



# Time Gentlemen Please

## Featuring The Demon Barber Roadshow

**Damien Barber**, Producer, Performer and Artistic Director of The Demon Barbers and **Bobak Walker**, Choreographer and performer, reflect on a unique partnership between traditional English Folk dance and Hip Hop

### **Damien Barber**

The Demon Barber Roadshow has been developing for about 10 years now and each year we've tried to push our boundaries, as individual artists and the show as whole. The Roadshow is a collaboration between The Demon Barbers, a five piece electric folk band, and some of England's most exciting young traditional dancers active on the UK folk scene today. The result is the high energy musical and dance spectacular that won Best Live Act at BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards 2009

and has been nominated again for the same award in 2011.

The idea of working with contemporary/street dancers first came about not long after the formation of The Roadshow but it wasn't until Bush Hartshorn invited the rapper sword dancers from the Roadshow to perform at the British Dance Edition, held in Leeds in 2006, that these ideas took a step forward. Bush was then the Artistic Director at Yorkshire Dance and although Bush and Yorkshire Dance have since parted company they have

both continued to be extremely supportive and valuable to the project's development.

After the success of the performance at BDE Bush, I met with Lucy Suggate, a young choreographer resident at Yorkshire Dance, and we began working on a research and development (R&D) project which culminated in a 10 minute piece being launched at Yorkshire Dance's 25th Anniversary celebrations in 2007. The pilot was received well but we still had a lot of work to do developing our



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Left and above: Time Gentleman Please.  
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ideas and so in 2008 we ran a similar project producing another 10 minute pilot which was previewed as part of The Demon Barber Roadshow at York Theatre Royal later that year. This was also received extremely well and gave us the confidence to apply to Arts Council England (who also funded the previous 2 pilots) for a grant to create a full-length theatre show. Both these pilots looked at the relationship between traditional clog and street dance and also included a beatboxer and percussionist.

The Demon Barber Roadshow's central aim is to raise the profile of traditional English dance by promoting it to a wide as possible audience and by making it as exciting and accessible as possible. With this project we hoped that by identifying similarities and fusing these styles with modern street dance we would not only develop our own skills and material but could also gain more respect for them from younger and more mainstream audiences. The folk revival has done

an incredible job of resurrecting English dance traditions and without the enthusiasts who recorded, documented and performed them we would have lost the majority of these. Unfortunately though, there has been a tendency by many folk organisations to only preserve them and to perform them the way they've always been done. Ironically, the same process that has helped save them is quite often also responsible for stifling their natural development. A slow, steady development of a tradition is undoubtedly preferable but having missed out on the opportunity for this we hope that project's like ours will help make up for lost time.

One of the strengths of this show is that the majority of the artists involved are connected both professionally but also socially. Many of them perform traditional dance and music as part of their everyday lives as well as performing with The Demon Barbers. This is one of the reasons why the production is set in a pub with the

whole cast on set for the majority of the show. The effect is slightly voyeuristic with the audience catching glimpses of a private world that is at times familiar and other utterly bizarre.

The three Hip Hop dancers were new to the majority of the other artists and although everyone seemed to get on well to start with there were definitely some reservations, mixed with curiosity, from both camps. No one really knew what was going to happen, the canvas was huge and the two groups had no idea what the other did or were going to do to. It didn't take long however for mutual respect to show. From the acrobatics and precise routines of the Hip Hoppers to the intricacies and physicality of the traditional dancers, everyone was quickly aware of the quality of talent that was being thrown into the pot. The Hip Hop dancers were also very happy to be working with a live band, who not only mixed folk instruments with drum and bass but who also understood >



their musical backgrounds.

From the outset we were determined not to 'create' a show on paper and all the members of The Demon Barber Roadshow were given the opportunity to be part of the project should they wish. This meant that the material from the rehearsal period that was used in the final production came directly from the artists themselves although we did throw in various ideas and themes for them to play around with. We had various ideas and themes that we played around. Many of these were determined before rehearsal but in the main the final material and storylines were created organically in rehearsals, and this was essential to the success of the project.

Working with a group who you're socially connected to is extremely rewarding but it does have its problems too, one of which was my relationship with them as artistic director/project manager/performer/ friend. Although my approach to the artistic direction of the show was relaxed I did have an overall vision for the show and I was very keen to have this vision realised. I also felt a certain amount of pressure to create a show that was not only challenging but one that had respect for Traditional English dance along with commercial viability and widespread

appeal. There was also the £35,000 Arts Council Grant that I had an obligation to ensure was well spent! I guess these sorts of pressures go with the territory, but the social dynamic in the project sometimes caused boundaries to become blurred and put extra strain on professional/friendship relationships. Saying that, I believe that creating a successful show with a group of friends is extremely rewarding, although there are most certainly lessons to learn along the way!

