



FEELING THE RUSH

PROCESS AND

PROTEST FOR

OUR TIMES



The large-scale outdoor spectacular **Rush**, by choreographer and Artistic Director of Southpaw **Robby Graham**, was commissioned by ArtReach for Leicester's Journey's Festival During the Summer of 2022.

This was the fourth iteration of a work that has become Southpaw's signature and a touchstone for our troubled times. One year on, Robby in conversation with People Dancing's **Louise Katerega** reflects on the origins, journey and final destination of **Rush**, a work that has remained resonant for almost a decade and spawned a host of unlikely dancers in some of the most challenged communities in four locations in England... >>

Rush is an outdoor mass movement spectacle, which has been brought by Southpaw Dance Company and its funding partners to South Tyneside, Blackpool, Hull and Leicester. It is inspired by a 21st Century phenomenon: all over the world people have shown their dissatisfaction with prevailing social and economic conditions by taking to the streets to protest. It engages with potentially disaffected people, aspires to give a voice to grievances, tell stories that matter and find an outlet for everyday frustrations in a huge release of energy and creativity.

The project consists of 6-12 weeks of dance, writing and film workshops to devise material that forms the show and follows three archetypes: a zero hours worker, a young mother and a homeless character. Through the lens of these stories, the wider story of the issues people in areas of low engagement face is revealed. Shows are deliberately placed in a neglected yet significant part of each locality, transforming it, rock-concert style, with projection mapping, spectacular sound design, flares, cars and community casts ranging from 40 to 200 people, many of whom are new to dance.

All images throughout this article are from **Rush** by Southpaw Dance Company at Journeys Festival International. Photos: Chris Patrick photography. © Art Reach.

“I wish I could say that things have changed in the time we’ve been doing it, but the sad fact is these issues keep getting worse.”

LK: How did Rush come about?

RG: Big question! I think my work led me in that direction for a good number of years, but (the Global Financial Crisis of) 2008 was a major pivotal event. There was a whole phenomenon of protests – Hong Kong, the Arab Spring – global symptoms of people feeling really alienated by and disassociated with their governments and not feeling represented. And when it hit the UK, it started in London with Mark Duggan in 2011 (1), but that ignited a wider thing in the UK that spread north.

Rush came from the media reaction to (the riots that followed Duggan’s death) in 2011. I felt broken down, because of Cameron and co’s reaction: a massive oversimplification of a very complex socio-economic situation that misrepresented these very frustrated communities, who had been misrepresented or underrepresented for years. I’m not advocating for rioting or damaging property or disputing it happened, but I just said, you know: “Enough is enough!”

I remember hearing words coming out of government like ‘criminality’ and ‘looting’... the voice of the masters saying this mass expression was just ‘opportunism’. I hated that they were getting away with that and just felt like, as artists, we needed to do something and comment. That’s what made me really angry. It took me four years to formulate that anger and approach and the first instance of Rush.

LK: Tell me about that first instance...

RG: It was Tyneside – a wide area. You’re talking ex-mining villages, coastal towns, different boroughs where people don’t tend to travel a lot. We worked in ten wards across different sites so where we did the show had a significance. We did it at an old pithead, with its history of what happened with the coal industry and rocked communities here in the 80s. Communities across the UK were being hit like this again so it felt like re-cycling. It was a real test of significance to do the first one.

It was a daring move for our commissioners Cultural Spring, an amazing CPP (Creative People and Places organisation) based in South Shields. CPPs work around England, tasked with working with communities who have the least engagement in the arts and culture, and usually in very economically deprived areas.

Rush was the first large-scale show Southpaw ever did. I remember pitching it, thinking: “I’m never gonna get this, because it opens with a riot!” At the >>







time, in 2015 measures and manoeuvres against protests were coming from government stifling people's voices. We took it upon ourselves to create something which takes out frustration. We really didn't think they'd go for it.

But the great thing about CPPs is they are community led. Commissioning *Rush* was led by members of Cultural Spring's advisory board and community members. I don't know what other pitches there were, but I remember them really connecting and saying: "This is what we're experiencing. It's not the same in every borough, ward, or every area of city we work in, but the frustrations people face are real. We talked about the breadline... the difference between a five pence increase or a ten pence increase in bus fare, which meant you can't afford to go to work. That's how tight things can be for people. I think it's something that we talk about (in the arts) and don't really understand, yet work in communities and areas that experience it. We felt that we had to articulate that and turn that into a narrative audiences could connect with.

LK: How did you get people, who may not have ever thought about it, dancing?

