

## **Earthfall: Performance Development and Methodology**

Since forming in 1989, Earthfall have evolved a distinctive and challenging methodology for rehearsal and performance. Broadly speaking, the company are concerned with addressing the relationship that exists between performer and audience. It's a concern strengthened by the company's rare ability to bring political and social agendas into an arena commonly limited by accepted definitions of what dance is and what it can be.

Earthfall Dance are now known as Earthfall, a name that evokes much of what lies at the heart of their explorations into movement, text and image: they push the boundaries of the physical world their performers inhabit, allowing for the impact that can be made between personal history and global theme, as well as a high element of risk, so moving away from more orthodox interpretations of contemporary dance. Performers in Earthfall's productions are not always trained dancers. Their journey into performance begins possibly in an artist's studio, or a sound recording studio. What becomes important is how individual strengths can feed into a process that is not confined by the expectations of a particular tradition - however recent.

Transition and translation are key words: caught between the often limiting demarcations that exist between theatre and dance, Earthfall can be successfully categorised in several areas. It's their hybrid status that allows them to confront new ideas about what a performer might do and how that might be influenced by a song lyric, or a painting, or a story, borrowed from a classical text, or from a neighbour in rehearsal. The company's artistic directors Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen formulate the initial scenario using a dialectical approach which synthesises before being presented to the company. An idea is taken and transmuted into its opposite; contradiction expands the improvisation, or the production's key theme. A body can fall in movement and still achieve its goal. Earthfall consciously abuse the dance form and their cross-art performance style - involving theatre, dance, sound and installation - involves an audience emotionally and physically in radical new ways. Many people attending their shows are from a non-dance background, drawn by the element of experimentation that speaks a language not limited to a learnt technique, or form of notation, which many audiences find alienating.

Breaking down boundaries, drawing in a variety of source materials - even the different cultural

roots of their performers - does not result in confusion. The process which has developed over the past eight years is the result of deeply considered analysis into what the company represents and how its individual members can contribute and enhance the work within a clearly defined structure. Before talking about the separate components of that process, its important to understand how the artistic directors shaped their own personal development. The common denominators in their personal histories can partly explain the trajectory of Earthfall, particularly in the areas of dance - theatre exploration and research into indigenous cultures.

Jim Ennis is the son of a Celtic musician. His early influences were the music played in his family and the ritual of the Catholic church mass which he experienced as an altar boy. Later, he studied at Dartington College of Arts, which has long had a reputation for being Britain's most pioneering theatre college. He studied dance, performance, directing and writing for performance under a number of tutors, including Steve Paxton, who originated contact improvisation, Mary Faulkerson, who has since set up a dance laboratory in Holland Peter Feldman from the Open Theatre, New York and Peter Hulton. He was also drawn to the research of Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski and his work investigating the nature of performance, its meaning and its mental-physical-emotional processes. On graduating, he took this interest further through work with the internationally acclaimed experimental theatre company Kiss (Holland) and the ground-breaking Gardzienice company (Poland). Crucial lessons were learnt in creating epic classical works involving a high degree of physicality in their presentation, as well as reference to the multi-lingual backgrounds of company performers. They were also productions that took their audiences on a journey of discovery. With Gardzienice, Jim Ennis undertook one of the company's gruelling research trips to Lapland; whilst with Kiss, he created a new piece of work for an Aborigine community living on a reservation in Australia.

Since childhood, he has also expressed himself through writing short plays. This writing revealed an obsession with recording action in great detail, something which liberated the actors when his later plays were performed professionally. This emphasis on detail - right down to the smallest of physical reactions - remains significant in the process that has since been adopted by Earthfall.

Jessica Cohen was originally set on becoming an actress, like her mother, who had trained at

the Old Vic Drama School. Her father was the director of a touring theatre company and from childhood she went regularly to see shows at London's Roundhouse, including innovative productions by directors such as Peter Brook. An inspirational dance teacher at her progressive Quaker school introduced her to her new career. She went on to study at the London School of Contemporary Dance receiving a grounding in the Graham technique, as well in ballet and historical dance. The course failed to allow for any real creative input from its students, however, so she began working in the holidays with the experimental theatre company, Moving Being. They were previously based at The Place and then re-located to Wales. She joined Moving Being full-time on leaving college and proceeded to work on a number of their best known productions, including The Mabinogi cycle of plays at Cardiff Castle and The City Trilogy. The latter production incorporated the discipline of T'ai Chi into its choreography and inspired her to study its history and development further. With the aid of a travel bursary from the Arts Council, Jessica Cohen spent a year studying and working in Taiwan. She researched the techniques of Peking Opera, traditional black ink drawing and painting, T'ai Chi and the mandarin language. She also worked as a lecturer at the Institute of Arts in Taipei. The impact of her study year was discernible in two solo works created when she returned to Wales: Tales East, Heads West and Orchid Flower Blanch, the latter directed by Jim Ennis.

The exploration of indigenous cultures, their manifestation in song, music and dance, became a spring-board into the development of a new company, one which de-constructed all of these elements and built them back into vividly choreographed works such as The Intimate Jig, based on the Welsh legend of Blodeudd. By early 1990's, however, Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen felt they needed to change the direction of the company. The long period of research and experimentation which had begun in their college years led them into a new phase of development, its starting point as a performance an underground car park in America. (Jim Ennis was then a visiting lecturer in the physical theatre department at Yale University). It was here that the company's watershed production *i and i* began its long evolution before premiering in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1994.

