

Watching the watchers

Janis Claxton, Artistic Director, Janis Claxton Dance and the dancing human animals at Edinburgh Zoo



Enclosure 99 – Humans, Janis Claxton Dance. Photo (above): Hon W Yau. Photo (top right): Tomaz Zihunt Chow



Above left: Artistic Director, Janis Claxton. Photo: Hon W Yau

Since 2007 my choreographic practice has been inspired by explorations into the innate interconnectivity of humans and other animals with a particular focus on non-human primates.

With a fabulous team of artists, we have created a series of works; Enclosure 44 – Humans (2008), Torque (2008), Human Animal Beijing (2009), Human Animal Shanghai / Scotland (2010), Humanimalia (2011) and Enclosure 99 – Humans (2011). These works have been performed in diverse settings ranging from theatre venues, the Urban Park at Shanghai Expo, coffin-sized glass covered holes in the floor of 798 Art Space (a huge cavernous gallery in Beijing once the home of a military machine factory), to theatre foyers and art galleries in Scotland, and the most well attended and exposed incarnations, the Enclosure series, performed inside animal enclosures at Edinburgh Zoo.

The works have all stemmed from ongoing research into non-human primate behaviour and communication. With support from zookeepers and staff at Edinburgh Zoo as well as leading primatologist Klaus Zuberbühler (University of St Andrews), we have developed choreographic and improvisation strategies, structures, workshops and performance works that draw attention to human and other animals and our interconnected lives and behaviour.

“Part of the reason we, today, are attracted and attuned to animals is that we are locked together, as we have always been locked together, in a shared journey that spans past, present, and future... Like us, they breathe air and thirst for water and food and seek others of their kind, and endure the inevitable suffering that comes with the cycle of life, birth, and death.” (1)

The process of investigation began in late 2007 with a creative development research period funded by Creative Scotland which allowed three dancers to spend four weeks between Edinburgh Zoo and the studio, observing and absorbing several aspects of animal behaviour,

communication and movement. The research process culminated in indulgently innocent, anthropomorphic engagement with the myriad of non-human primates at Edinburgh Zoo, with a special focus on our closest kin there, the famous Budongo Chimps.

The resulting works have covered the span from an aesthetically ‘pure dance’ set to a Bach partita and performed in a traditional theatrical setting, to the exploration of an enclosed performance space; a large Perspex box that turned into a steam bath in the sweltering heat of Shanghai. The keystone, however, of all the pieces and to which all of the works owe credit, is the award winning Enclosure 44 – Humans for which the company received a Herald Angel Award and a Total Theatre shortlist during Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2008.

Enclosure 44 – Humans took dance to the public in a massive way – the zoo had 32,596 visitors in the two weeks we were there – and to our delight unexpectedly turned the audience performer relationship on its head resulting in a ‘who’s watching who’ interactive durational experience where audience members unknowingly became the subject of the performers’ observations. As audience watched performers watching audience watching performers, boundaries blurred and unexpectedly the objective of the work – observing human behaviour and its relation to other animal behaviour – was fulfilled from both sides of the enclosure.

Behaviours often became evident in more spontaneous, profound and sometimes hilarious ways outside of the original performance space as audience members and passers-by watched, commented, gasped, laughed, clicked cameras, imitated chimpanzees, dragged their children away, danced, complained about arts funding, threw kisses, and even cried. For the performers, despite spending much of the time in waterproofs and Wellingtons in the cold wet Scottish summer, it was an awe-inspiring and highly educational fortnight.

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A zoo attracts probably the largest demographic of visitors of any public event in the world drawing into one space and one shared field of experience people of all ages and abilities, from all class, religious, ethnic and educational backgrounds. From just one enclosure at any given time the animal within may be faced with a vast array of human animal onlookers, which could include a child with grandparents, a mother with her newborn baby, a psychology student, a professional athlete, a school teacher, a wheelchair user, an office worker and a primatologist. The possibilities are endless – Muslims, Christians, Hindus, creationists, atheists, sports lovers, couch potatoes, actors, dancers, cleaners, mathematicians – they all visit zoos around the world every day of the year, in droves.

