



Keira Martin, The Other. Photo: Karol Wyszynski.

“Down to earth and straight up....”

Dancing with honesty and truth inside Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, **Keira Martin**, a most independent of dance artists, tell us like it is from a treasured position of trust among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in Yorkshire in a conversation with Louise Katerega.

LK: How did your work in Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities come about?

KM: Because of an outdoor show called Horse and Cart which started during the pandemic!

Over the years, I have worked on various projects with the GRT community in Northern Ireland and UK. Part of my passion and practice is to tell stories, represent marginalised communities, under represented people and tackle social and political taboo issues.

COVID pushed all my touring shows outside - I had a show, Good Blood, touring with my sister, Sioda - and, of course, theatres closed, so we hired a big truck and did the first live show in Leeds in partnership with Slung Low and Leeds Dance Partnership.

Kathak dance artist, Sonia Sabri and I had been working on a show with my producers, Spin Arts, that was planned to premiere at The Patrick Centre, DanceXchange (now FABRIC) in Birmingham. Spin Arts, had been making connections in Bradford and Leeds and so Horse and Cart was born!

Cart dancing is a tradition - entertainment on a cart and how news was told in rural communities. My own access into art and culture started at home as part of my own Irish cultural heritage in Barnsley, within the Irish community. My entire family play music and sing and dance and so when I was ten I went to Irish dance class at the local Catholic Church for 50p a class; it was more social than anything Gypsy.

Doing these shows, I basically felt I'd just come home...

At that same time, as well, Spin Arts had been engaging with the Holme Wood Community, a scrap metal community of working-class people, rag and bone men, and Travellers that had settled on an estate, horses and all. When Sonia and I embarked on Horse and Cart, we rented our cart from Rob, a resident of Holme Wood, engaged with that community and that's where it all started.

From there, we've connected with the wider GRT community because they took interest in our work with Holme Wood and our outreach with Leeds' Gypsy Roma and Traveller charity Leeds GATE. It's just grown from there.

LK: It sounds like you have a very personal connection to this work...

KM: I love working with underrepresented communities; love learning about their culture. It's a very familiar scenario for me, but also a world that I have a lot of respect for and actually, don't understand, so we're learning all the time about the

community, the different languages. It's extremely interesting.

The history is so rich, you know. They're steeped in culture, aural stories, all the old ways and heritage.

What draws me is their traditions and their storytelling. It's very similar to my culture in that everything is passed down aurally as song - they know all the songs my Mum knows - it's just really familiar. I'm also very political, so on the socialist side, people being able to live how they want to live and not in a police state also drew me. Really, it's illegal now to be a Traveller. You can get arrested and fined since a government bill came through which effectively persecutes GRT communities in June 2022 (1). A lot of the community I work with are trying to change the stereotype society sees them as and I guess a lot of my own work is trying to change stereotypes about working class, Barnsley Irish people.

It's all about true representation and breaking stereotypes. Any injustice I'm there, aren't I?!

They've welcomed me with open arms though. I feel really honoured, because I know there's a lot of trust that has to be there. I've worked with Travellers before; in Berkshire, on site in Handover and in Derry in Ireland, so it's not unfamiliar to me.

LK: And tell us more about the young people you have been working with...

KM: The young people are the most polite, well-mannered young people I have actually met. Whatever stereotypes people have about the GRT community, the biggest thing I want to say is that they hold values of respect, solidarity, family and loyalty. I have spent time in the community. They have shared so much of their history and lived experience. They're really aware of the stigma around them, but they're extremely resilient. People are people!!! And we need to have more positive conversations about what unites us not what divides. They're very proud of what they are and where they come from. They're almost used to the persecution and that's really sad when a whole community is used to being treated that way. They expect it, so they don't trust people so much... but the kids I engaged with are so connected to nature! Their life is the outdoors and animals and I just think they've got it right in the world we're in. They know about money, they can budget, they're resilient, brave, much more equipped to go out in the world than my kid is at the moment...extremely independent.

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Keira Martin (left) and Sioda Adams, Good Blood. Photo Joe Armitage.

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LK: What do they think about the kind of dance experience you offer them or about you as a dance artist?

KM: The sessions we hold aren’t just dance. This is a culture where a lot of kids box, so we’ve been accessing movement through boxing. We’ve been doing quite a bit of Irish dance (*Keira is a former professional in the field*) – we have a lot of Irish Travellers – and Ceilidh dancing. We haven’t gone down a contemporary dance route...yet!

