



A gift to a city

Donald Hutera travels to Northern Ireland to experience Rosemary Lee's latest work, the hauntingly beautiful seven-screen film installation of over 500 local people moving, dancing and gliding through the streets

If I declare that Rosemary Lee's the real deal, what do I really mean? Simply that this exceptional 'maker' – to use Rosemary's own label of choice – must now rank as one of the most gifted, level-headed and articulate artists in the UK.

Rosemary has been making work as a choreographer, performer and director for a quarter-century. My regard for what she can do has shot up yet again thanks to an incredibly ambitious, uncommonly engaging seven-screen film installation entitled *Without*. Created with the support of UK City of Culture, the Arts Councils of Northern Ireland and England, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (NI) in association with Artsadmin, this 22-minute work was shot on location in the walled city of Derry-Londonderry in the spring of 2013 by Rosemary and a relatively small team of collaborators including, crucially, members of Northern Ireland's Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company. Just as important was the participation of over 500 local people of differing ages, sizes and abilities who can be seen dancing

and often literally gliding or wheeling their way through the streets and, in effect, between the screens. Nor should the contribution of a battery of behind-the-scenes volunteers be overlooked. What they were all a part of is an ingeniously conceived marvel of community-based art and one that, in terms of its combined visual and thematic impact, can seem both melancholy and uplifting.

"It was all done on goodwill and trust," Rosemary says of the project. And, as she might well have added, a lot of hard graft.

It was Steve Batts, Artistic Director of Echo Echo, who offered Rosemary this challenging yet hugely rewarding commission. They met a quarter-century ago when she fashioned an all-ages piece for an Oxford-based company of which he was then a member. Rosemary suspects that Steve invited her to work with Echo Echo out of a desire to bolster company members' skills as dance facilitators, especially on large-scale projects. But what was in it for her?

First it might be useful to say a bit about the place.



All photos: Without, Londonderry. Photos: Simon Alleyne

Derry-Londonderry is Northern Ireland's second largest city and the only remaining and completely intact walled city on the entire island. Located either side of the majestically broad river Foyle, it's a compact and hilly urban centre with a rich and sometimes dark history. One of the most infamous dates in the city's annals is Bloody Sunday, also known as the Bogside Massacre, when British paratroopers shot unarmed civilians during a civil rights march. That was in January, 1972. Fast-forward four decades to its choice as Lonely Planet's 4th best city to visit in 2013, presumably in large part because of its selection (in a perhaps highly symbolic gesture) as the inaugural UK City of Culture.

Rosemary has written eloquently about the initial spate of research and rumination Steve's invite entailed: "When I first visited Derry-Londonderry I walked the city walls to get a sense of the location and was amazed and moved by the topography of the city. It seemed I could look into and out of the city in equal measure, see its history in the layout of streets as well as in the very stone work, witness its domestic family life and its commercial one in the same view, and all the while see a continuous horizon of distant hills and sky. Having been asked to make a new work for and with Echo Echo for 2013 I felt I wanted to honour that first impression and try to include the whole city in some way, creating a gentle and permanent panoramic work that encompassed the living city and its people."

As her words indicate, what Rosemary was after – particularly as an English outsider – was a means of

representing with sensitivity and truth a place that "moved and stunned" her with its views of "communities laid out like canvases. I felt I couldn't ignore the past but had to understand more about it, and then consider how I could make a work that acknowledged it respectfully and also moved on."

"If I was going to do anything I had to embrace the whole city equally," Rosemary continues. But what form would best serve that intention? "I felt a live work wasn't right as it's too fleeting and dependent on a small audience who knows what's to come. Whereas working with an installation allows more people to gather over time, and it's free to view."

At some point Rosemary hit upon the idea of an audience surrounded by projection screens in a ring. "They're hung in a similar way to your experience walking the walls," she says, "as if you're in the centre of the city looking out in all directions. The city seems enclosed and yet everywhere on the wall you seem to see the horizon beyond it, and I wanted that feeling of travelling outward as well as looking inward."

The ring of screens was an inspired notion. Once Rosemary had chosen this vehicle of expression for her project she then had to learn to drive it, and secure a sufficient number of willing passengers. Recruitment, as Rosemary well knows, is often an issue on projects of this size. The cast of Without is comprised of people from day centres, tea dance groups and local schools plus any friends, family and neighbours who could be enticed to take part. Other participants – and this includes skaters, cyclists and

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scooter or wheelchair users came with wheels. Plus the members of Echo Echo and those, like the mature dancers ensemble Body Wisdom, who regularly attend the various dance classes at the company's headquarters within the city's walls.

