

Donald Hutera, Enclosure 99 – Humans, Janis Claxton Dance.
Photo: Audience member



We are family

Letting go of filial blame, **Donald Hutera** finds ‘humanimal’ satisfaction in the Edinburgh Zoo

No doubt about it, I was a deprived child. No piano lessons (although, believe me, I begged for them) so no chance to release my inner Mozart. And as my first visit to the dentist wasn’t until I was 12, I can only trust that it’s my dazzling personality rather than the less-than-perfect interior of my mouth that people notice first.

These examples of parental irresponsibility are bad. What’s infinitely sadder is never having a chance to dance with either of my parents in public, let alone on a stage. No waltz with mum (by the time of my daughter’s ill-fated 2009 marriage all four of her grandparents were, alas, long dead) and nary a single get-down at the disco with dad.

Honestly, the neglect I’ve suffered. I’ll just dab my eyes dry and then explain what prompted the self-pity. It was seeing David Bolger’s *Swimming with My Mother* at Dance Base last August during the Edinburgh Fringe. This small but beautifully-formed pearl of a performance resonates with Bolger’s loving and far from soggy memories of having been taught to swim in Dublin Bay by his mother, Madge, before he could even walk.

Bolger grew up to be a dancer and choreographer (rather than a dolphin). As co-founder and head of the Dublin-based CoisCéim (Gaelic for footstep) Dance Theatre, he was able to create a piece gently buoyed by personal meaning. ‘I wanted to explore the idea of the gift she’d given me,’ he says about collaborating with Madge, ‘and our deep bond both in and out of the water.’ He also simply longed to dance with his mum onstage. Although Madge has attended dance workshops for older people, a bout of stage fright at age three put her off a professional career. ‘And here she is 74 years later performing again,’ Bolger says. ‘It shows that one should never say never in life.’

Mother and son shaped the show together through a delicate ebb and flow of mutual listening and learning. Bolger describes the result as ‘a natural, unforced, documentary piece that uses our shared swimming-life as a metaphor for life itself.’ Creating it has been liberating for Bolger who adds, ‘I think it strikes a chord with people about their own relationship with their parents.’

I may not have been so fortunate to share the spotlight with a parent, but I can’t really complain. From summer to autumn 2011 I feel lucky to have had several dance-based experiences that, while not familial, were far from bog-standard. In all, in fact, I was a direct participant.

Consider On/Off, wherein members of canny h2dance encouraged citizens of Chatham, Kent to freely move about

a vacant car showroom or, crucially, to pedal stationary bicycles that generated the power that kept the space lit and the pre-recorded soundtrack going. (Imagine the saving on energy costs, not to mention the potential reduction in obesity, if this simple but ingenious DIY idea were to be adopted throughout the UK: ‘Quick, a bicycle in every home! Start pumping those legs to save the planet and yourselves!’) h2’s little item left me grinning, if a tad saddle-sore.

I was also one among many losers in Dance Marathon, a fun, friendly, ambitious but ultimately shallow production inspired by the craze for physically gruelling dance competitions (with, importantly, cash prizes) in Depression-era America. Here the Canadian theatre company bluemouth inc. turned the entire audience into dance contestants. I enjoyed myself, but at a price: after more than three hours on my feet the only thing I had to show for it, or so I retrospectively believe, is a hernia.

By far the most purely, deeply rewarding of my recent dance ventures was being invited into Janis Claxton’s *Enclosure 99 – Humans* at Edinburgh Zoo. ‘The three main animal groups movers tend to gravitate towards are birds, big cats and primates,’ says the Australian-born choreographer, ‘but the most emotional connection is with monkeys and apes.’ This has become an ongoing springboard for Claxton’s questioning yet playful research of human behaviour, social interaction and status. (Read about it on page 14 in this issue of *Animated*.)

Claxton understands what fascinating ‘humanimals’ we are. In *Enclosure 99* – a number derived from the maximum percentage of DNA some scientists claim humans and great apes share – she was one in a ten-strong cast of Western and Chinese dancers. For two weeks straight they were cooped together seven hours a day, rain or shine, in what Claxton dubs ‘a creative exchange between two cultures.’ And I was one of a handful of guests she allowed into the rocky, forest-like and confined but open-air space (and one normally reserved for koalas) with them. What it entailed was donning waterproofs for three speech-free, non-gestural hours of monkey-see, monkey-do activity and impulsive, subtle power games. Whether as observer or observed, doing nothing or a lot but always being as in-the-moment as possible, what it amounted to was a kind of bliss.

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