

Right:
Robin Dingemans.
Photo: Benedict
Johnson.



Group solo

Robin Dingemans explains the creation process of *Not What I Had in Mind*, a probing and playful community dance piece - minus the community!

It seems I've always loved dance. I attended dance classes from age seven, developing a huge passion for the widest variety of dance available. Growing up in the predominantly rural area of Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, what was on offer was extremely limited. Leroy from Fame!, Barishnikov and my Fred Astaire-like grandfather were all figures of inspiration who fuelled a dedication to dance that eventually took me far beyond what might be expected from the rather mundane Royal Academy of Dance model that dominated my early training. Inside of me was an intuitive urge to move, and the notion that dance said important things that must and can only be said with the body.

I began my professional career in 1996 with a two-year stint in the Royal New Zealand Ballet, having trained at the New Zealand School of Dance. In the last decade I've predominantly been freelancing as a contemporary dancer with a wide variety of companies and choreographers (DV8 Physical Theatre, Theatre-Rites, Ricochet, Protein Dance, Rosemary Lee, Yvon Bonenfant, Arthur Pita, Fin Walker, Maresa von Stockert, Siobhan Davies, Mark Baldwin, Aletta Collins, Wally Cardona, Mark Morris and many more). Later I've been focusing more on my career as a choreographer via commissions for *Spring Loaded*, *The Place Prize* and *The Circus Space* and

collaborations with artists such as architects, theatre directors and visual artists. I also teach in a wide variety of professional and non-professional settings.

Most of the dance work I've been involved in has its originating ideas in the personal stories or experiences of the creators. Often these stories have been ones that are universally shared, or that were specific to individuals. Both can make for interesting and engaging art.

In my show *Not What I Had In Mind*, however, I wanted to explore the potential of having none of the originating ideas being my own. The performance features a solo dancer - me - accompanied onstage by a fellow performer and live percussionist, Manuel Pinheiro. To create the piece I collaborated with 28 different people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and most of whom had no prior experience of professional dance. I recruited them using a variety of methods: word of mouth, call outs from contributing dance organizations and targeting specific groups (such as homeless charities and the National Autistic Society). For up to a day each they worked one to one with me in the studio. Everything in the show was generated from what my collaborators choreographed and said on the day. The performance is thus a presentation of the images and ideas that matter to

them. (Details of who they were and the process they were led through can be found on my website www.robindingemans.com/mind.html)

Go with the flow

Taking inspiration from people not usually engaged in professional dance is a route I'd found fruitful before. For our show *Me+You=5*, my fellow performer and collaborator Joanne Fong and I conducted research with a group of Hackney primary school children. The ideas that emerged from working with them fused with my adult preoccupation with space. As a child myself I'd felt that dance brought space alive with an almost audible crack, and that without people moving and inhabiting their environments any given space (designed for humans) was dead or dormant. This was the main principal that informed what we explored with the children, working on different ways they could re-vitalise space either by articulating themselves or moving through the air around them (activities which carried both abstract and/or psychological resonance). I focused on working with seven year-olds as this was the age that I began my training. One of the most profound moments, however, came from a short session with nursery age children. I simply asked them to hold a partner's hands and dance to the music. A bounty of ideas and movement

>



Above: Robin Dingemans & Joanne Fong in *Me + You = 5*. Photo: Christoph Bolten.

material flowed from the wriggling, untrained little treasures in front of me. The basic instruction exposed glimmers of every dance style I know emerging instantaneously. This experience said to me that all dance is primal and natural, and that because it evolves through humans being human then any movement or style can be utilised to say what may need to be said through dance.

The method I devised to work with the contributors on *Not What I Had In Mind* was designed to take each of them to a state of creative flow. I used a series of questions and tasks to mine their knowledge and ideas. Each day I asked the individual to create movement on me that reflected their mood, personal philosophies and aesthetic preferences. The majority of the tasks that led to physical results were essentially methods of abstracting ideas specific to each individual, and these results were then translated into movement fragments. There were also several questions or ideas posed that did not directly create movement material. For example: 'Tell me about your most important psychological or philosophical trait. How do you express it in your life, or how would you like to express it?' Another was: 'If you could have one guarantee for the future, what would it be?' And yet another: 'Describe a work of art that would give you total aesthetic and emotional satisfaction.' Again, questions or requests like these were designed to bring the contributor to a condition of internal

contemplation, as part of my aim was that the day would be as much as possible about their unique perspective on the world and at the most profound level possible.

Face off

Many beautiful, surprising and shocking responses were shared with me through their movement ideas or personal philosophies and stories. An overriding influence on what the show became is how each person felt on the day. For instance, I worked with a woman who had broken up with her partner the night before. We shed tears about what she was going through without her having to ever use words to express it, but we also shared laughter because of the cathartic nature of me being a vehicle for her expression. Experiences like these heavily influenced how I treated the material I gathered, and the narrative structure that emerged from the day-long sessions.