All of these onlookers have come to watch and connect with the zoo's inhabitants, knowing or not that they themselves are a member of the animal kingdom. For the most part they have come to connect with these other animals via a medium shared throughout the animate world – movement. Whilst enjoying the roar of a lion, the song of a gibbon, the groans of a hippo and the chatter of monkeys may be of added benefit to visitors, for most, the calling to a zoo is a calling towards movement; the skittering flight of parakeets, the dexterous climbing of spider monkeys, the acrobatic swinging of gibbons, the slow determined lumbering of a silver back. At a zoo, humans make connections with other animals and to their own animal selves, primarily through movement.

Thus a major draw-card to our performances was the sheer amount of movement the human animals engaged in for seven hours daily. Whilst sleepy lions and undulating otters kept the attention of visitors for fleeting moments, the humans engaged their watchers for the longest viewing periods of any enclosure.

Both Enclosure 44 and the recent Enclosure 99 involved five to ten 'human animals' (dancers) inside an animal enclosure seven hours a day for two weeks, supported by two 'zookeepers' (a physical theatre performer and an actor) who respectively offered the daily 1pm Human Animal Feeding Time and the 3pm Human Animal Talk.

The human animals, all experienced improvisers, had rules to adhere to and scores and games to play, but essentially, the work evolved as an experiment. We were interested in the process; what would happen if we spent all of that time inside one space together communicating through movement, devoid of the most defining attribute that distinguishes us as human – speech. We also took away the power of sign language and directive gestural

Enclosure 99 – Humans, Janis Claxton Dance. Photo (right): Hon W Yau. Photo (below): Tomaz Zihunt Chow



communication signs such as pointing and waving, and tried to avoid or abstract anything that we felt clearly represented a 'word' such as rolling eyes, shaking the head, shrugging shoulders, thereby inviting both ourselves and the audience to partake in reading us through our movement and behaviour.

The zookeeper sessions were based on observations and shadowings of the actual keepers at the zoo, with particular attention being paid to the chimpanzee talk where the



and chimpanzees), as well as the plight of the endangered and 'often misunderstood species called the contemporary dancer'. Standard zoo talk procedures became highly effective tools for bridging the audience/performer gap and inviting participation. Question and answer times were particularly entertaining; 'Which one is the Alpha Female?' 'Where do they go to the toilet?' 'Why don't they talk?', and the favourite daily laugh inducer guaranteed to be asked by a middle-aged man 'Does the zoo have a human animal breeding programme?'

The work proved entertaining and educational on several levels and this was enhanced by the enthusiastic and committed education team at the zoo. Random (real) zookeepers would appear with a group of visitors and indulge in their own Human Animal Talk unannounced.

Key to the success of the works was the relationship with Edinburgh Zoo, which had begun back in 2007 when the particularly brave and eccentric Education Manager, Stephen Woollard immediately responded with a passionate 'yes' to the idea, and has since helped us manifest both projects.

In 2011 riding on the success of Enclosure 44 – Humans and the subsequent plethora of media exposure for the zoo, we were invited to restage the performance as a lead up to the planned arrival of two giant pandas from China. This made funding more accessible and a cast of five UK and five Chinese dancers took the work to a new level in Enclosure 99 – Humans.

This time, having been ousted by the fairy penguins from our original enclosure, we were re-housed in the outdoor koala enclosure where once again the performers, both planned and accidental, engaged for 14 days in an experiment. Primarily through movement we highlighted the human as a part of the greater community of animals, a member of the great ape family sharing almost 99% DNA with our closest cousins.

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Enclosure 44 – Humans was produced and supported by Edinburgh Zoo, Artemis, Dance Base, and Catalyst Dance Management. Enclosure 99 – Humans was produced and supported by Confucius Institute for Scotland, Scottish Government, Edinburgh Zoo, Dance Base, Artemis, Catalyst Dance Management, Barceló Hotels and Star Sea Chinese Restaurant.

(1) King, Barbara. (2009) *Being with Animals*, Doubleday Religion. p.35.

zookeepers employ a personal and affectionate attitude to their highly volatile cousins, naming them all by first names and telling of their individual histories – where they are from, if they have had children, what rescue mission had brought them to the zoo, etc. Couched in this familiarity between the keeper and his subjects, the Human Animal Talk became a performance tool that touched on conservation and educational issues (such as the connection of almost 99% DNA between humans, bonobos