The strategies of filming *Without* were both intense and immense, with every shot planned out clearly via loads of notes and drawings. The first section was shot on a freezing but bright 12-hour day from atop the tower of the city's Anglican cathedral. The camera had to be repositioned after each scene, with performers shifting from one location to another and Rosemary herself "using walkie-talkies, mobile phones and waving my arms to say hello." Shooting from the city walls took longer, with material for each screen shot on a different day. As Rosemary explains, "I wanted it to seem simultaneous so that the performers at times come out of one screen and move into another. I had a stop watch with a volunteer next to me timing stuff so I could later co-ordinate all these unison bits. We had to keep to tight time frames and only shot two takes on the long middle section, each around 25 minutes long. That's simply crazy in film terms, but we did it."

There is, says Rosemary, a formality to the structure of *Without* that "holds the mass of information it contains together. I like simple, unifying structures." To achieve this she worked closely with the composer Graeme Miller, a long-time collaborator whose superbly subtle work on *Without* is integral to the piece's mood. Graeme went about Derry-Londonderry on his bike collecting its natural music. "Graeme wanted to create an organ of the city in which each key was a timed sound he'd found. I love this concept. He struggled to crack it until he found the 'singing' gate on the Creggan Hills – a metal gate that the wind was coming through."

Rosemary is nothing if not responsible towards whoever she works with. "I worried that I didn't have time to engage people and give them the experience of embodying images and transforming their experience of moving. Instead I hope it transformed their view of themselves in the city and their perspectives on it, their knowledge of making a film, their confidence and their experience of what it is to work in a certain way – that is, professionally."

In movement terms she had to judge where to have people go, to what distance and on what surfaces. "I was thinking about how to do simple things that moved them through the screen, and of the way animals move – trying not to always pass through a city on pavements or in lines but to glide or wander. It was about occupying the city differently and freely, with a disregard for the discipline of urban space with its kerbs and designated pathways."

Rosemary speaks, rather like a poet, of "listening to the city and its past and future in a different way, perhaps. We also had to listen to the earth. I wanted delicacy and lyricism, and a sense of treading on memories." Here she quotes Yeats' admonition to "tread softly for you tread on my dreams..."

Not that physical vigour was ever going to be sidelined. "I wanted a pulling and catapulting section," says Rosemary, "and something about the struggle to move forward one step

and then go two back." There was room, too, for humour and fun even if that tipped over into a certain rawness.

"The children I wanted to be children – exuberant, skipping, playful. I worked, as I always do, with the elements so that for them there are air dances, fireworks and explosions.

Throwing a dove up to the sky and letting it go was one of their favourites. And opening and closing, as in embracing the space of the city around you and then closing in."

There were compromises, but nothing at all major. As Rosemary admits, "I had no rehearsal time with the skateboarders or rollerbladers. Although I wanted them to glide, the little lads on boards weren't up for it. Still, the mad and lovely way they zoom round corners in some screens became the work and, I think, enhances it."

Without in its finished state transcends the complexities of its own creation. It's brilliantly shot and edited in ways that maximise its human and political resonance. Additionally for me there was the enormous internal kick of being able to go to Derry-Londonderry in late November, stand inside the installation (shown on a loop in Echo Echo's upstairs studio) and then immediately afterwards visit the very sites where Rosemary had placed her camera and thus view the city and surrounding landscape with my own eyes. I also both observed and met people and got a sense of at least a portion of the rhythms of their lives.

That's what's embedded in *Without*. This indelibly magical work is full of grace and grit. *Without* denying them their unique identity as living residents of Derry-Londonderry, Rosemary treats the people in it like angels and, occasionally, ghosts. They're the sleeping, the fallen, the waiting and the disappeared as well as the active, vital survivors of a very particular place.

She found the experience of creating *Without* humbling. "I learnt a huge amount from doing it about organising, filming and editing, trusting and accepting, and was reminded of how humour and joy help when working on a tough and almost impossible project. I'm thrilled it's working on so many levels for people. I didn't expect it to work as well as it does. It probably speaks to different age groups in different ways as the young have no memory of the troubles. I want it to be playful and fun for a young viewer as well as haunting and poignant."

As for what Rosemary actually intended by making *Without*, she speaks of "a city occupied by people equally in all communities, respectful of difference but highlighting what binds us – our humanity. But I try not to say what I'm aiming at as I like to see what people get from it. I'd rather leave it to them. I'm proudest when I heard a viewer say it gives us a glimpse of what a peaceful city looks like. But I really wanted it to be a gift to the city and its wonderful people. It's by them and for them. I want to disappear so it can just exist for them."

visit www.artsadmin.co.uk/artists/rosemary-lee

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