RG: Well, I suppose it's our approach. I'm not from a contemporary, fully trained, conservatoire background. I'm from hip hop theatre, and BBoying. I've always come through with community at the heart of what we do from the first classes in Northern Ireland, between Catholic and Protestant communities, all the way through to working with amazing people like our mentors Tamara McLorg and Royston Maldoom. To be honest, I've never really questioned it, I've always worked in that way.

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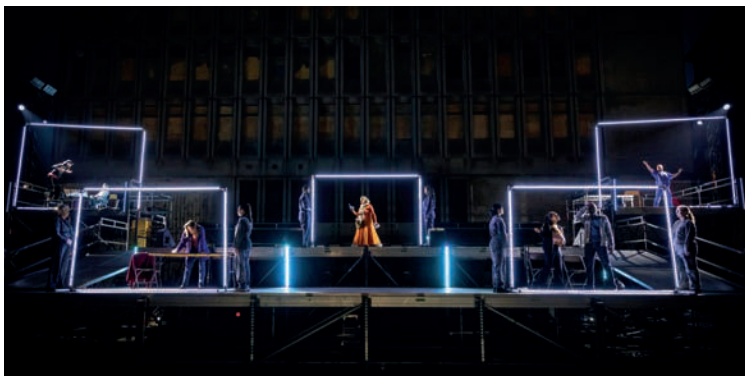
And with *Rush*, there's not much of a riot, if you only have like six professional dancers on a stage! The power of the piece lay in having community involved and all expressing a sentiment and the sentiment they were expressing was our job; just to be facilitator of the community voice. We worked with writing sessions and workshops and devising and talking to people about different stories and frustrations, maybe hardships, but also successes and things that bring the community together.

And that's what forms *Rush* in each area we work in. It's truly a co creation process. I mean, *Let's Create (2)* what a strategy! When we read it, we were like, well, this could be our mission statement.

LK: How long does the *Rush* process take?

RG: We have done six, but try to spend 8-10 weeks in a community. We might put on six or seven workshops initially or concertina sessions together to build our sense of momentum towards the spectacle finale.

You've got to meet people on their own terms and their own turf, you know? You can't just jump in. I'm sure that there's lots of amazing projects that happen in the beautiful, central theatre space in



whatever city, but we're interested in satellite work, drawing audience in from all parts of it for the final production.

It's about accessibility of those sessions as well. Not everybody wants to travel, not everybody is already engaged. We don't want people who've already been dancing for 10 years. We want people who have never thought about doing anything like this before in their lives and an end up transformed by it in the end.

LK: Southpaw offer support to participants like childcare, taxi or bus fares? Was that need always apparent?

RG: I think there can't be any barriers to inclusion. Whatever we can do to remove those, we do. We try to offer every possible means, because there is an interesting discussion around payment and around

community work. (3) Sign me up! At the very least, you have to make sure that people aren't emptying their pockets for engaging in culture...

Also, you have to think sensitively. We don't know, where we meet people and what their challenges are. Our ethos, it's discreet. Financial support is offered, but never drawn attention to in a public forum.

LK: What are some other challenges you face?

RG: There can be a lot of "this sort of thing is not for me". And it's understandable. Arts and culture don't always feel accessible, dance can feel pretty elitist, or there can be threshold issues at venues. We just try to convince people there's no reason why you need to feel that way. Culture is absolutely vital to who we are.

And I'm not gonna lie sometimes you just go: "There's got to be an easier way!" I remind myself, because we've been through it a few times, you get to that end point and it is about the journey. Don't get me wrong. I love every moment even the hard times! That's seriously what makes it amazing. And when you see people just light up with the possibilities of what they can actually do, you can see the sort of addiction to that happen; what we all love as performers.

LK: Why wasn't once enough for Rush? What draws you back?

RG: I wish I could say that things have changed in the time we've been doing it, but the sad fact is these issues keep getting worse and our current government are doing absolutely squat to deal with that. It's almost got to the point where it's so farcical it's hard for us to address.

Before last summer, we always really felt it's not an overtly political work. I don't want to make it out as such. It's not. It's about small 'p' political; lived experience not grand overtures. But we kind of took the gloves off with the last version in Leicester, where the Downing Street lockdown party was featured. It was very overt, but people were frustrated, especially over the pandemic; feeling alienated and misrepresented... people who were losing loved ones yet there were parties going on behind closed doors. I mean, it's disgraceful... Those were the feelings that rose up when we spoke to people and you need to translate that. As I said, we're facilitators of a community voice.

LK: It's not just pure dance, there's text too. How do those two elements play their part for you?

RG: I've worked in theatre quite a bit and been lucky enough to learn from some amazing directors. I've tried to absorb and implement that in what I create.

