



Caroline Thompson in Denise Rowe's *She Who Walks*, Dartmoor National Park. Photo: Denise Rowe



Rita Marcalo in costume, *Dancing With Strangers*. Photo: selfie

# Five questions for five women



Daniel Whiley, Karl Fargerlund-Brekke and Faith Prendergast in Sally Marie's *I loved you and I loved you*. Photo: Danilo Moroni

Journalist and curator **Donald Hutera** gets the low-down on women making waves in the UK's independent dance scene



Theo-InsideOut, Quartz and Dance Adventures, Umbra, curated by Rachel Kay. Photo: Dance Adventures



Rosie Whitney-Fish. Photo: Tim Head

## 1. TELL US ABOUT YOUR COMPANY OR BUSINESS...

**RACHEL KAY (RK):** Founded in 2013, Creation Box London is a multi-functional research and development centre located at Make Space Studios in Lambeth North. My goal is to deliver outstanding, dance-led work through facilitated programmes, inspiring and guiding talented people in order to explore and fulfil their creative identity and potential.

**RITA MARCALO (RM):** Instant Dissidence is a Bradford-based company started in 2002, and is my way of offering other people art experiences embedded in daily life. Initially we made dance-theatre work. In 2009 I made a shift towards conceptual choreography when I created Involuntary Dances, the first in a trilogy of works about my experience of living with epilepsy. This led to an invitation in 2013 to become, for two years, an associate artist of Dance4 – an organisation at the forefront of questioning and expanding what choreography is and might be. A second shift happened in 2015. I suddenly started to doubt the ethical sustainability of an arts model driven by the individual artist's interests, and began to consider the role art can play as an engine for social change. This opened up a whole new way of working for Instant Dissidence. Since then we've been creating a series of socially-engaged works taking place in public urban areas and developed in partnership with their communities – from dancing with strangers in public places, to inviting people to sit behind the wheel of an animated parked car, to creating augmented reality choreography for people to experience at bus stops.

**SALLY MARIE (SM):** Sweetshop Revolution is a London-based dance-theatre company founded in 2008, and through which I've made a number of full-length touring pieces. I try to make work that matters in the moment and communicates something to the audience that can be felt but not said.

**DENISE ROWE (DR):** Earth Dances is about the power of movement and

dance to unlock our remembering of who we really are, with the earth at the centre of our lives. It was founded in 2010 as a means of bringing together the diverse threads of my work as a dance and movement artist working with African dance forms and embodied movement. I am based in Dartmoor in Devon, and much of my work happens within these powerful landscapes. But I also deliver sessions around the UK and internationally. Earth Dances is in some senses an umbrella organisation covering various performative and participatory projects, but the focus is on workshops, classes, retreats, camps and ongoing trainings – all with the intention of bringing dance, music and song into the heart of the community where they belong.

**ROSIE WHITNEY-FISH (RWF):** The idea for DanceWest was bubbling up in my head for ten years before I took the plunge and established it in April 2015. We are a partner of Lyric Hammersmith renting desk and studio space there.

## 2. WHO IS WHAT YOU DO AIMED AT, AND WHO HAS THUS FAR BENEFITED FROM IT?

**RK:** Rather than isolate one style or genre, Creation Box London is a versatile and safe environment that welcomes all forms of artistic expression and collaboration. The Box has become a home for up and coming creative entrepreneurs to develop their companies and ideas, and get their visions off the ground at affordable rates.

**RM:** On the one hand Instant Dissidence makes work which is programmed by, and engaged with, experimental arts festivals and their audiences. On the other hand, because we involve non-professional artists in the making and/or performing of work often sited in public spaces, it speaks to anyone whether they usually experience art or not. A third audience for our work is academic researchers and industry-focused scientists. Involuntary Dances, for instance, arose out of a residency at GlaxoSmithKline pharmaceutical company.

**SM:** My work is aimed at all sorts of

people depending on the piece. With *I loved you and I loved you*, about the life of Welsh composer Morfydd Owen, I tried to make work in which audience members felt like they were falling into a film. It's just finished touring to twenty venues, which I booked myself. My next project, *Everyday People*, is community-based and happens over eight weekends this summer in Farnham Maltings. Six members of the public will have a chance to choreograph a dance on five professional dancers, with me as a go-between. Soon I'll embark upon an outdoor version of *Tree*, a work originally made as an indoor promenade piece. This new, outdoor version will reach up to 5,000 people, although I don't think numbers should be at the heart of how a piece is judged!

