

Right: Beth Cassani.
Photo: Andy Wood
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Boys to men

Choreographer **Beth Cassani** looks at the motives for – and joys of – creating a dance with her sons



Above: Jacob & Tom Cassani in 13, choreographed by Beth Cassani.
Photo: Lizzie Coombes.

Recently I've begun to make choreography which foregrounds a research interest in representations and expressions of masculinity and male identity. This year a commission from the Company Chameleon, founded by the dancers Anthony Missen and Kevin Turner, allowed me to investigate bravery and friendship and how they play themselves out in the gendered world we live in. I've worked with Anthony and Kevin several times before and know that they have a unique and intimate bond. They grew up together in community dance groups in Manchester, were for several years members of Scottish Dance Theatre and have now returned to Manchester to feed back into the community that fed them. They have a relationship similar to siblings in the sense that they know each other's nuances of body and personality, and tolerate and support each other in a way that's beyond ordinary friendship. In my new work for them, *Before Night Fell*, they throw and catch logs and do a lot of running. In the piece I try to tap into a movement world we can all comprehend viscerally and psychologically. The choreographic material depends on effort, support, trust and a bit of competition. Within heterosexually constructed perceptions of masculinity there are designated areas of life to express these human qualities. It's my belief that dance can transgress, or provoke a redefinition, of these boundaries.

Mother and sons

But it was an earlier creative experience that helped crystallise my >

relationship with the culturally and socially transformative potential of choreography, particularly regarding male identity. 13 is a dance I made in collaboration with my two sons, who perform it. Jacob and Tom Cassani were 12 and 14 when the work was premiered at the 2007 Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007, where it won a Herald Angel Award. The following year it went on tour to Spring Loaded at The Place, London and several

festivals in Italy and the US.

One of the intentions behind the making of 13 was to frame the moment of my children venturing out of childhood. As a parent I wanted to create an opportunity for them to investigate and question some of the assumed norms established in our culture around male behaviours and representations of masculinity. I also wanted to acknowledge the way in which my artistic practice intervenes

with my everyday life, and how the two are inseparable. I needed to communicate the importance and value I place on my children and my practice.

This work would've been impossible without Jacob and Tom being fully complicit in it. They fully understood what we were looking at conceptually. We had lots of conversations about their experiences of being male socially, about what was demanded and expected of them at school and in their peer group, and about some of the extreme images that people take for granted on TV and in films. Both boys engaged with the process in their individual ways. Tom, a comedian and trickster, understands undermining or subverting situations or people instinctively. Jacob is analytical and enjoys a good political debate. I knew that making this work would be possible because I've watched them create complex, fully choreographed fight scenes from about the ages of four and two, with Jacob as director and Tom as stuntman.

From the outset our creative process was natural and easy. Jacob and Tom have no formal dance training but can certainly do things with their bodies that are quite physically skillful. They relished the opportunity to throw each other around in the studio and possess amazing movement memories and spatial understanding. Again, they're ordinary boys, not highly trained or technically accomplished dancers. Of course they're extraordinary to me, as all children are to their parents. Secretly I wanted to celebrate their extraordinariness. This, I recognised, is dangerously close to exploiting your kids in a way that reduces them as people, disempowers them and for its 'success' relies on an 'aah, aren't they sweet' response. That might be appropriate in a school assembly but not if the work were to be valued in a professional performance context, and not if they were going to own the experience.

The process we went through together enabled me to creatively and often playfully explore the boy's ownership of, and relationship to, their bodies and, therefore, their emerging



Above and top right: Jacob & Tom Cassani in 13, choreographed by Beth Cassani. Photo: Lizzie Coombes.



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identities in order to facilitate them to perform themselves. It was important to me - and them - that they were fully comfortable and in control of the dialogue with the audience. Not only would this serve to empower them as performers, and make the work stronger, but also it was part of the agenda of the work itself - to explore how these two young people can and do subvert expectations of children’s identity, and young male identity, and the kinds of masculinities they’re unconsciously or subliminally asked to take on and then ‘wear’ for the rest of their lives. I hope that through this creative experience Jacob and Tom can learn that they always have the possibility to change or explore who they are and want to be.

In performance the audience’s interest was captured by the way that Jacob and Tom represent boys and brothers. The piece is constructed in such a way that they not only bring themselves, their bodies and their stories to the space but also knowingly carry and reflect many culturally embedded stereotypes and images of ‘boy-ness.’ 13 was both a creative rite of passage for Jacob and Tom (and their mother), but also consciously speaks about the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. We had fun writing the marketing blurb for the piece, using phrases like ‘How to be a man in five easy steps’ and ‘How to be a man in the 21st century,’ but those were the same questions we were dealing with in the studio.

The bigger picture

How we as artists produce and share what we do is contingent upon political and social values. I’m often a kind of choreographic mosquito collaboratively drawing the life-blood of the work out of the performers. My work I regard as community-based in

that the ethos underpinning it is to facilitate and empower people by being in an equal dialogue with them as performers, participants or audience. I try to avoid assumed hierarchies of body types, techniques and experience. The context may differ greatly depending on whether I’m working with professional artists or primary school children, undergraduate students or, in this instance, my sons. Ultimately, however, my responsibility as an artist is to creatively juggle my own and others’ needs within the remit of the job, and to do this in a way that supports good practice.

The work with Jacob and Tom required a different social contract of exchange and agreement based upon trust in our established relationships. All the questions about power, manipulation, and getting people to do things with/for you were foregrounded. I paid them for time spent rehearsing, which was separate from other bits of our lives. I admit I had to tread a fine line between my responsibility to them as a caring parent and my responsibility to the work, them in it and it being the best it could be. At times it felt like a huge risk personally, professionally and artistically.

Performance brings all our physical detail and moments of confidence and vulnerability into sharp relief. Onstage we’re metaphorically naked, although professional training sometimes gives performers the tools to disguise this nakedness and neutralise the self inside artistic codes. In dance the audience often sees bodies framed in ways that are crafted and communicated by the choreographer. Because we’re not always conscious of what we make it’s easy to fall into the trap of representing onstage identities that may be limiting,

reductive, or reinforce negative or un-useful imagery. There can, however, be a real and direct pleasure and empathy in watching bodies that aren’t locked inside years of technical training and habitual movement patterning. In my collaboration with dancers I’ve always been interested in the human being that lurks inside the dance persona. My choreographic process actively softens and loosens people up so that they can let their guard down and give themselves (rather than an idea of themselves) permission to be truly present in the work.

In 13 Jacob and Tom were simultaneously naïve and surprisingly self-aware. This, I think, is an authentic representation of ‘13-ness.’ My sons presented this uncertain moment in their development with integrity. Such uncertainty isn’t celebrated in our culture; our work and social practices ask us to mask it all the time. Making this piece has inspired me to use my skill as an artist and facilitator to give shape to a complex range of human bodies and experiences, and to communicate the delights of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.

During the last performance of 13 presented in Italy I noticed Jacob’s pectorals sticking out as he walked across the stage. He’d grown a lot. Programmers were still keen to promote the work, but I knew that Jacob and Tom were outgrowing what it was and are ready to move on. We’ve achieved more than we ever set out to with this experience and now they have other fish to fry. A well-known choreographer suggested that I find a couple of other kids to do it. I won’t be doing that. But I will continue to ask myself, ‘What is a man?’

contact bethcassani@yahoo.com