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I remember Lloyd Newson saying at British Dance Edition (4) in Edinburgh one year, because he was working with text: "I can create a (dance) duet which will tell you how I feel about my brother, but sometimes, you're never going to know it's my brother unless I take two seconds to say it." Context means we can enjoy content.

The kind of things that we're trying to reflect, I don't think you need to abstract them into dance. You shouldn't need a degree in order access meaning and narrative within dance. I've got nothing against abstract dance, I'm just saying I don't want to alienate our audiences or the people that we want to engage with. We want to move the narrative forward. Sometimes text is the most direct way to do it. We've got a movement language that syncs beautifully with the text. I think it still gives an element of beauty and a different poetic layer to the work.

I really enjoy working with actors' voiceover as well! I often say we're like animators. It's like when Tom Hanks comes in and does the voice of Woody, then the animators go to work. The dancers animate the text and those beautiful performances that the actors give.

And actually, it is important as well, the voices within the work. We work with all local actors and a local writer so the accents, dialects, and colloquialisms feel really rooted in the area. Those are all really important for audiences to feel more connected to the content.

LK: What do people say about the experience of dancing?

RG: The word transformative is thrown around and I don't want to do that, but... We tend to work in communities that haven't really engaged in arts so it's a mad process. You go into it for 10 weeks, never having danced, even stepped a foot towards it and it becomes your life, building towards this huge production. And we do go for the full bells and whistles - projection mapping, set design, massive stage and structures; cars, smoke grenades, lots going on... We're careful that people feel supported the whole way, but after an experience like that it can open something when people have seen it. I've literally seen the moment happen when people come off after. Just their eyes are a little bit wider. It's amazing.

LK: And what happens when Rush ends and Southpaw move on?

RG: I've seen it happen many, many times where a project I have been involved with will sort of go off the edge of a cliff so to speak, and there's just no signposting. Nothing. So we try to properly perpetuate this environment where people can just take ownership and create their own legacy that we are always there to support.



It's one of the beautiful things about Rush! I have seen social media posts and legacy stuff for years to come! *(One of the main points of between participants and company including Robby himself from the start of projects is a social media page).*

Cultural Spring, have a group, the Rushettes, who went on with their own work. Rush made for that core. Same in Blackpool and Hull!

LK: Did Rush shift anything in you and your practice?

RG: Yeah, it certainly did. It's so important to me not just because it continues to be relevant, but the first instance of creating your own large-scale work





is pivotal in anyone's career. I'd worked on large scale projects before, but never created my own. And it felt doubly important, because it was raw and genuine and I think we thought of community dance, back then, as exploring quite light concepts and themes. That's a massive generalisation, obviously, but there was this perception. We did something really quite risky that hadn't been seen a lot.

LK: Yes, today there are opportunities like the Place's MA in Communities Participation and Activism, whose radar I know you are on, so perhaps that time was the beginning of shift... What's next for you, Rush and Southpaw?

RG: It's been an amazing production to carry through with for so many years and I've loved every one of them. I do see a point on the horizon though where I say 10 years is enough to have explored that.

We will hopefully be performing Rush again in 2024, but the real ambition is to re-unite some alumni casts from all over the country, supported by legacy partners and new partners and recreate the piece in 2025 – a retrospective ten year look back from the first to the latest iteration.

We are a new NPO (5) too, really excited about the future, seeking partners for the next two years and beyond, the next large scale touring offer and moving past this time as a community and as a company.

LK: Anything else does the world needs to know about Rush or Southpaw?

RG: Rush maybe sounds very daunting for anybody that hasn't seen the show reading this article. Rush,

is, in the end, about joy, about community, and about the expression of that. We don't think having a big old dance, as beautiful as it might be in the moment, is going to solve all the issues people are experiencing, and that we explore onstage. But at least it gives voice to that. And I think that's why it's important to remember that's where culture and art stands. That's the power of it. You're not voiceless, you know? We can express ourselves through different means. And sometimes the best protest you can make is to have a really positive way of exploring that.

And Southpaw are looking for people to work with! We're based in the northeast, but we work nationally so really excited to connect with people and partners across the UK. We love doing what we're doing. We're gonna be doing it for a long time!

References

1. Mark Duggan, was a 29-year-old Black British man, shot dead by police in Tottenham North London on 4 August 2011
2. Let's Create is Arts Council England's 10-year strategy for "a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences
3. Ethics & Participatory Art: Art & Community Notebook N.01, Arlene Goldbard, François Matherasso
4. British Dance Edition was a showcase event for British Dance Companies.
5. Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation

Info

www.southpawdancecompany.co.uk