So, what was new in this show for the company? *i and i* saw the macrocosm of world politics brought into a room shared by four people. It premiered on the borders of a country torn apart by civil war. It was created

inside a sculpture made by American artist David Kalan. It incorporated several expressions of Welsh culture, but most importantly, filtered all artistic concerns through a creative process that has since developed into a flexible blueprint for the company, enabling personal history to shape itself into performances that speak across linguistic and geographical divides. What became increasingly important to Earthfall was drawing into the creative process people who wanted to explore their own backgrounds and histories. These personal histories and stories are one of three key elements in the process that leads to the development of new work.

Amongst those who joined the company at this time was Brazilian dancer Margarida Morini. Her experiences in her native country acted as the inspiration for the show following on from *i and i*. forever and ever evolved out of a story about Margarida's friend, Anna Soares, a teenager who was arrested on a protest demonstration in Brazil in the 1970's and then tortured by its military regime. This personal history acted as a catalyst for a work that developed a theme very close to the company's concerns: that of confinement. It's a theme that has potential choreographically and politically and Earthfall have continued to explore its many possibilities. In a Girl Standing By A Lake, specially commissioned for the Cardiff Festival, Brian Keenan's extraordinary book An Evil Cradling and the paintings of Gwen John inspired the company to return to this theme and to take it to new extremes, partly due to the designer Mike Brooke's scenography which saw the performers moving on top of 4,000 tonnes of coal in Cardiff Bay's historic Coal Exchange. Keenan's writings were not literally translated into the performance, but inspired physical encounters shot through with longing and loss.

In *i and i*, newspaper reports of the murder of two young lovers in the Bosnian civil war suggested a different kind of containment: that of religious and racial bigotry. Bosko Brokie and Admira Ismic crossed the racial divide of their city Sarajevo and paid a terrible price. This incident was mapped into the choreography of the work, but later developed to become part of a distinctive vocabulary that spoke more generally of the conflict that can exist between individuals, particularly the proximity of violence and tenderness in human relationships.

The early part of rehearsal is a journey, the route partly determined by a set of primary and secondary themes already identified by the director. These themes often act as the "provocations", or as starting points for a series

of improvisations, the two other elements that make up the process followed by the company. Provocations are bait for performer, director and ultimately the audience. In *i and i* for example, they consisted of the story of the two Bosnian lovers, Kalan's ambiguous sculpture - was the male figure dead or alive? - and the inter-relationships that existed between company members.

In the rehearsal room, performers, director, musicians and designer work together. Whilst every company member is encouraged to develop thoughts and ideas in a series of improvisations, the overview is very much the domain of the director. The analogy is that of a fisherman who sees something in the water and immediately draws up their line. They don't wait on their discovery and it's the same for the company director. If an idea is right, it is selected and worked into the structure there and then. There is a through-line in the structure from the outset and the style of music to be used will also have been decided upon. For *i and i*, for example, it was felt that a hard, percussive and very confrontational sound would be appropriate for the themes so a drummer was brought into the company.

The first phase of rehearsal is also the time to introduce new company members to the style of movement developed by Earthfall. The company are interested in exploring a kind of movement that is not dictated by tradition, but allows for confrontation and lower centre of gravity - literally earthbound and deconstructed. They want to discover an honesty in the movement chosen, as well as inject a degree of irony into the work's content. As mentioned earlier, some performers are not from dance backgrounds. The company does not try and mould them to a particular vocabulary of movement, instead they work to incorporate the idiosyncrasies of their own way of moving into the performances. In *Fabulous Wounds*, for example, the lead character Gerald Tyler moves in an off-beat way which enhances his role as outsider within a particular group of people. The particular style of movement does not work against the general thematic content of the piece and so disconcert the viewer.

The process is not confined to the rehearsal room - detailed work continues on the production whilst it is out on tour. Sometimes, its small sections of choreography that get changed, in other instances, more radical alterations are made. In *forever and ever*, the redesign of the installation housing the performers brought about a completely new approach to the choreography. The company always strip the performance arena bare, allowing for an honesty in presentation that is

matched by a choice of physical movements that deliberately contrast to more stylised dance forms. The new design of *forever and ever* replaced a box-like structure with overhead lights, so exposing the action both on and off stage. Suddenly, off-stage performers become integral to those people caught in the lighted arena.

This relationship had to be reconsidered in the choreography. The result: a tightening of the trajectories and pathways followed by the observer and the observed. If a dancer drank from a bottle of water and then dropped it to the ground, for example, this action would be caught by a body falling in the performance arena. The guitarist moving out into the lighted performance space also became a provocation: should he be avoided, or confronted? Nothing could be left to chance. In *Fabulous Wounds*, the lead performer's actual physical scars became the impetus for thematic development looking at the consequences of someone who has been rejected and lives on the margins of society. The production's initial starting point - a semi-autobiographical exploration into the relationship between a failed terrorist and a go-go dancer - was transformed through relating the idea of terrorism to the formative influences on a young boy, who collects life's physical and emotional scars and shakes them up in a kaleidoscope of memories that both amuse and wound the spectator. These ideas turn were influenced by two works of literature - Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha!*

The overriding concern is always to look at what can be said physically and emotionally within set limitations, sometimes of the body's own making, sometimes through the content of the piece. It's the detail, as always in Earthfall's works, which speaks volumes and which has helped make the company not only Wales' leading exponent of dance theatre, but one of Europe's most sought after companies.

## **Penny Simpson**

Penny Simpson is a journalist, novelist and broadcaster.