

A Restless Art

'Men & Girls Dance' (Fevered Sleep)

A case study of participatory art



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‘MEN & GIRLS DANCE’ (FEVERED SLEEP)

‘I didn’t realise I had so much to say about this until we began this conversation.’



What do you see?

I don’t remember now who told me about a proposed dance project involving men and girls, but I do remember my reaction: that’s a really bad idea. A few months later, by chance, I got to see the reality, during its Nottingham residency and that Saturday afternoon was one of the most beautiful, moving, funny and joyous hours I’ve spent in a theatre. A bad idea? More fool me.

‘Some people dance as their job, and some people dance for a tiny part of their lives, often when they’re kids, then they never dance again.’

David Harradine¹

Fevered Sleep’s 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, and how girls passionate about ballet might respond to the language of contemporary dance. 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 for these artists, the anxieties and their ambiguous reverberation in the media, were new reasons to persevere. The project, in development 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.*'²

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, Nottingham and Brighton, **ending in London in 2017**.³ Each town brings a new partnership, another group of children, and a different performance. In Nottingham, Fevered Sleep were hosted by Dance 4, the city's dance agency, in their inner city studios.

How do they move?

The residency begins with an open call for girls aged 8 to 11, put out through the local partner organisation. But the company also offer schools workshops with the aim of involving children who might not already dance or have much connection with the arts. Many of the girls who come to the audition workshop are taking dance classes, especially ballet, but Butler and Harradine are looking for presence rather than technique. They select nine girls who show curiosity, playfulness and delight in moving with the five male dancers. Harradine's description of them as the scaffolding of the piece is metaphorically and literally true. They hold the core structure of the choreography over which the nine new performers clamber with agility and invention. What they create during each two-week rehearsal period is different in each city. These children truly are co-creators. Their ideas, movement and presence rewrites the hour-long performance.

For Sam Butler that is as much a process of unlearning as of learning:

It is the unlearning of the usual adult child contract, which places adults in the lead roles with the children in the background. It is the unlearning of the separation of adults and children, of men from girls. It is the unlearning of what a dancing body should look like, of who can and should dance and who can't and should not. It is the unlearning of how to learn. It is the unlearning of children, of a child, of girls, of this girl, of these girls being underestimated.⁴

That the company comprises two groups of people is inescapable and not avoided: the men's maleness is plain in their luxuriant beards. But they are not in charge. Part of the piece's success 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 in true relationship. Authority here is not only physical.



The show begins in doubt, as each group look at the other across a carpet of newspaper. Hands extend invitations. Posture and movement is slowly imitated. Tentative connections are made. In this playground men remember their childhoods while girls play at being grown up. Somewhere in the middle, as their paths cross, they begin to play.

For set, design and costume, there's only newspaper. Men and girls are in a space 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 is just waste paper. Laughter, innocence and joyful movement have chased other stories from the room.

At the heart of the piece is our 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.'* *'I can see she's holding her ankle in her left hand.'* *'He's leaning back and looking at the sky.'* 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.

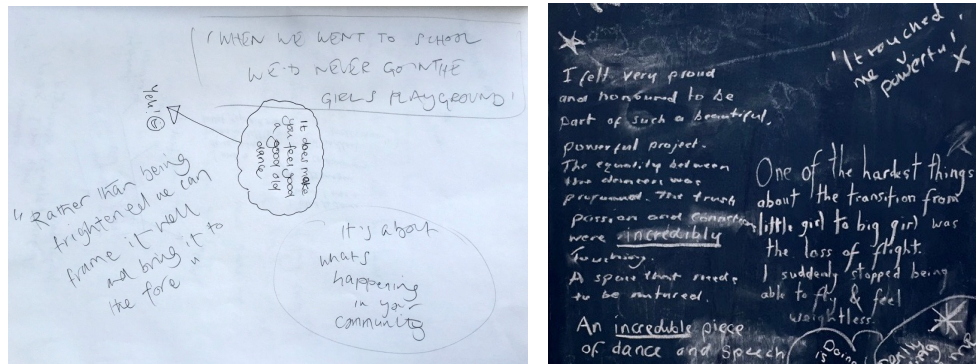
What shall we say?