At one point, I was teaching Irish dance to some girls, teaching a lad how to play the drum and whistle, I think anybody working with this community going forward needs to understand that it needs to be led by them and you can’t dictate what they have to do. If they don’t want to do it, they don’t do it. And do you know what? I’m like that! It’s very Barnsley, very Irish, very Yorkshire...

And I don’t mean that in a negative way. You really know where you stand and it’s quite nice actually. I enjoy it.

LK: What else is on the list of things you most want to share about the GRT communities you’ve encountered?

KM:

- **marginalised communities’ community dance does not mean ‘cr*p art’! It’s about just bringing high quality art to that community.** It feels to me like there’s this thing in dance that anything that’s done in the community is lesser, but the way Arts Council England is going and the sector are going – everything’s changing anyway. And it’s where public money should go. It should go to the public.
- **don’t generalise and don’t make assumptions.** I would suggest people go and spend some time

Sonia Sabri (left) and Keira Martin, Horse and Cart.
Photo: Neil Terry.



with Travellers, the GRT community, go spend some time with charities that work with them and actually meet the people, because all you hear is what the media tells you and that knowledge is only what you think on your own, not what you're told by people themselves. It's all about breaking stereotypes.

- **GRT people are forgotten about. There's a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month every year in June. It's never celebrated in the mainstream,** only in the Traveller community and people that know. I think it's just about making these things mainstream. Let's have Traveller month with as much positive outreach as possible!
- **we're not 'dumbing it down'** and the GRT community deserve 'high end' art and access to art – and that they're people. Let's all get on board about how difficult their lives have been made by dire poverty, hostile authorities and out-of-date prejudice.

It's not enough to impose on a community, tick a box, perform for one night then leave. That doesn't cut it...It's insulting.

LK: Has working with GRT communities impacted the rest of your practice?

KM: Well, off the back of Horse and Cart came my solo project, The Other. It's about anybody that's been marginalised – “no Blacks, no Irish, no dogs, no refugees, no gypsies”, all that. I'm performing that and predominantly we're not asking people to come out of their community, we're going into their world.

Then there's a children's show, Queenie and the Pooka produced by Spin Arts, a collaboration

with dance-theatre maker Carlos Pons Guerra and myself, with a story informed and inspired by the GRT youth, made in collaboration with LeedsGATE. It's supported by Bradford Council, Leeds 2023, Leeds Dance Partnership, Arts Council England. and commissioned for Leeds 2023. This had me really engaging with Leeds Gate and the GRT community. They worked alongside us to write the script and inform the work. We've done loads of outreach work. We've performed 18 or 19 shows for the GRT community specifically and two or three open to the public all around Leeds and Bradford. A lot of schools and a lot of Roma community groups came to see it.

LK: Any final insights or advice for anyone wanting to engage with GRT communities and offer them opportunity to engage with dance?

Respect their culture, respect their heritage, respect the way of life! A lot of things we think about that culture are not actually the way they are. Things like My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, Peaky Blinders, Cher's song, Gypsies Tramps and Thieves, don't help. It's wrong to represent them as violent thieves and tramps and that's all you see in the media, when they're the most welcoming, soft-natured people. Like I said, people are people!!!

I also think there's something we can learn from them environmentally, because they're on it! Councils should be paying them to collect scrap and to use the horse instead of a car. They recycle everything, horses use no fuel; they live off the land, they make stuff and are extremely entrepreneurial. If councils and government gave them places to live without being criminals, they could contribute loads to society, we just don't see it.

Just have a realistic goal and a realistic perspective on these projects. And don't be a snob.

I'm an artist who wants to make work that matters – with an inbuilt social injustice radar. I'm from a marginalised community myself – working class, Barnsley, Irish Gypsy and Traveller all somewhere in our family. It's about having similar experiences through different lenses. Being down to earth and straight up, understanding the social and political context. I am an artist. I feel I have a responsibility to contribute to social change.

References

1. There was already a significant national shortage of places for nomadic Gypsies and Travellers to stop under British law legally and safely, however, on 28 June 2022, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act came into force, which means some people who live on roadside camps may now face time in prison, a £2,500 fine or their home being taken from them. This law is open to interpretation and impacts upon everyone who is or wishes to live nomadically – by culture, choice, or necessity.

Info

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