**DR:** Earth Dances workshops are open to anyone, but the demographic tends to be mainly women aged between 20 and 60 who are either white British, Afro-Caribbean or of mixed ethnic origins. The emphasis is on reclaiming dance as a powerful and transformative force, bringing a grounded and embodied spirituality to movement. My annual *Foot to Earth Dance Camp* is a family-friendly event for around 50 people and has the widest range of ages, from 6 months to 60 years. I also lead sessions at summer festivals involving people from mainstream and alternative sectors and hold regular community dance classes. My performance work is increasingly site-specific and so audiences are very mixed.

**RWF:** DanceWest's aim is to increase visibility of the existing West London dance scene, support dance professionals and facilitate new dance experiences for communities there. Artists want opportunities to create locally and the public is waiting for performances to happen. Since we started we've worked with people aged 1 to 90 years delivering school and community projects, providing development opportunities for teachers and artists, and producing a programme of high-quality events and performances.

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### 3. CAN YOU SAY SOMETHING ABOUT PROJECTS RECENTLY COMPLETED OR CURRENTLY IN DEVELOPMENT?

**RK:** As a choreographer I work extensively in commercial industry, building shows for companies like Jaguar, Google and Range Rover. I love every second of the pressure that comes with taking on those brands. But I also work in the contemporary world. I'm a storyteller, a poet and a visionary. I like to immerse the viewer in my mind and take them on a journey that will somehow affect them personally. My dad had a stroke in 2010 at the age of 57. Since then a main focus has been developing a relationship with the Stroke Association, and working to raise awareness of the effects of stroke. This led me to make a dance-based film documentary. The Reason I Fly was choreographed as a tool for stroke survivors to conquer their fears and face their challenges head on. It's about pushing beyond what you think is possible in order to get back to daily life, so that you can strive for whatever you believe in. The film is also a metaphor for my life, my work and Creation Box London, and in the coming year I'd like to develop a live installation dance performance that coincides with it.

**RM:** In 2013 we were awarded Arts Council funding to undertake Less Bums on Seats and More Bodies in Space, a two-year project to develop five different pieces of work expanding modes of audience engagement. Dancing With Strangers is an outdoor piece which invites passers-by to dance with me as I act as a 'stand in' or channel for somebody else's original movement. A Dancer's Guide to the Galaxy is a digital storytelling project weaving the sci-fi writings of Douglas Adams with a series of animated conversations between me and a series of people whose minds I hitch-hike for a while. bus.stop.dance. is an augmented reality choreography experienced between you, your mobile phone and the surroundings of a bus stop. Caramel is an 'edible choreography' - a small-scale, black box piece in the round during which audiences provide 'ingredients' to create the work throughout its performance. auto/mobile is an outdoor piece occurring in a parked car. In the latter

audiences are invited to enter the vehicle and go on an imaginative journey with two performers.

**SM:** Every piece I do is completely different according to the subject matter. I love things that are funny but not everything has to be that way. Subjects covered in my previous work have included women at war as well as our connection to nature. Currently I'm making a ballet at London Studio Centre about a group of women from a planet where you're not allowed not to believe in love. In it I'm playing around with what is possible on pointe, and how it can be ugly as well as beautiful. My company's next full-length performance, BeautifulK, is about love and sexuality. I'm also hoping to begin building the foundations for a children's work. There are, additionally, a couple of smaller solos I'm trying to get commissioned, including one for Joel Brown from Candoco which will be part autobiographical odyssey and part music gig because he's also a song-writer. I'm also developing Sweetshop Tigers, a scheme linking 10 recent dance graduates and up to 60 independent choreographers.

**DR:** The Bridge is a nine-month dance programme with a group of 6-12 participants from various walks of life. Delivered in three modules, it's about empowerment, and reclaiming dance as part of our essential physical, emotional and spiritual heritage and health. She Who Walks is a performance based project, a response to our shared European ancestry of wise women (and some men) persecuted for their embodied relationship with the land during the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, and an invitation to reclaim the wisdom of living in partnership with the earth.

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At the heart of both projects are the connections between people, the living earth and the unseen world of our ancestry which is central to many of the traditional African dance forms I've studied. I'm currently editing a stand-alone She Who Walks film and have initiated the Dolls project, which invites people to make small red fabric dolls in honour and remembrance of those wise women. Groups of women are making the dolls in the UK, America, Germany and France. Once I've gathered one million I plan to install them in the landscape as part of an extended participatory event.

**RWF:** My work is socially motivated and tends to be site-specific or site-orientated. I'm interested in people and place. I've just finished R&D on a new work for the SS Robin, the world's only surviving First World War steam coaster. This year this will lead into a mass movement performance with a female community cast. I'm also developing a new work for theatre venues. I also work internationally for commercial clients. Collaborating with people from visual arts, film and fashion is very inspiring.