Still, despite the smiles and laughter, we live in the world we live in and there's plenty here to make you think. Before the show, a 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 project newspaper: *'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.'*

That newspaper is a critical part of the project, subverting gutter journalism by taking on its form to transform its quality. The result is an artwork that brings

together images from performance and rehearsal, critical reflection, personal memories, official documents and audience responses. It acknowledges the project's tensions in an approachable and attractive format. But it also affirms the artists' belief that evil done by some must not be allowed to poison the literally vital relationships of adults and children. Being aware is not the same as being wary.



In *Men & Girls Dance*, talking and thinking is as important as moving and watching. The third element of the project is the Talking Place, 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 was to encourage conversations about men and girls dancing. Among blackboards, photographs and plates of biscuits, people sit to share feelings, memories and thoughts about the project. Some write in scrapbooks or chalk on the boards.

'The only thing that makes me sad is that I'm not a little girl who can do that anymore.' • *'I never had anything like that from my Dad, I'm really glad you're doing this, because some fathers don't and it's sad.'* • *'I don't want to live in a world where I can't give someone a hug.'* • *'There was a child in a playground stuck up a tree, I wasn't sure if I should help.'* • *'It's a time you can let loose with no judgments.'* • *'They are all beautiful. Brilliant. I want them to know that.'*

Participants from the Nottingham Talking Place

After each residency, Luke reflects on the discussion on the Men & Girls Dance blog:

'People came in and spoke about what it means to be physical, the exercise and activities they do for fun. How it makes them feel good, to move, to sweat and to smile. We watched as stories were spelt out carefully in chalk – here and after the shows - about what it is to dance with men, with someone you love, someone you trust. We listened to tales from teenage years about inhibitions and expectations, isolation and expression...'⁵

No answers are sought or given, just the aim of encouraging reflection. So at every stage of the work – title, rehearsal, performance, in print, online and in conversation – language is straightforward. It can be hard to escape the internal discourse of your profession and doing so is not the least of Fevered Sleep's achievements. As George Orwell wrote, *'If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy'*, and that after all is what *Men & Girls Dance* set out to do.⁶



How do I feel?

Why do I like this project so much? Partly, I'm sure, because the show was delightful. It reminded me of when my own children were small and the joy in that closeness. It passes and is replaced with other kinds of closeness, but each stage of parenthood is 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?

And that feeling would not go far in such a 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, courage, openness and a steady consciousness of the risks involved – especially for those outside the company.

The children are offered an intense experience unlike anything they will have known. They are likely to become very fond of the men they dance with and others in the team: their ideas have been valued and their performance feted. And then it's over. Professional performers learn to cope with the aftermath of the intimacy of creation, but it is a lot to ask a ten year old. Fevered Sleep's 'aftercare' is supportive though, keeping in touch with the occasional message or letter, while the local partner, like Dance 4 the Nottingham partner, offers long term contact and new opportunities to explore dance.

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.'

Participant



Links

- Men & Girls Dance <https://www.menandgirlsdance.com>
- Fevered Sleep <http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk>
- Men & Girls Dance Trailer (Video) <https://vimeo.com/153937408>

Notes

- ¹ Arts Council England Blog: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/men-and-girls-dance---five-questions-fevered-sleep>
- ² Fevered Sleep: <http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk/current/men-and-girls-dance/>
- ³ In July 2018, Fevered Sleep began work on a new iteration of Men and Girls Dance with the Skånes Dansteater in Malmö, Sweden:
<https://www.skanesdansteater.se/en/performance-festival/men-girls-dance>
- ⁴ Sam Butler, writing in May 2017 on the [Fevered Sleep blog](http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk/underestimating-children/)
<http://www.feveredsleep.co.uk/underestimating-children/>
- ⁵ Luke Pell: <https://www.menandgirlsdance.com/men-and-girls-dance-blog/2016/10/15/reflections-from-nottingham>
- ⁶ 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) in Orwell, G., 2000, *Essays*, London, p.359