

MEN AND GIRLS DANCE

FEVERED SLEEP, RISK-TAKING AND PARTICIPATORY ART



Men & Girls Dance (photo Benedict Johnson)

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

‘That’s a bad idea.’ It was months ago and I don’t remember now who told me about a proposed dance project involving men and girls, but I do remember my reaction: it just seemed like a really bad idea. Last Saturday, I got the last ticket for the matinée of Men & Girls Dance at Dance 4 and was blown away by one of the most beautiful, moving, funny and joyous hours I’ve spent in a theatre. A bad idea? More fool me.

‘When we went to school, we’d never go in the girl’s playground.’

Apparently, Fevered Sleep’s co-artistic directors, Sam Butler and David Harradine, were surprised by the resistance they met when they began research. Their initial impulse had been aesthetic – exploring how bodies of tall, trained adults might move with those of small children. People’s reactions to the idea of men dancing with girls quickly changed that. At a time of intense and well-founded questions about how some adults abuse their power over children, this really was a dangerous proposal.

But to courageous artists like Fevered Sleep, those anxieties – and their ambiguous reverberation in the media – were a reason to persevere, not to back away. The project, in development now for over three years, gained a clearly political strapline:

A new dance piece celebrating the rights of adults and children to be together, to play together and to dance together

It's always good to see a rights-based approach to participatory art. And this work had to be participatory, since its very conception unites children and adults, those who dance for pleasure and those who do it as a profession, the untutored and the highly trained. So it has developed as a series of residencies: Folkestone, Huddersfield, Salford and now Nottingham. (The piece goes on to Brighton in October and London in April 2017.) Each town brings a new partnership. In Nottingham, it was the ever-inventive Dance 4, finally installed in premises with their own beautiful studios.

CO-CREATING A PARTICIPATORY DANCE PERFORMANCE

From an open call for participants, nine girls are chosen to work with the five male dancers. The choreography leaves space for improvisation and the piece developed by each new company during a two-week rehearsal period is always different. These children truly are co-creators. Their ideas, movement and presence remakes the hour-long performance. The result, at least to judge from what I saw, is extraordinary.



The presence of two groups is inescapable and not avoided: the men's maleness is plain in their luxuriant beards. But they are not in charge. One of the piece's successes is how control of what is happening, or might happen next, seems to dance continually from one group to the other, or from one person to another. Who leads and who follows shifts as in true relationship. Authority here is not only physical.

It begins in doubt as the groups look at each other across a space in which there is only a carpet of newspaper. Hands extend invitations. Posture and movement is slowly imitated. Tentative connections are made. In this playground the men remember their own childhoods while the children play at being adults in professional roles. Somewhere in the middle, as their paths cross, they meet and begin to play.

For set, design and costume, there's only newspaper. It's an inspired choice. These people are in a space literally defined by the media. In the next hour, they take control of it. What begins as a blindfold or a minotaur's head is tamed and eventually mocked.

They strip newsprint off a man encased in its pages, lift it high as a magic carpet, roll about in its folds and finally have a snowball fight with it until it's just waste paper. The laughter, innocence and joyful movement have chased other stories from the room.

'She LOVES to fly!'

At the heart of the piece is our natural fascination with other people. It reclaims the wonder of watching, as girls and men describe what they see in a partner's body and its movements: *'He's on his left tip-toe.'* *'He's leaning back and looking at the sky.'* *'I can see she's holding her ankle in her left hand'*. When, at the end, the performers line up one by one in front of the audience to look at us, as we have looked at them, we are made aware of our watching and yet made comfortable in seeing that this is what people do. We do find one another endlessly watchable, endlessly fascinating.

