



Men & Girls Dance

David Harradine, co-founder and co-artistic director of Fevered Sleep, which celebrates its 20th birthday in 2016, airs some of the ideas and beliefs underpinning the company's experimental approach to public engagement and participation

This article reflects on the relationship between participation and creative practice in the work of Fevered Sleep, the company of which I'm co-artistic director, and on our current project Men & Girls Dance. I write as someone whose background is not in dance (I trained in theatre, and now work across artforms, making performance, film, installation, books and digital art), and I don't locate my work in the field of "community dance"; but nevertheless, choreography, community, collaboration and participation are central to the ways in which Fevered Sleep works.

For us, the distinction between participation and practice has

completely eroded. We don't see our creative process as a mechanism for creating opportunities for participation; instead, we have come to recognise the importance of the participation of other people in our creative process as essential to its success. This seems to me to be an important distinction. The public work we make is sometimes explicitly participatory; for example Men & Girls Dance, which brings together five adult professional dancers (all men) with nine girls who dance as a hobby; or On Ageing, a theatre piece for adults performed by seven children aged between seven and 14. Often it's not, and participation

takes place in much less publicly visible ways, and with all sorts of people: through workshops in primary schools so that we as artists can feed a child's perspective into the ideas we're developing; through conversations with expert writers and thinkers (scientists, academics, researchers), which lead to a deeper understanding of where ideas we're working on might take us; by creating spaces for conversation with our audiences (spaces that might exist in the physical world, or that might manifest online). These participations are elements of the research process that's at the heart of our creative practice.

Fevered Sleep is experimental in its approach to public engagement and participation, and we work hard to create opportunities for genuine two-way dialogue through our work, with all sorts of people, who participate in our practice in all sorts of ways. Why do we work like this? Not because participation for participation's sake is our goal; and not because we believe that participation leads through simple means to simple benefits or impacts. We have come to recognise that participation makes our practice better; because it makes our work as artists better. We recognise that creating processes that allow for multiple voices, multiple mechanisms for involvement, and multiple perspectives comes closer than any other process we've explored to equipping us as artists with the materials and knowledges we need to make work about our bewilderingly complex world.

The simplest - and probably most important - consequence of this way of working is that we're always looking >>

Photos: Karen Robinson; Men & Girls Dance



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for ways to bring different people together. As artists, we find the points of resonance and friction that flare up when we do this creatively rich, and often ethically and politically provocative. I don't think we've felt this any more strongly than we have when working on our current project, Men & Girls Dance. Our initial interest on this project was entirely aesthetic: what choreographic and performative possibilities might arise if we brought together dancers of very different types: male with female; adult with child; professionally trained with amateur? These aesthetic questions were quickly pushed aside, however, by other people's reactions to the very idea of the project: it's too risky; it's inappropriate; it's a bad idea; it won't work; it's insubstantial; it's creepy; it's dangerous; it can't be allowed; it has to be stopped (these are all real reactions that we've encountered at one time or another).

And so the work became political. Why is the idea of bringing together men and girls to dance in a safe, professional context so challenging? What perceived risks are manifesting in the minds and imaginations of the people who objected to the work? When did it become “inappropriate” or “risky” or “dangerous” to suggest that safe, playful physical interaction between generations should be celebrated; and how can this be seen as negative, or as a threat to a company's (Fevered Sleep's) reputation? The context for these reactions is clear, of course: there are and always will be adults who wish to do harm to children. But the wrongful acts of the few have compromised the rights of the many, not least us adults and artists for whom interaction,



Photo: Keith Pattison; On Ageing

togetherness, touch, play, trust, dialogue and interaction with children are essential aspects of our practice.

Men & Girls Dance is an attempt to imagine and embody a different way of being. It's a public experiment in which dancers of totally different ages, sexes and levels of experience model a different way to be and be together in the world. The project takes a critical stance on many tenets of participatory practice, and reshapes them into art: touch is celebrated, intimacy is reclaimed; the body becomes a site of play and joy, not of danger and of risk.

All this of course is played out in front of an audience, those other participants in Fevered Sleep's practice, who, more than in any other project we've made, complete this work. They complete it with the

anxieties and fears they carry with them into the room. They complete it with the hopes and desires they bring: for their daughters, the girls who are taking part; and for the men, to be allowed to be free. These multiple layers of participation – from research, through creation, public performance and into the encounters with our audiences – drive Fevered Sleep, and nourish all our work.



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