

DANCE UMBRELLA PRESENTS



My Dance DNA

Siobhan Davies in Conversation with Maria Balshaw

September 2017

MB: Hello everyone, and welcome to the University of Manchester's Whitworth Gallery. My name is Maria Balshaw and I'm really delighted to be back here in my former establishment interviewing a choreographer and friend, Siobhan Davies, for *My Dance DNA*.

My Dance DNA is the new talk series by Dance Umbrella. It's presented in association with The Space and five venues around the UK. It's a rare opportunity to hear from some of the UK's leading choreographers, to have them discuss their influences, and hear them as they recall moments of movement on film which have inspired them.

This evening's talk is the third in the series, and is taking place here at the Whitworth, where as many of the people who are attending in the gallery know, I was Director until very recently. It is also a gallery where Sue and artists commissioned work, that was presented in the gallery spaces - including, quite recently, 'Materials / Rearranged / To / Be'. Sue has worked with us twice in my time at The Whitworth, and it's been an absolute pleasure to work with an artist and choreographer who appreciates other art forms so much.

We'll have time this evening for questions at the end, so please do keep in mind what you would like to ask Sue. And for audiences at home, we'll be taking questions from twitter, so you can send them through to #mydancedna. So Sue, it is my delight to introduce you - Siobhan Davies / formal title.

SD: Always known as Sue [Laughs]

MB: Always known as Sue

Um, Sue is known for her rigorous aesthetic and her hunger to engage in creative discussions with other art forms. She is a choreographer held in high regard right across the sector, and I have known her work since she was a dancer. So, she was originally, hugely acclaimed as a dancer in London Contemporary Dance Theatre, and then Second Stride. Sue is now one of a very select breed of dance artists who actually run their own spaces. In her case, it's an award winning and exceptionally beautiful and serene building in Elephant and Castle, in London.

MB: To get a flavour of her choreography we've put together a special, compilation of her recent work for you. We'll see that now.

- Compilation of Siobhan Davies works -

MB: Fabulous. Is there anything you want to... say about...

SD: There is... two things. These recent works have mostly taken place in galleries and not in the theatre. I really enjoyed the idea of believing whole-heartedly in the arts of choreography and dance but, being able to re-imagine them in other artistic spaces. And to find the virtuosity that I feel is inherent in all of us when we move naturally. It looks simple because it could be everyday movement, and yet I'm trying to celebrate the unusual in the every day.

But also, that all of these works that you've just, we've had snippets of, these are co-made with me. I'm a huge believer, and always have been, that you make work with the people you work with - and there is a sense of the responsibilities I have as the director of particular works. But all of these are made with the people, and in fact the last one I commissioned the separate artist to make a distinct work, and that's been just a wonderful progression for me to be part of, over nearly fifty years of making.

MB: Fabulous. So I've got a few quick fire questions to get us going: What's the first dance you remember seeing?

SD: Apart from myself being a really wayward mouse in a school production, the one that... impacts me even as I think of it now is a moment when Margot Fonteyn – I used to go to the ballet, I used to, to see in the slips ... you'd go to the slips in the Royal Opera House, you'd be miles away, the artists would be quite small on these huge stages. And Margot Fonteyn in Romeo and Juliet – uh Kenneth MacMilan's Romeo and Juliet - She would be on her own on stage with Rudolph Nureyev hiding behind in a beautiful cloak, hiding behind a bush. And she just raised her arm in a form of yearning, love, presence, and this tiny figure utterly filled the stage and the house, and I thought magic happens in huge simplicity.

MB: And choreography, what's the first piece of choreography you remember loving?

SD: I think, I think probably one I was in, because choreography had been observed by me before, um, and there was a work by Richard Alston, and I think it was the first work that he made for four women, and it was called *Transit*. And we sort of hurtled out of wings, he said “tighten yourself up as a ball, and hurtle yourself out into the wings” and that feeling of being together and suddenly spilling out onto stage with energy, and then trying to make something happen with diligence and a sense of performance before hurtling back into the wings later. That moment of being inside choreography was extraordinary.

But I should quickly mention also a work, that happened, that I saw much later on, and it’s a work by Bronislava Nijinska called *Les Noces*. And if it ever goes on, please see it. It is technically a ballet, they are on point, it’s a Stravinsky score, a Gontcharova design, and Nijinska having huge amounts of Russian earth in how she presented ballet. It’s exquisite.