As the project progressed I became more skilled at ensuring that what was being made genuinely came from the contributor, and that they felt confident to craft what I performed for them to the highest level possible. Sometimes the person I was working with seemed so at ease and skilled that I became momentarily paranoid that I was, in fact, in the presence of a professional choreographer. My ability to engage with each person became, at times, so deep that it seemed as if psychic connections were developing. After working with about ten people I

"The basic instruction exposed glimmers of every dance style I know emerging instantaneously. This experience said to me that all dance is primal and natural."

started to be able to predict what they were going to ask me to do, although more often they took me off guard. On one occasion a 15 year-old boy somehow read in my body what I'd done the day before. In response to the question 'What is your dominant mood today and how would you get me to express or represent that?' he described exactly what the person the day before had asked me to do, editorialising, 'That's not my response, it's just what I keep having in my head.' He then proceeded to create something entirely different. But before that he interrupted himself again, describing with some accuracy what would happen the next day with someone else in answer to the same question. I don't have an explanation for this. Was I in the presence of a psychic or were there, perhaps, traces of information left on me or in the space from the previous day that he'd inadvertently picked up? It doesn't really matter. It just said to me that we have far more depths to us than we utilise, and that the body is an excellent medium to engage those depths.

The studio time spent with each person was intense for both of us. As far as I know it was a positive experience for all of them. They seemed engaged both with how they could use me creatively, and in delving within themselves for underlying motivations. This could produce some intriguing physiological reactions. Quite often I would notice that about halfway through the day the person's



Above: *Not What I Had in Mind.* Photo: Christoph Bolten.

face would change radically, sometimes startlingly. It seemed as if the face became rounder, the skin heavier and the expressions slightly deadened. I wonder if this was because they had reached a state of internal searching and assessment, and so the normal concerns of using the face to engage with another had found alternative channels. The effect may have been exaggerated by our spatial relationship, with me sitting beside each person to ask questions or discuss ideas, and them looking towards the empty studio as opposed to being face to face with me as we talked.

In stark contrast to this was the day I worked with a blind man. His face at first gave me no clues as to the meaning of his words and thoughts. It seemed, logically perhaps, that it expressed the state of interiority the others arrived at only later in the day. To me it makes sense that if a person does not see the facial communication that normally accompanies words, how and why would they keep practicing such things themselves? Late in our day together something fascinating began to happen with his face. I noticed that when he was going about practical things, such as searching for an item in his bag or washing and drying his hands, his internal concentration on these ordinary physical tasks seemed to be mirrored in the exaggerated contortions of his face, I was very drawn to this means of expression, and from then on I grew better able to read the subtle movements of his face. As he visualised what he was asking me to do, corresponding movements were expressed through his face. Likewise, when I asked him a question that did not provoke a movement response, I could see ideas emerging and developing before they were articulated as words.

Opportunities for originality

In many ways this project was a product of, or response to, Arts Council of England funding policies over the last ten years and how they have influenced my development as a performer, maker and teacher in contemporary dance usually at the

Examples of questions or tasks to generate movement material for Not What I Had In Mind:

- What is your dominant mood right now? If you could imagine a person on stage, how would you get them to express that?
- Tell me about a significant physical gesture or movement you made or you saw someone else make.
- Use my body to create abstract movement that pleases or satisfies you.

more experimental end of things. More than half of my engagements as a jobbing dancer have involved working with UK-based national touring companies that, as a condition of their funding, deliver education workshops alongside touring work. None of these companies are education-based; their primary focus has instead been to create and tour original work.

But originality, or so it seems to me, can arise in many forms. To me the primary focus in community dance should rightly be on the experience of the participant. With this in mind, over the years I've become increasingly interested in the depth of information and profundity that can be experienced by participants in workshops and projects for non-professionals. Alongside this I've acquired a greater desire to explore the enormous potential of creating work with such people, where the primary focus is on artistic quality. Opportunities for engaging non-professionals in the development of works of excellence, whether as instigators or interpreters of ideas, can be taken much further.

This is something of what I hoped to capture through the methods used to make Not What I Had In Mind. In many ways I employed a completely absurd creative process, and one that predictably turned back on itself and became about me rather than the 28 contributors. I say 'predictably' because the questions and tasks came from me and were things I wanted to know from others. And yet there were many ideas and occurrences that definitely took the work far beyond what I would have discovered in a normal devising process. And yet, again, the project kept bouncing back to me to such a potent degree that I feel I changed and developed in

fundamental ways as a person and artist. My visceral, intellectual and professional engagement levels have all been heightened, so that every experience I have now seems to be occurring within an enlivened realm of perception. It's almost as if the contributors have somehow given me a gift of being more in tune with the full spectrum of human experience – soulful, primal, perceptual but also cognitive, rational and irrational.

The entire process yielded an inundation of information that temporarily overwhelmed me when it came to putting the show together with Manuel and the Netherlands-based dramaturg Peggy Oleislagers (who was an essential guide from beginning to end). We eventually delivered a work that I trust is by far my best to date. Movement fragments created by the 28 contributors were used to build a narrative structure of experiences that emerged during the research process. The scenery and staging were developed from their ideas and responses, while the soundscapes Manuel creates in performance were principally devised through an intention to articulate or amplify those same things. In summary, my experience of performing Not What I Had In Mind is unique from any past performing experience. I become a spirit-like figure transmitting what matters to those 28 people. At moments I feel lighter and more articulate than I've ever felt onstage before, but at the same time I inhabit my body more fully than I knew possible as I bear their collective weight. It seems to ground and connect me to this planet.

contact robin.dingemans@gmail.com /
visit www.robindingemans.com