

# Art penetrates life

Rosemary Lee's Square Dances was commissioned by Dance Umbrella as a site-specific dance work involving members of the community putting dance into public spaces to encounter and engage. Artist and writer **Lizzy Le Quesne** reports

**Her most literally 'accessible' work so far, Square Dances, performed in 4 central London squares in October 2011 within the Dance Umbrella festival, offered a practical materialisation of the philosophical spirit of Rosemary Lee's practice.**

Rosemary's work is essentially about community and nature, as vital contexts for human strength, weakness, joy, sorrow, growth and loss. The very young, the elderly, one might say vulnerability itself, have always been present in her work alongside strength, vigour and vivacity. And Rosemary's work places both the act and the meaning of dancing firmly within the vernacular – the elemental tools no less – of the human condition and of society. The setting and structure of Square Dances propelled this content further towards direct confrontation or encounter with the 'real world', with the city, with nature within the city, and with audiences. Four separate dances, repeatedly performed outdoors in four city squares over two days, were watched by both prepared and unsuspecting audiences in the freedom of public space. With no soundtrack beyond the noises of the city itself and occasional, unamplified, ringing of bells, the four dances, in vividly different ways, seeped into common space and into private lives with a gently transformative potential.

"It was the free part of the

commission which most attracted me" said Rosemary Lee when describing her initial impetus. "I really love to offer dance to people as a gift, and not ask them to pay for it." There is a loosening of expectations when art is not attached to price; and perhaps, with that, a greater possibility for encounter with it. "And I love it when people come across dance unexpectedly, in the midst of ordinary life." This is one reason, Rosemary explained, that making dance for broadcast television has attracted her in the past – the thought of someone flicking channels at home and coming across her work by chance.

Likewise, Square Dances was a wily intervention into the hushed weekend city. At liberty to pass by or to stay, approach or retreat, audiences were treated to partial, repeated or multiple viewings. We were forced to remain partially in life, walking from site to site, in and out of art, as it were. The contemplative mind-set of aesthetic perception became intermingled with the realities of the urban world, enriching awareness of rhythm, light and motion all around, oneself in motion.

The green oases chosen by Rosemary arose surprisingly around corners amidst the dark grey brick and stone of Bloomsbury, and the inherent grace and specialness of these places were enhanced by the exceptionally human and unassuming quality that >





All photos: Square Dances, Rosemary Lee, Dance Umbrella 2011, London. Above: Women in Gordon Square, Robyn Cabaret, behind her Mai Tassinari. Below right: Men in Brunswick Square. Photos: Hugo Glendinning. Below left: Charlie Hendren. Photo: John Mallinson





All photos: Square Dances, Rosemary Lee, Dance Umbrella 2011, London. Left: Ellen Johansson, Queen Square. Photo: Hugo Glendinning. Below left: Woburn Square. Photo: Richard Washbrooke. Right: Brunswick Square. Photo: John Mallinson

Rosemary elicits from her performers. The composure, the simplicity and ingenuousness of their moving discharged a palpable tenderness into the open air.

Performed by separate groups: adult men; adult women; young people (students of the London School of Contemporary Dance); and children; each dance converged with its site and its audience differently, freshly revealing both the spaces and the performers. Perhaps 40 men, of various ages, gathered beneath the branches of an enormous tree in Brunswick Square and raised their arms and gaze toward the sky. The tree became an all-seeing, benevolent force as the men simply sank, extraordinarily slowly, to finally lie prone and silent in the grass.

Accompanied by the sound of a single bell intoning the passing minutes, the movement was so gradual that it was barely perceptible. Without somehow actually seeing the men move, I could register the changes only in retrospect. The men's absorbed and constant presence created a coagulated stillness in the open space, highlighting the twitching of the leaves, and the light, rhythmic pacing of the pigeons. These contrasts seemed to state the simultaneousness of parallel time frames: the millennia that see the transformation of vegetation to coal, or landscape to cityscape, the centuries reflected in the architecture all around, the varying lifetimes of each man, and the pulsing intensity of those ten minutes.

In vivid contrast to the silent waning or slow decay of the men's dance under the tree, nearby in the restrained Georgian elegance of Gordon Square, a hundred women dressed in oceanic blues and greys flocked and swarmed along curvaceous pathways. They surged, tsunami-like, towards and through the viewers, turning, lunging, reaching out their arms and ringing handheld bells. They teemed into the square from one end, and out of it the other, leaving us behind, somehow washed, somehow spun and shaken by their collective energy flushing through and between us. This heaving sea of female dynamism took place, fittingly, within sight of the former London homes of both Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf.

Queen's Square acts as garden to both the city's children's hospital (Great Ormond Street Hospital) and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery and thus has a special poignancy. Here the student dancers were valiantly personal and interactive. Each of us was greeted by a soloist who invited us to dedicate their dance to someone. The name we gave was written on the dancer's skin and borne through the air as they moved, barefoot on the grass, before us. Their individual solos incorporated hovering balances and bold extensions, pauses, ripples and drops to the ground: complex, calligraphic material well suited to their developing physical skills yet which was quiet, serenely paced and performed with eyes open and





eyes closed. The solo, danced almost within touching distance of its watcher, became an alchemical ritual, somehow assisting a passage through private thoughts.

Even as an audience member rather than a genuine user of the garden I was grateful to be presented with the opportunity to turn my thoughts to loved ones, both departed and alive, who require more of my attention than I have afforded them. To have that process facilitated by a young person's courageous and patient physicality was a revelation, both about the situations I was contemplating, and about the metaphysical function and value of dance. These small solos were deliberately framed to penetrate directly into the audience's obscure thoughts and feelings, offering them both a literal 'airing' (outside) and a very private contemplative space.

After this intimate encounter, the children seemed distant and unreachable, dwarfed by the world. Their intricate group dance saw them zig-zagging along the length of the narrow Woburn Square, lined on both sides by immensely tall trees that closed, cathedral-like, above our heads and it struck me how vital it is that we protect and nurture the innocent. The children huddled together, played follow my leader, leapt, darted, spread their limbs and embodied images of animals in their seemingly endless journey to the other end of the space. The enormity of the world and the complexity of the lifetimes stretching out before these creative, spirited creatures was awe-inspiring, in a not entirely uplifting sense. Lee shows us the trepidation and the tenderness as well as the galloping power and joys of life.

In different ways, these dances snuck into and pushed open cracks in the superficialities of our culture. The quietness, the sustained calm and the surrender of the men's action presented a strikingly different kind of maleness and strength from that our culture tends to propagate and celebrate. The mass of women were more tangible energy than visual body. Young people were seen to offer valuable depth and understanding and children were outlandish, alien, unknowable, far removed from sentimental cuteness. With this richly layered and yet boldly minimal work, Rosemary Lee brought practical philosophy in the form of human movement to the city streets. Not over-testified or delineated, the extensive research and intent not stated in the bump, the work was left naked and available, to take from it what we will. Quietly subversive and disarming, Square Dances enacted gentle freedoms: freedom to move, freedom to be still, and freedom to watch.

Lizzy Le Quesne's performance and photographic work has been presented in galleries, theatres and specific sites internationally. She writes about dance and the visual arts, and lectures at Brighton University. She also performs with other artists including Ricochet Dance Productions and is a certified teacher of Skinner Releasing Technique.

Dance, media and site-specific practice is a new residential course, led by Rosemary Lee, to support dance practitioners in creating and documenting site-specific work with community groups, see page four for more details.