then being concerned about what the hell I am doing and feeling at odds with myself. I keep hoping and working towards making a dance, a way of working, a connection to others and hoping that these are available to and questioned by others. And I know that I am amongst many who want to bring something good into the now.

RL: I had hoped COVID might be helping us return to valuing everyone's contribution to society, that rich mix that makes a society work, the front-line workers, the shelf stackers, the ambulance drivers, etc. Only the sad and frustrating thing is that artists don't seem to be seen in the same light, as contributors to making society a better place.

SD: We all want to be useful, I am sure part of people's anguish is that they feel they have been dismissed and can't be useful. We are useful as choreographers and dancers but not necessarily because we are instrumentalised.

RL: Yes, we have to keep banging on about the usefulness of art for art's sake!

There is a new word being used for the feeling people have at the moment – languish, I have that sense of languishing. Slopping around in a stagnant pool, there was no flow for a while. We need purpose, energy and motion to feel our aliveness.

I am so fascinated by the relationship between, on the one hand, seeing yourself as an individual forging your path through life and, on the other, being part of the bigger society, part of the collective, and how those two ways of engaging with the world might relate. How can an individual's will entwine with the sense of being an ensemble, and doing things for the good of the bigger society? I think that sense of post-war Britain affected us both. We grew up with that approach of having responsibility for the greater good. Though if you look at the world currently, you could quite well say we failed badly.

In a healthy democratic society, everyone should have dignity and purpose, and no one should feel as if they are not valued.

SD: Exactly, and we should have the chance to have access to expanding experiences. Perhaps it's pie in the sky.

RL: We all need some pie in the sky... no? ■