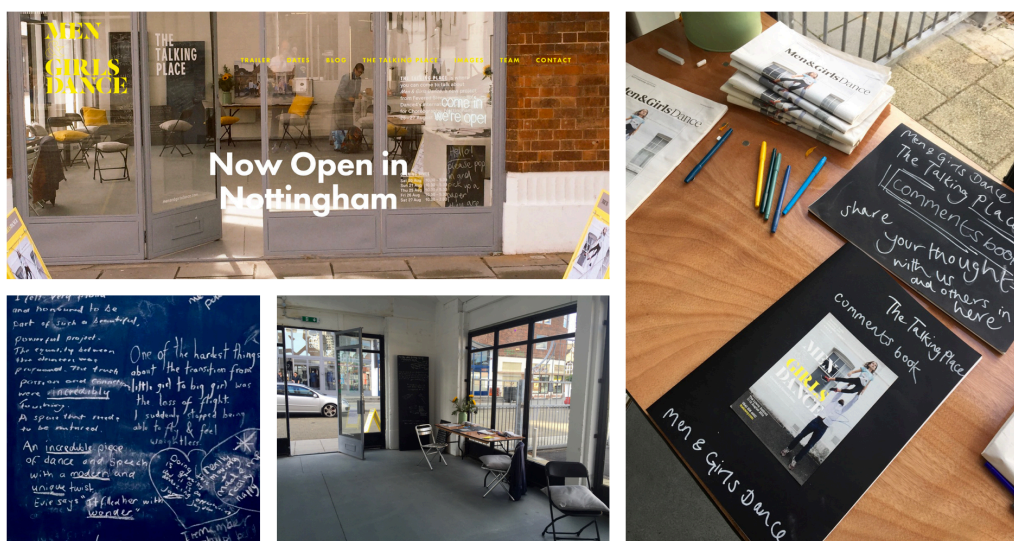


RISKING CONVERSATIONS

Still, despite the smiles and laughter, we live in the world we live in and there's plenty here to make you think. Waiting to go in, one man surrounded by families and couples, I felt uncomfortable, wondering if others would be looking at me. It's an experience that David Harradine evokes in the newspaper that is another element of the project:

‘There was me, this solitary man, alone at the village bonfire, watching someone else’s children playing. A self-censorship: not letting myself watch for fear of being watched.’

The Men & Girls Dance newspaper is a rich artwork that brings together images from performance and rehearsal, critical reflection, personal memories, official documents, audience reactions and more. It acknowledges, in a lasting but approachable form, the project’s tensions and difficulties. But it also affirms the belief of those involved that the evil done by some must not be allowed to spread everywhere and poison the vital relationships of adults and children. Being aware is not the same as being wary.



The third element of this important project is the talking space, which is how I got drawn into it in the first place. Walking through the old Sneinton Market I passed a shop with its doors open and a neon sign: ‘come in we’re open’. So I did, and found myself talking with Luke Pell, whose task is to encourage conversations about men and girls dancing. Among blackboards, photographs and plates of posh biscuits, people can talk about their feelings, ideas and memories of their own childhoods. Some write in scrapbooks or – habit of the social media world – comment on what others have written.

After each visit, Luke continues the discussion on the Men & Girls Dance blog:

People talked with us about family and touch and not being afraid. About not growing up too soon. About summers of fun with friends and family playing games, children running about in their knickers in gardens, bouncing on trampolines. We heard about favourite nights out dancing, queuing for clubs, about salsa in the northern quarter, dances in warehouses by flea markets and in the village.

Luke Pell

No answers are sought or given: there's just the aim of encouraging reflection. I especially liked the straightforward language used. Unlike so many works aspiring to be participatory, there was little sense of artworld language and preoccupations.



REFLECTION

Why did I like this project so much? Partly, it's true, because the show was delightful, though contemporary dance isn't always the most accessible form. It reminded me of when my own children were small and the joys of that closeness. It passes and is replaced with other kinds of closeness, but each stage of parenthood is unique and special. I never looked into my daughter's eyes with the same intensity after she learned to talk: until then, all I had to understand what she wanted was the expression on her face. So yes, there is a personal dimension – but what is art good for if it doesn't touch us personally?

But that feeling would not go far in this complex and risky project. There are so many traps here that could have curdled my enthusiasm. Glibness, exploitation, grandstanding, incompetence: I've seen them all in participatory projects. Here, I saw care, method, bravery, openness and a consistent consciousness of the risks involved – especially for those outside the company. The decisive element was sensing that these artists were genuinely more interested in those they were working with than in their own ideas. That was evident in each dancer's performance and in the project's conception and execution. The different elements make a whole with beauty, political resonance and human integrity. That's a rare trick to pull off.

'I felt very proud and honoured to be part of such a beautiful, powerful project. The equality between the dancers was profound the trust passion and connection were incredibly touching. A space that needs to be nurtured.'

Men & Girls Dance is a fine demonstration that participatory art can be as challenging as any other practice and that it can offer experiences that are second to none.



'It reminds me of dancing with my grandpappy. He would pick me up and spin me around and I miss him.'

SOURCES

Visits and conversations

- Visit to Men & Girls Dance Talking Space at Sneinton Market and performance at Dance 4 26 – 27 August 2016, (Nottingham, UK), conversations with Luke Pell and brief meetings with other members of the team. Quotes taken from blackboards and comment books.
- All photos by Men & Girls Dance by Benedict Johnson, courtesy of Fevered Sleep, except photos of the Talking Place by FM.

Publications

- *Men & Girls Dance* Newspaper (Nottingham Edition)

Films

- Men & Girls Dance Trailer on Vimeo - <https://vimeo.com/153937408>

Websites

- <http://www.menandgirlsdance.com>
- <http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk>
- <http://dance4.co.uk>