



Photo: Matt Wilson

Moving, memories and being more ourselves

Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company's recent pop-up performance of *Cracking the Crinoline* delighted audiences whilst challenging their preconceptions of older women. Creative Director **Sian Stevenson** and Development Director **Cathy Westbrook** talk about how this powerful piece and the introduction of digital technology into their performance work have brought about a step-change in the company's development

At 70 and facing serious physical ill-health, American poet, May Sarton, reflecting on growing older, wrote, "I am more myself than I have ever been".

This quote serves as a call to arms for Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company. How can we, as older women, continue to be 'more ourselves'? And how can we demonstrate the rich complexity of our multi-faceted identities to a world that persists in dismissing old people in general, and old women, in particular, as 'past-it'?

We have found some of the answers to these questions in a movement practice that privileges the older female body, draws choreography

from people's everyday experiences and uses that most complicated and unreliable process, memory, to see where the experiences of our long lives have brought us.

Moving Memory emerged in 2010 from a project, led by Sian Stevenson and Jayne Thompson, which had left a group of older women demanding to dance more. The core group of seven women have been working together ever since, becoming increasingly confident in their role as co-authors and firmly committed to the policy of 'no wafting'. Sian Stevenson remains the Creative Director and driving force behind the company and its long-term aspirations. The quality of ensemble practice is absolutely fundamental

to the ethos of the company and is accompanied by a passion to improve, develop, experiment and take ever greater risks, seeking ever greater rewards.

The work of the company so far has been defined by two key developments: the use of digital technology and the step-change brought about by the short, pop-up piece *Cracking the Crinoline*.

Cracking the Crinoline

The company was well-aware that venues were hesitant to programme a bunch of old women so *Cracking the Crinoline* was made as a way to get out there and meet our audiences directly. Requiring only the women, >>

Developing practice

their cleverly designed and striking costumes, and a portable music player, the piece can be performed pretty much anywhere. Since its first outing at a sports centre in Gillingham as part of Big Dance 2014, we have performed in a wide variety of public spaces, including a market square in Faversham, a plaza in Canterbury, a park in Hythe, a shopping centre in Sittingbourne, Dreamland Leisure Park and Turner Contemporary, Margate. The piece also travelled to traditional venues such as Sadler's Wells London (as part of the Elixir Festival 2015) and Brighton Dome.

Without fail, the piece has surprised and delighted audiences. They are surprised by the simple fact of older women standing up to perform in a public place and, as the piece progresses, they are delighted by the transformation from dainty, well-behaved biddies to loud and proud women. The piece invites much laughter but the humour lies in the unexpected actions; the women remain stompily powerful. As one small girl

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commented, "This must be the best show I've ever seen - but they're a bit mad".

All the performances demanded that the women negotiate the unpredictable happenings that can occur when making a spectacle of yourself in public spaces - the cracked paving slab, the drunk man meandering dangerously close, or a performer about to trip on her crinoline - but these challenges meant the women developed a professionalism that allowed them to juggle and adapt to any difficulties the performances threw at them.

Cracking the Crinoline neatly encapsulated the essential concerns and artistic identity of the company, demonstrated that audiences are more than happy to put aside any prejudices when confronted with the right material and gave the performers a hunger and determination to create a fuller, more complex piece.

Doris and Vera

If Cracking the Crinoline marked a

step-change in the development of the company, then use of digital technology, especially projection, has been an enduring feature.

The company's origin, springing out of a participatory project for untrained bodies, means that sharing the practice wherever possible is as much a part of the work as performances. The practical challenges and creative limitations of working in community, residential and day care settings combined with the physical frustrations of older participants (especially more frail elderly) led us to wondering how we could transform spaces, overcome issues of short-term memory loss and restricted mobility as well as provide a platform from which participants' views and opinions could genuinely and meaningfully be expressed and celebrated. We also had questions about how to enhance and enrich the core company's own performance work.

In 2013, we started working with our digital projection partner, Butch Auntie, to explore the possibilities of





creating digital answers to some of these questions. Subsequently, we have created 'Doris', a portable kit in the form of a laptop and projector, which allows us to project bespoke digital images in a number of ways. Pre-prepared sequences demonstrate warm-up exercises and give older workshop leaders (and participants) an extra reference point. Doris's specially



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chosen images (such as trees waving in the wind) transform space and atmosphere, supporting participants in discovering new ways of moving and improvising. Doris also has the capacity to hold banks of images specially collected for individual projects. These serve as backdrops, conversation and movement provocations and, indeed, can be an end result – as an installation – in their own right. The approach results in a sense of renewal, ownership, community, self-confidence and empowerment described by participants as “liberating”.

We have a vision of a transformative and fully responsive environment, where a huge range of beautiful images can transport participants out of their immediate environment, encouraging free thought, extended movement and creative play. We have a vision of such an environment being installed in care settings across the country, easily usable by care staff so that creative movement activities can be available for large numbers of older people. Fulfilment of this vision is still some way off, but the journey towards it is proving to be revelatory. Thanks to funding from the Nominet Trust and The Baring Foundation, we are some way along the route of balancing technical possibilities with practical realities. Doris is being given a much-needed facelift (not something we normally encourage in our company members) and we are commissioning new software, 'Vera', which will introduce elements of interactivity. Most importantly, we want to see people actually using this practice in their own settings so we are devising a series of training options from cheap,

easy and simple through to something more sophisticated.

At the more sophisticated end, we incorporate projection into our performance work. Our latest piece, *Beyond the Marigolds*, demonstrated our most technically and artistically complex use of projection to date. The visual dimension added a richness to the stories being told, contributing to the show's overall kaleidoscope of 'moments' expressing fragments of experiences and powerful emotions. One audience member commented that the show “breaks the mould”, and another told us, “It was like nothing else I have ever seen – thought-provoking, emotional, wonderful”.

As older women, we cannot help but be concerned with the nature of our ageing society and issues of health and wellbeing. It is our experience that being involved in artistic activity automatically makes us feel better physically, helps us connect more to other people and gain a sense of purpose and achievement. Some of us are finding that many aspects of our life are ‘closing down’ as we get older whilst being involved with Moving Memory gives us new things to learn and ever-more-demanding goals for the future.

Please come and meet us at an open forum, and learn more about our work at the University of Kent in Canterbury on Thursday 14 September 2017. Email cathymovingmemory@gmail.com for more information.

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