### 4. WHAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

**RK:** When opening a business you can easily fall short by conforming to expectations of what others want it to be. With Creation Box London I've taken my time and stayed true to what I intended it to be so that it continues to grow. We recently won the Outstanding Studio prize at the Inspires Awards in London. It was a monumental moment, especially as the Box is only two years old! Also, last year I launched InBox, a mentoring programme for emerging choreographers to further develop a new work under the guidance of four industry professionals. I believe it'll be a tipping point in the careers of some exceptional emerging choreographers.

**RM:** I'm an artist. I make a living out of playing with ideas. Every day I'm afforded the opportunity to realise my creativity and fulfil my potential as a human. As someone who grew up in 1980s Portugal in an educational system which privileged reproduction of knowledge rather than creativity, and in a family which had no tradition of engaging with art, this

was something that I wished for but thought would never be possible.

**SM:** Every piece is such a joy to make, and so many people are part of the planning and creating that each one feels like a miracle. My work has received award nominations almost every year for the last eight but it's the opportunity to make the works themselves with such incredible people that matters most to me. That, and audience members who are so moved by a show I can hear them sniffing in the darkness sometimes.

**DR:** In 2012 I was awarded an ADAD (Association of Dance of the African Diaspora) Trailblazers Champions fellowship. I'm grateful for ADAD's continued support. I'm also delighted about the ongoing success of Foot to Earth Dance Camp, now in its eighth year, which brings together teachers of dance, song, yoga, rhythm and ceremony and is growing into a wonderfully celebratory community. But perhaps I'm most proud – if proud is the right word – of my hidden 'accomplishment': to stay true to the work as it emerges, follow the creative process even when it takes turns I can't explain, and not be thrown off-centre by ideas of what society might expect me to be doing or what is ostensibly valued by the wider community.

**RWF:** To be an artist living in London is a real achievement. It's tough, but there are lots of us. I'm constantly collaborating with new and interesting people, but also touring the world through my commercial work. Setting up an organisation like DanceWest with no income in the middle of a recession is another major accomplishment. Some people are quick to underestimate me maybe because I'm friendly, honest and approachable, but I see all of these as strengths. I'm also proud of Dear Lido, a small project which then developed and toured to 46 working and non-working lidos across the UK with its own education and community programmes.

## 5. WHAT OBSTACLES DO YOU FACE IN THE CURRENT ARTISTIC AND ECONOMIC CLIMATE?

**RK:** One obstacle I've faced is raising awareness of what I do. Many artists and creatives want a quick fix,

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but projects and ideas take time. Everything will happen when it's meant to if you're willing to persist. My main obstacle, however, has been sacrificing personal and creative time for Creation Box London. Running a studio and business has taken over my life! I don't regret it, and it's an experience I'd repeat. It just takes drive and a strong mind.

**RM:** I know that me being an artist has less to do with personal merit and more to do with opportunity, privilege and random events. I'm acutely aware that there are currently many people all over the world just like me – people with as much, and most likely more, talent and potential. However for one reason or another – class, conflict, poverty, borders, lack of educational opportunities, trauma – a great number of them will never fulfil their artistic potential. This inequality is the main obstacle we face today, and means that a great number of wonderful ideas will never see the light of day.

**SM:** I spend forty to fifty hours a week on producing my work, and all for free. The Arts Council want so much support to be already in place, and there's no one to support this initial fundraising and budgeting phase which can take months. Like many dance artists I'm looking for a producer who's ready to go with me on an adventure that builds Sweetshop Revolution into a truly great company, and one which supports not just my work but that of others too.

**DR:** My work is about drawing together seeming opposites to find the common ground of our shared embodied human experience. Because I work cross-culturally there are issues around how to communicate that. I often come up against the elitist notion – especially within the psychology of many people in Western culture – that dance is only for some people. It's different in rural Zimbabwe, where most people conceive of dance as being part of the lives and health of the community. I'm constantly seeking avenues for income and working within restricted budgets. The low availability of public funding for projects, especially within the arts sector, puts extra pressure on my work as it doesn't easily fit into a specific category and can be hard for people to grasp without experiencing it. It's tricky to get the word out to the people who would most benefit from my work in a language they can relate to.

**RWF:** Although I've been choreographing and producing for a decade DanceWest itself is new, and this part of London hasn't ever had a one-stop shop or a voice for dance. You have to constantly prove that what you and your organisation are doing is needed. Also, fundraising and cash flow is a challenge when starting anything from scratch. I have to think creatively, investing a lot of time and, when possible, resources to make things happen. I've worked as a volunteer on DanceWest for two years but it's a sacrifice I know will eventually pay off.

### Info

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