

6 Focus on site-specific dance practice

Crossroads

Luca Silvestrini, Artistic Director of Protein, reveals the inspiration and making of Crossroads, a site-specific piece in Greenwich



Crossroads. Photo: Gigi Gianella



Real people in a real space. This is what I thought when Greenwich Dance commissioned Protein to make an outdoor, site-specific new piece for the 2011 Greenwich and Docklands International Festival, involving a large cross-generational cast from the local communities of and around Greenwich.

This was truly a special commission for me as I was able to combine my passion for performance in outdoor locations with my interest in developing work with non-professional dancers of all ages and abilities.

At the time of the proposed commission, I was already planning to develop Protein's strand of cross-generational work (started with *Alfresco* in 2005) with a new thematic focus related to travelling and cultural identity. With a title in mind, *Crossroads*, and a desire to bring together a group of people who could inform the creation through their diverse cultural backgrounds and their varied experiences of travelling and migration, I began to visit a number of locations around Greenwich.

It was the suggestive King Charles Court, part of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site, and home of Trinity College of Music, that captured my full attention and helped me to clarify the vision of *Crossroads*. Its plain but grand courtyard soon became the natural setting for this piece about travelling. The sense of history and confinement of this location, the two arches that create both access and separation with the outside world, the open sky framed by the four walls of the building and most of all the view of the river Thames, provoked my imagination and served me with the images and inspiration I needed to take my creative thinking towards its next stage.

It was at that point that the chosen location – a courtyard, a confined outdoor space, protected and hidden by its walls – brought me to think that every journey has places and moments where travellers are held together to wait; an interval, a both physical and emotional gap between what we have left behind and our final destination. This concept was clearly embracing all sorts of journeys: the ones we chose to do and those we are forced to do. In my imagination, the Trinity courtyard immediately transformed into a holding space for migrants – or simply a station, an airport, a port – where many travellers have arrived, rested their hopes and left. Suddenly that space, its own architecture and its geographical location, began to tell me possible stories of archetypal travellers and a narrative started to emerge.

Whilst the site and its spaces inspired a context and a possible narrative for *Crossroads*, the actual activity of the building provided me with the most significant creative stimulus: live music and singing. Since my first visit to the site, I became attracted and fascinated by the unique sound environment of this location; an unpredictable musical cacophony made of different instruments, scores and styles of music constantly pour and resonate into the courtyard from the many practicing rooms of the college. This sound added an important narrative layer to the

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travelling and migratory metaphor I was progressively putting together: the idioms, music and singing cultures of my imaginary travellers started to transform the yard's daily sonic texture into a cultural crossroad of music and songs from around the world. This clarified a few more decisions in terms of recruitment and artistic collaboration. A particular attention to diverse cultural background and migration went into our call for participants, whilst we began to also look for music and singing community participants interested in taking part. For this reason, I decided to ask composer Andy Pink to collaborate on putting together a cross-cultural score that the participants themselves could inform.

A series of age-specific taster workshops brought together a truly international cast of around 70 people, aged from four to over 70, and led to an ensemble workshop where Andy and I tried out a series of creative tasks, which became the bare bones of the piece. Participants were asked to bring a suitcase or a travelling bag to the workshop and to think about what to put inside them (the things you cannot separate from as well as the practical things you need when travelling). We also asked them to think of a song representing their cultural roots they could sing and share at the workshop. The results of

that day told me that an enthusiastic community of different travellers was formed and that the rehearsal journey was ready to start. While the dance team (Stuart Waters, Vanessa Cook, Thomas Goodwin, Yuyu Rau and Gaia Germanà) and I were rehearsing with the different groups (children, adults and elders) at Greenwich Dance, Andy was busy collecting songs and music flavours from the workshop and started rehearsals with a specially formed small band of musicians led by Colombian multi-instrumentalist Anthar Kharana. The artistic encounter between Andy and Anthar was a blessing and produced the most important creative push that the project needed at that stage. We found that Anthar's ability to play a myriad of instruments from around the world and his musical and singing versatility offered the piece a strong focus and the perfect thread to string together the different sections we were working on. Anthar became the music traveller, a sort of musical storyteller, in charge of guiding the audience through a promenade performance that started and finished outside the courtyard, via a journey of dances and songs.

Most significant, from a dramaturgical point of view, came the permission and therefore the choice to move both audience and cast from the courtyard into the



All photos: Crossroads, Gigi Gianella

beautiful Loggia on the west wing of the building, a small indoor space with three beautiful, tall glass doors opening up to the outside.

This technical detail resolved and helped the narrative, bringing the audience closer to an experiential performance. After encountering the different groups of travellers and their performances in the courtyard / holding space, Anthar guided everyone inside the building, prompting us all that the journey was continuing, that we were called to the next threshold. This was a strong experience accompanied by a crescendo humming, which saw a huge crowd processing and squeezing inside the Loggia. We had moved from an open, large but contained space to a much smaller indoor space that clearly was not meant to contain so many people. As everyone started to wonder what was going on, and feeling hot and trapped, a selected group of performers, standing on chairs against the wall, began a relay of different songs from Rwanda, Taiwan, England, Poland, Portugal and Turkey. The crossing of different languages, together with the physical restriction we were now experiencing, provoked the audience to connect with images of overloaded boats of desperate migrants that are forced to flee their homeland, putting their life at risk. This singing lament finished with a

Chinese lullaby sung by Lyra, one of our youngest participants aged five, sitting on Anthar's shoulders. At the end of her song, she led us outside the Loggia into one of the most beautiful open spaces of the Royal Maritime site. As the audience felt relieved to exit that crowded space, all the travellers / performers started to run freely across the bright green field and towards the horizon. This was a beautiful celebration of joy, freedom and reconciliation.

This was an open ending, as some thought the travellers had arrived where they wanted, while some thought they maybe had returned home or just about to start the next phase of an ongoing life journey. Many thought that the experience was cleansing and felt like a rebirth.

With Crossroads I made the decision to introduce a strong, relevant theme into the work I make with communities and community dancers both here and internationally. Because of that the participants were able to connect their life experiences in a more significant way and I feel as though we have managed to undo many cultural and social barriers with this project. It's enormously satisfying to see that a creative process of this kind has brought people with diverse ages and backgrounds closer together. More importantly it brought together foreigners who have decided to move to the UK with those who were forced to, and we did this not through counselling and social servicing, but through creating, rehearsing and performing dance, music and songs. The site-specific nature of the project added an enormous sense of realism to the whole project – imposed by the site, the weather and the physical limitations of the space – but it also expanded the imagination and creativity of everyone taking part and that of the audience.

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