MB: I will seek it out if I can. And, the next question is a logical follow on. So that hurtling made you feel the choreography, but when did you then start to feel like a choreographer yourself?

SD: This is going to sound absolutely daft. It was a few years ago when David Hinton and I made a film called *All This Can Happen*, and it’s a film, and it has no dance in it, - we’re going to see an excerpt of it later - Its tiny elements of film from a huge amount of different sources, film and stills. I was at the editing table and I had never made a film before, and I didn’t know how to make a film, and yet I was in this position, and all I could think of is “what’s my skill”? And it was choreography, so I had to use everything that I had learnt in studio or in watching other people’s works and edit a film. And it was there, and I thought, “you are a choreographer because you can transform that skill into making something else.”

MB: Fantastic

SD: That was good [laughs].

MB: So, I want to take you back to much earlier in your life. Did you have a big childhood inspiration?

SD: Well, I’ll step straight back to my parents. My father introduced me to a whole load of comedy. And I’m not a very comic [laughs] choreographer, but there was a wonderful sense of timing. My mother had been an amateur archaeologist. And, um, she, uh introduced to me to all sorts of sights, all sorts of pre-classical statuary, umm, and one of the books that she had was cave paintings

MB: Right

SD: And I remember looking at these works, we can have one up here I think in a minute. This is from the Chauvet Cave, a French cave. [Images come on screen] And, thinking, these are the result of a certain creatures becoming human. And by becoming human, one of their abilities was to make a representation, something outside of themselves. To become something other by making these works. But I also think this must be the first film I will ever see, because just look at how much movement is in there. I mean this, it's just, it could have been an animation, and yet then there it was in a dark cave. But, but also, fabulous use of materials because the way they draw uses the relief on the cave wall. So, there'll be a sort of musculature round his shoulders because the cave wall bulks out at that time. There'll be a certain dip where his flank is because that's what the cave wall did. You, you just have to look at this and go we have to, we have to... absorb the idea of art as just imbedded in every single one of us and I just have to look at that and...

MB: Well, my husband's an archaeologist by profession so things like this that are thrilling and very important to him, and he has introduced me to them.

So if we move then into your professional life, early on, can you tell us a bit about what influenced you particularly?

SD: Well, the truth is I knew nothing. I was at dance school, I went to my first dance class, and within months I was doing a very, very small part as, in one of the performances. And I didn't really know my right leg from my left leg. So at one point Robert Cohan, who was the director of London Contemporary Dance Theatre, said "everybody has to choreograph. It doesn't matter if you can or you can't. You just have to go into studio and make. And if you make you will begin to understand why you have to really contribute as a dance artist". So I went into the studio and worked with a dancer called Namron, and we made something. And us, you, I said we made something, and I think that's just simply carried on through my history. I cannot make anything without the company of the people who are with me in the studio. So, if I'm going to say what influenced me, it's every single artist. I think... do we have some images of them? Its every single artist I've ever worked with.

- Images of artists -

So these are the more recent artists because I've tried to collect them quite quickly. And, you'll just see that each one of them has a knowledge which accompanies them whenever they come into the studio. Why would I not want to use that, why would I not want to learn from what they have been doing and what they have been learning?

And, I think that will just simply continue, and it's not only the dance artists, it's also the visual artists, and more recently the scientists that I've bought into the studio to work with us or geographers, or anthropologists.

MB: Clare Twomey who worked, made things with you here, is setting up a factory currently in Tate Exchange and Tate Modern, and I've connected to her because of you, and so we formed a relationship. But her energy is very like yours actually, that's what I was reminded of.

SD: Yeah, That was good, I mean, she's a craft artist, a ceramicist, and to work with her bodily, to work with the fact that she creates bodies of work, that was such an exciting affiliation.

MB: Yeah, it created something extraordinary. So moving on now to your..

SD: I need to mention Eva Karshak and Trisha as amongst my influencers. Sorry, I didn't get there. So, when I'm talking about dancers, which I just was, there was a moment in about 1976, when I was in New York, and Richard Alston was making a trio, with himself, actually it was quartet – himself, myself, Christopher Bannerman, and a dancer called Eva Karshak who eventually worked with Trisha Brown.

