

Left: Under Dark Skies.
Photo: Jemma Thomas

History in motion

Does dance move us that little bit closer to ourselves?

Cai Tomos, Wales-based independent dance artist, talks about those moments of connection, of not knowing and of fearlessness that we can enter in our dances

Our bones and our flesh hold within them the stories of our life. Like the bark of a tree, our bodies show the ways we have been weathered. When we move and dance, we awaken our sleeping histories, we liberate something of our secret inner life, as our flesh speaks of all that we have seen, heard, lived and not lived. It is the joy of seeing this history in motion in the dance that is the keystone of my work.

I have always danced, always had a deep curiosity about movement and the sensing body as far back as I can remember. Moving was linked to the feeling of vitality as a young boy.

I would like to illustrate this with a story.

When I was ten, I was given a camera on my birthday. This camera had a ten second timer, and curious as I was about feeling movement, I was also fascinated with seeing it. So I set my intention to try and catch an image of myself suspended in flight. I lay down the mattress of my bed on the stairs in preparation for my landing. I would set the timer, run to the top of the stairs, and with a big breath jump into the freedom of my body in flight.

Not much has changed since then, this pursuit for freedom and aliveness is still as active. This moment of jumping serves as a metaphor for my interest in this suspended place, this place of not knowing and of fearlessness, that we can enter in our dances.

The place where we can experience true 'aliveness'.

When I dance, and listen deeply through my senses, I often experience a kind of freedom and 'aliveness' that feels like I am forgetting myself and remembering myself simultaneously. It is this freedom, and the experience of it, that breeds curiosity but also a commitment to the inquiry into the power of the arts as a potent tool for renewal, whatever age we are.

I currently facilitate a group called 'Cain' in the Galeri theatre, North Wales. The group is for older people. I use that term loosely, older than what exactly, I don't know; older than younger people? And younger than >>



Cai Tomos. Photo: Cai Tomos!



Cai Tomos, People Dancing event 2014. Photo: Rachel Cherry

some other older people? At its heart, it's a group that comes together to move, to create dances together, and to explore both their individual and collective creativity. We work mainly through improvisation and movement practices that invite a listening to inner life of the body.

I feel passionate about improvisation. Improvisation is a way of actively practicing uncertainty and as I'm not so good at it myself, I keep practicing through my dancing.

Improvisation requires us to walk a creative tightrope; there is a real beauty in the tension it creates, in how we are called to attend to listening to both ourselves and others in the dance. The poet T.S. Eliot states that, "anxiety is the handmaiden of creativity". I know she certainly shows up for duty when we are summoned to dive into an unknown dance. It is this constant state of flux that brings such aliveness to the creative process.

Practicing uncertainty in our dance inside the studio might also be useful as a way to cultivate flexibility to all the changes that life presents outside the studio. The work of American dance and theatre artist, Anna Halprin has been a great inspiration in recognising the importance of this fluid dialogue between our art making

and life.

At its best, improvisation is a beautiful mirror for our life. It requires us to trust, to make enough space inside us, to sense what's unfolding in the present. It's a beautifully precarious and fragile form, which, for humans to engage in, seems also to reflect our nature. Members of the group so often speak about a freedom they experience in the dance that arises out of this creative tension that improvisation invites us into.

I sense that some of this freedom comes from a place in the dance where we become absolutely present and absolutely absent at the same time. I wonder, therefore, if dancing can allow us to befriend time again?

Let me explain.

Listening to people speak so much about this 'timelessness', about this suspended place of freedom in the dance, indicates to this 'other' relationship with time, one that can perhaps feel much larger than the one all the clocks and calendars in the world squeeze us into.

We can, even briefly, renew or rediscover our relationship with time again.

Its preciousness is revealed more as we get older perhaps, so having these moments that feel 'time-less' when we

dance, seem important.

So often for me, questions about the notion of the self, perhaps as being something very fluid, bubble up on the surface of each dance. As we take the time to develop our capacity to listen to our own body's wisdom, we begin to awaken a deeper understanding about our 'being-ness'. A space can sometimes appear in us through the creative process, where we can be suspended temporarily, a bit like jumping from our own staircase! What was unknown or hidden about ourselves becomes revealed, and in this there is the possibility of being reacquainted with ourselves.

I would like to speak to this notion of renewal with a short story about a session a few years ago that has stayed with me.

A woman in her late 70s arrived for a dance and movement session that was taking place in the afternoon. It was the first of such sessions in the local area. As she walked in, she seemed a little confused and a little irritated. Her understanding was that she would be watching dance, not participating and dancing herself. After the initial confusion subsided, she gradually joined in the activities. As the session drew to a close, I asked

each member of the group to share a word and a movement that described something about their experience at the end of the session. We went round the circle with each person speaking and moving his or her truth, each with their own gesture and tone. It came to the woman in question.

She looked somehow different now, softer perhaps. With tears in her eyes, she said, “belonging”, and her fingers and hands meandered down like roots from a thirsty tree to clasp the two hands of the participants either side of her. She squeezed these hands with a punctuated silence that left a resonance that filled the space with an indescribable richness.

‘Soul’ is the word I would use to describe this richness that seemed to hang in the air like a scent that day. It is, for now, the only word I can find that is large enough to hold, without reducing the expansiveness of, what she shared. It seems that dance and the experience of being in our bodies can be like a compass; it can be a way of orientating us to what is important and, often, to what is hidden or lost within us, whatever age we are.

Making time to wonder is paramount, and to remember the importance of wondering. The imagination is as vital in older age as it is in our childhood. It is a resource like the dance, which is always available to us.

So, as we move our histories, our histories move us. We can honour all that has been in our life in each dance, but we can also shake its grip on us; both are inextricably linked to each other. But whatever is revealed in the dance, as we get older it is important to have a space where we can be reminded that we belong; to each other, to ourselves, but also to the larger mystery that dancing and listening to the body can lead us towards.

Perhaps those moments of connection, in the dance with each other, move us that little bit closer to feeling ourselves into the answer of why we’re here.

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Standing alone

Carol Brown, Artistic Director of TAN Dance, gives a glimpse into the creation of Sorrowful Sun, a People Dancing – Wales Commission, and how an international partnership supported the dancers to work independently and achieve true and touching performances

Awarded one of the Wales Commissions for the People Dancing International Event, I wanted to use this opportunity to realise a dream to create a company of learning-disabled dancers with high artistic standards along the lines of the Spanish company Asi Somos, run by Onil Vizcaino. Asi Somos dance alone, very successfully, with no support workers. Watching such a company dance unaided, you realise that a very different and potent message is being conveyed. The award allowed me to work under Onil’s mentorship to create an inaugural work for performance at People Dancing in Cardiff in November 2014.

Onil would work with myself and my team, tutor and facilitator Cathy Coombs, and Associate Artist Leila Bebb. He would make two visits to

Wales and electronic communication would be constant over the ten weeks of the project. We would hold six-hour rehearsals once a week for nine weeks with two short residential courses close to the performance date.

The heart of our approach would be using dance as a field of action to give value to difference. We would work to the abilities and needs of each dancer while challenging them to go beyond what they thought would be possible. Onil talked with us about how we all have cognitive and perceptive processes that enable us to relate to the world around us and that for people with diverse capacities, these processes are influenced and limited by society’s assumptions of their abilities. Our dancers would have developed habits and strategies that might need to be broken through >>



Dragon’s Heart and Dragon’s Soul company, Sorrowful Sun. Photo: Gary Bevan