

Dancing in the land

Ella Huhne, Artistic Director, Landance and **Anna Golding**, Community Dance Artist, illustrate the opportunities for dance contained in our landscape

I run an organisation called Landance, facilitating site-specific contemporary dance in the landscape. Landance runs workshops leading to performances for people of all ages and abilities in the landscape. Our work involves collaboration between dance, music and visual art with participants taking part in whichever creative discipline they choose. Workshops incorporate improvisation and creative work that is a response to the site, which might be the flora, fauna, heritage, geology, moods and feel of the place, encouraging abstract interpretation.

I have worked as a theatre designer, a lecturer and as a potter. Creating environments and atmospheres on stage has been replaced by a desire to create performances within existing environments, bringing people into the landscape to collaborate creatively.

I think that our senses are heightened when we are outdoors, we see, hear and move differently, we are more relaxed and open to play. We feel better! Creative work is less self-conscious, teenagers engage and lose their awkwardness about being 'cool', adults immerse themselves in collaboration, children are released by

the freedom to roam. The terrain means movements are more natural, music can be developed with pebbles and sticks as percussion instruments, drawing with charcoal on fabric for costumes is free and expressive.

'Beautifully conceived piece, great to see performers of all ages make something that was highly interactive with the environment and original.'

Specific landscapes have distinct atmospheres. I tend to choose hill forts, often partly wooded. These offer >





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wide ranging views in certain areas giving an expansive and uplifting setting for the end. The change in scale that you can manipulate on different sites is inspiring, placing some near and others far, way beyond the scope of a stage. Movements, colours, sounds, music, voices resonate through the trees, sometimes glimpses half seen. The strength of the trees works well for dance, for pulling and leaning. Light plays miraculously on foliage and faces.

We work without technology, no noisy generator, no lights, the music is acoustic. Inevitably there are challenges, getting everyone to focus when there are so many wonderful distractions. Also transport is a big issue, how performers and audience access the site, though this can work in our favour with whole families turning up to bring one child only to find themselves all taking part. I always arrange performances over two days in case one gets rained off but so far we've never had to cancel. In the rain in the woods in 2007, dancers and audience partly sheltered by the dripping leaves, the performance took on a dreamlike atmosphere, the 2009 and 2010 performances were bathed in sunlight, what luck.

'...the sun dappling through the trees added wonderful depths to the movement of your group through the landscape.'

As Anna Golding, co-choreographer 2009/10, choreographer 2012, remarked, "I think that there is a complicity between performers, artists, organisers and audience that if you are involved in experiencing outside work, part of the process is exposing yourself to whatever the sky is doing that day and how it influences the landscape that you are in. At best, this gives a tangible sense of dancing with the land as opposed to on it. Having

said that, the performers and audience must be safe and this is where communication is key, with information about site accessibility and terrain always clear in publicity and from stewards."

Sites give distinct moods to the work developed. At Woodbury Castle in Devon performers stood along a circular ridge of ancient beech trees, then rushed down to a clearing to perform in small groups amongst the audience. They wandered through eerie woods bringing the audience behind them, ears tuned to distant song and eyes looking out for flashes of colour through branches. A tunnel of light at the head of the path drew the performers and audience on and allowed a beautiful silhouetted duet evoking Indonesian shadow puppetry. Moving forward, the audience were suddenly on open heathland with the sea in the distance. Dancers were positioned in amongst windswept grasses, dropping away to the distant coastline with movement and sounds inspired by crickets, sand lizards and indigenous butterflies.

At Castle Neroche in Somerset dancers lay hidden in bracken, waving their arms sinuously like strange plants amongst the ferns, they hid behind trees, suddenly appearing here and there, then disappearing again, children created a sculpture on a log, figures emerged from a hedge bank ominously descending towards the audience. Lengths of strongly coloured fabric were used to draw lines in the air, for dancers to lean on, pull on, manipulate, to delineate a stage area for the audience to gather around. Performers wove tall blue silk flags through the green foliage.

'I was totally enchanted and grateful to have been given this opportunity to experience art and nature coming together in celebration.'

Performances are promenade, you



walk, watch, listen and experience the landscape all at once. They are in daylight in the early evening, so that small children and older people can be part of the audiences. Stewards guide the audience silently, leading them and stopping, sometimes laying a length of fabric down to indicate their boundaries. At other times musicians lead the audience along winding paths. At Castle Neroche, Charlie Hearnshaw the composer, taught the audience a song as they gathered waiting for the performance, which they sung later whilst moving from one area of performance to another. Small children in the audience imitate the dancers after the show, running around and climbing up on tree trunks.

'I loved the fact that there were children performing with adults or with each other. There was a sense of community and communion.'

All of our dance, visual and sound artists have assistants, which offers



Neroche 2010. Photo: Richard Tomlinson

valuable experience to emerging artists and provides an important link between disciplines and activity on site.

Landance has evolved slowly, I have received advice and support from local arts and education agencies and organisations. The knowledge and contacts of these professionals have been crucial to the growth and evolution of Landance as have the artists that have been involved.

In 2007 the choreographer Joanne Willmott and I collaborated on the first Landance, with Taunton Youth Dance Company members and older individuals. Landance 2009 and 2010 projects were developed with Anna Golding and Rachelle Green, with a longer run up of workshops at the local community school in 2009, with music by Charlie Hearnshaw, and in 2010 Dominic Rott facilitated parkour work with the participants. Filmmaker Richard Tomlinson has documented all the projects for the website.

The next Landance project will be

set at Eggardon Hill in West Dorset, an exposed undulating site with no trees. It offers a huge canvas to meld into, land and sky, with distant views to the Jurassic Coast. It inspires thoughts of flight, a sense of anticipation felt just before leaving the ground, birds appear suddenly, skylarks and birds of prey. I am collaborating again with Anna, the choreographer, and commissioning a score from composer Andrew Dickson, who will develop it with a small choir before working with many more singers. Projecting the more subtle parts of the score will be a challenge. It is a large-scale project, involving dance groups and choirs as well as individuals.

Anna again commented, "One of the exciting aspects of the next project is that we are establishing a new Landance adult contemporary dance group who will be based locally and who will continue to explore and experiment beyond the performance, giving us a sounding board for future Landance development."

We believe we are developing work

that intensifies the vastness you experience at Eggardon, it's like being on top of the world, as well as the intimacy of the dips and valleys in the site. Working outdoors gives natural emphasis to those changes in scale. Our collaboration, entwining our creative disciplines, is energising and inspiring, we are creating a basic structure around which participants can improvise and develop a responsive relationship with the site and each other. I aim for this project to have an abstract simplicity, pure colour, line, form and sound, in keeping with the expanse of terrain with which we are working.

'Stunning synthesis of land, scenery, music, dance on a gorgeous sunny autumn afternoon. We should have the opportunity to experience more work like this, makes the soul soar and troubles evaporate!'

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