And I just want to pinpoint something that I learnt from her. When she moved - let's just imagine something – when you see a film and there's a huge close-up of an actor or actress who is extraordinary. Somebody who in the stillness of a moment allows a thought or an emotion to pass across their faces, she did that with her entire body. You could see the thinking and the emotional change and the shift right the way through her body. And that impacted on me hugely because I thought that's the intelligence that is required in performance, particularly if you're close up to it. And it was one of the reasons which much later I was able to move into a gallery space.

And she eventually worked with Trisha Brown, we're just gonna show you something if you could start putting it on now and I could chat a little bit.

- Footage of *Set & Reset* by Trisha Brown -

This is Trisha Brown and Eva Karshak dancing side by side.

So Eva's, um, Trisha's in the front, contemporary dancing to the full. Beautifully articulate, random, exciting. A tangle of exactitude and wildness. So intelligent, so there. Behind her is Eva. And she'd had a classical ballet background. And you can see the residue of it occasionally, even while they do the movements side by side. So, two very different artists who are approaching the same material with equal intelligence, but utter originality.

MB: It's fabulous.

SD: I just find it so witty and bright at the same time, it's like insouciant, it...

MB: You just took the word out of my mouth. Honestly, 'the insouciance of it' was what I was just about to say

SD: Yes. And it's very complicated movements, and she just does it with wit and ah it's lovely...

MB: Gorgeous shrug. Yeah. Very inspiring. So, now, your work. There's been wonderful influences there, um, could you tell me about one of your early works and the thinking and inspirations behind it?

SD: Well I'd been, I'd been dancing for a while and the principal techniques that I had learnt through were Martha Graham's and Merce Cunningham's. And as I said earlier, I was very, very naive, I didn't really know what was going on, and I'd been asked to make a work, and was at the beginnings of making a work called *Sphinx*. But I thought I should use this work and I made a solo for myself in it as a way of understanding something. So, my dilemma was that in the Graham technique you'd have arms that were quite mythic. They were quite sculptural, and in, in Merce [Cunningham] you had legs that would do sort of wonderful tricky things. And I could never quite work out what happened in the middle. I wasn't connected. So I tried to find a way in which I might appreciate that. Probably going back to the cave painting, there was ideas of when I watch wildlife programs a creature is totally connected when its galloping, when its chasing, its utterly there, there's efficiency, and beauty, and urgency, and hunger. So I put myself on the floor, sorry if you can't see me.

So I put myself on the floor and tried to imagine what it would be like if I was some kind of creature. And we could put up on the film now some Muybridge images, which show that science and photography were looking at how animals and child development had a sort of synergy between them, as we understood how our body connects. So, I tried to learn that as I came up. Up off, up high, and that, at this point the arms now felt more like connected limbs rather than just gestural moments.

And um, did you show the Muybridge? Ah I see. So here are

- Images by photographer Eadweard Muybridge -

SD: I mean just look at the, the beauty of the animals all connected. But how a child learns through that connectivity from a very early age, and we lose it.

Look at that sloth, he can do it upside down.

So yes, this, this idea of connectivity was an early hope.

I think there's a picture of me doing *Sphinx*, uhh, and uhh [laughs as the photo appears on screen] the dilemma is I lost it in performance. When I actually performed the work I didn't encompass everything I'd learnt in the studio. It takes a while to learn and then actually use it, you lose the stuff. Ah!

MB: Yeah. Well in the things that I have observed of you, it's all connected now.

SD: It, it is more connected now, yes. But I mean that's one of the beauties of working within dance and choreography is its one of the things we have the chance to look at, is this sort of mind/body dilemma. Because we still have a tendency to think that our legs move our mind across a room, when in fact it's the opposite, or it is, it is this whole. Is it the idea of 'we are complete with the idea of being our senses, our minds, and our bodies' have the language but that doesn't help us.

MB: Yeah. So if we move a little bit later into your career could you take about the influences of a more recent work for us?

SD: We spoke a moment ago about the film, *All This Can Happen*, which I made with the director David Hinton. And we chose found footage, we didn't film anything. We only worked with found footage. And I was trying to, eventually we were trying to get glimpses of those parts of action that our normal eye doesn't see, so that by using stills, or by using fragments of movement, the audiences eye would be guided to that part of action that we just don't connect to.

So, one of the ways in which we, we researched that was to look at the very, very first photographs of movement. Muybridge was one, but another find was Jules Etienne Marey, who was a French scientist.

MB: Yeah, and we have a clip, don't we?