We're now looking at ways to develop the show further and tour it in 2011. Again this throws up new challenges as the show incorporates 16 performers and 4 crew members, some of whom are professional and some who are in full time education or employment. Some want to tour as much as possible while others prefer weekends. Although this makes the logistics difficult we do have a close knit group of performers who enjoy both working and socialising together and that is a fantastic asset.

#### **Bobak Walker**

I first became aware of this project when Damien and Lucy Suggate held a workshop on traditional dance for professional dancers at Yorkshire dance in early 2007. I'd worked with

Lucy on a number of projects before but had never come across Morris or clog. I went along out of my respect for Lucy's work mainly but also because of my natural curiosity. I enjoyed the workshop, and it raised a few questions that I'd never even thought of before, but it wasn't until they asked me to work on the second pilot that I really began to become interested in what The Demon Barber Roadshow was up to.

When Damien asked me to be the choreographer for the full show, I was there! I'd been hoping that the project would continue after the pilot as I thought some of the ideas that came from those two weeks showed serious potential.

During the R&D period for the full show there were some amazing moments where the similarities between the two styles became clearer and more overwhelmingly obvious than either groups of dancers had expected. One of our tasks was to take an existing Morris dance, study it and by using the same foot patterns, tweaking the styling, use of levels and arm positions, morph it into something that looks like a street piece. We went into the task with very little expectation about the results but it turned out to be much easier than I had envisaged. The



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eye opener was when we then danced side by side with the folkers. Once we stripped away the music and costume, to see the two pieces side by side, it was real magic in the studio. I think we were all shocked at how these dances, seemingly worlds apart, were actually variations of the same movements. It was one of those moments where any lingering doubts evaporated and we knew it was going to work.

Impact was a significant factor on my knees, thighs and core after getting properly stuck into the Morris dancing. I consider myself pretty strong and fit, but what these guys were doing was seriously tuff stuff. I'd always had it in the back of my mind that the folk dancers should do some Hip Hop choreography and I think after they saw us Hip Hoppers throw ourselves at the Morris dancing, I was bowled over when the suggestion actually came from the dancers. The Morris team could not only execute the steps but dance it with real Hip Hop attitude.

Initially there was some thinking that it was risky to create so much in such a short space of time, placing so much expectation on the dancers. Some of the original and challenging tasks included wildness like asking the band to play songs through their mouths on imaginary instruments, performing

songs in characters from U2 to barnyard animals. We soon realised that we were all bursting with character, story and with the skills to boot. This coupled with the overall message of what we wanted to say were the magic ingredients. It was genuinely interesting to learn about each other's worlds in terms of music, settings, and vocabulary. I think from the sharing and understanding of the movement, interest in the rest of the cultures grew in the dancers. 'What is it like at a Bboy jam, can we come to one?' Equally 'what's a real folk session like?', 'where's my nearest pub session?' Since the project began we've all gone out to events in our own time that a year previously we would never have imagined we would pay money for go to and enjoy so much. Ultimately, both cultures are about getting involved and I think much better enjoyed 'live'.

One of the important realisations for me was how English folk culture is treated in the media, often the butt of jokes and seen as a relic. I was very much guilty of this stereotype and dismissive of the whole culture before my chance encounter with The Demon Barbers and the group. Since then my understanding and outlook has completely transformed. Until recently I

had missed that although Hip Hop is massively popular, there is still a huge misconception of what Hip Hop is especially outside of my own circles, and in mass media and for older generations. Quite justifiably it is possible to imagine Hip Hop as simply Gangsta rap with all its associations with gang, loving of commercialism and lyrics and politics which can be off-putting. Not only does this show destroy some of the misconceptions of folk dance (even among the most hardened members of the Bboy crew I dance with!) but it also breaks down some of the stereotypes that Hip Hop suffers from.

My hope is that Time Gentlemen Please continues to help this period of growth in Folk dance in the UK, like with the resurgence of Hip Hop after its death by the hands of the frenzied media of the 80's. I am eagerly rooting for when it becomes even more obvious that it's here to stay and for people to access and be inspired by it in the way that other such exciting folk dance and music styles do. Michael Flatly, we're coming after you man!

**contact** [damien@thedemonbarbers.co.uk](mailto:damien@thedemonbarbers.co.uk)  
or 01535 640371 / **visit**  
[www.thedemonbarbers.com](http://www.thedemonbarbers.com)