- Footages of Jules Etienne Marey's works -

SD: We've got a few clips here. Some of them are really strange, but these are movies. In fact his original work was only stills and much later were they made films. These are about the 1860's, so although you may be looking at it and going "for heavens sake, what's going on?" this is the first time in which people would genuinely be able to see action through film, through serious noticing of what happened frame by frame, second - millisecond by millisecond, about movement. And I found that attention to detail so extraordinary, and it was that kind of attention...he's rather happy, isn't he?

MB: Yes.

SD: Walking across.

MB: Yes. Indeed. [laughs]

SD: [Gesticulates] Pleasurably. Umm, so that attention to detail was a huge support to making *All This Can Happen*. And I think we've got umm

MB: Yes I think we've have a clip of *All This Can Happen*.

- Footage of *All This Can Happen* -

MB: So those last images are all Jules Etienne Marey's?

SD: Yeah

SD: And the writing is by Robert Walser. And he wrote this novella in 1916 called *The Walk*, and there is something exquisite about how he notices the everyday. He notices it in a sort of wayward way as well as a precise way. Self-conscious some of the time, joyous other times, reflective. So I love the way he looks at the world. I just find that quite...

MB: Yeah, and a deviation - but one that will make sense to you - is of course, because in this gallery, the first, in this room in the Whitworth, the first piece that you co-created with us was walking in circles.

SD: Yep, that was ROTOR, yeah. Yes, no absolutely, walking, walking always. I mean if you just, if we just think about it, in a minute you're going to get up out of your chairs and walk out of this room, and you're not even going to think about it, and yet every one of you will do it slightly differently, in a slightly different emotional way, let alone a physical way, with a slightly different intention. And I just find those minute differences, and the virtuosity of doing something as extraordinary as the orchestration of walking. Its, umm, I just find those things exciting.

MB: Yeah. And they call up other associations

SD: Absolutely.

MB: Uhh, your circular walking called up works from the collection. That a curator then presented alongside a series of circles in modernist works.

SD: Yes. And that, and then that conversation between us being able to be absorbed by movement and yet the curator at The Whitworth turning around and going "I've got a kinship to that", "I've got a kinship through the very collection I have at my fingertips every day." And the conversation that then happens one hopes it is with the audience as well between what they have got used to visually in an art gallery and then what they're introduced to in terms of movement, and I...

MB: Yep, and I think, part of what you introduced was an awareness of what all gallery visitors do, which is walk. They're looking, but they're walking. They're walking from room to room, and your interventions in the space just heighten the awareness...

SD: ...of doing that. I, I also hope that we're able to delay people who come through an art gallery because even I know I can sometimes speed through something. Whereas, I love the idea of being delayed, and then taking on the time of the gallery space rather than my time.

MB: Yeah. I think that's very important. That slowing things down is really important.

SD: Slowing.

MB: So walking was then, that was a few years ago. What's influencing or interesting you right now?

SD: Well, I mean, there's a, it's a continuation. When I began choreographing I really enjoyed trying to find and make movement, and make movement that was ambitious to some extent in its reach and in its dynamics, and in its technique. And I made one more movement, and there came a point when I realised, for me, simply by making more movement I wasn't necessarily saying any more. I wasn't really using it as material, I was sort of spinning it, rather than making something out of it. So I became more interested, as it's fairly clear now, in, in the movement that we have in common with each other. And part of that adventure was amplified by meeting different neuroscientists and different neurophysicists because they have a real interest in what's going on in the body and the mind. I mean, that's their territory. And they look at us as dance artists and choreographers and go "you must be thinking about that the whole time". Well it was one person, Doctor Jonathon Cole, whom we spoke at a conference together, and he introduced me to the idea that the virtuosity that we have, both in everyday movement, and when we're dancing in a more exaggerated, amplified form, is very much as a kinship with those people who have pathologies who can't move that much. But their virtuosity is in how they move what they have.

And he introduced me to this incredible man, Ian Waterman. So, Ian was nineteen, and he got the flu, and through the flu had a virus, and after the virus he lost all proprioception. So, if you close your eyes now briefly [closes eyes], if he closes his eyes, he has no idea where his body is. He can't feel the seat under his hips, he can't feel the hands on his thighs, he can't feel the floor under his feet. When he wakes up in the morning, I mean when he wakes up and he hasn't opened his eyes, he has no idea where he is in the bed. And he, I mean...

MB: It's just unbelievable to even try to imagine what that must be like.

SB: It is. Luckily, I've met him. And luckily, I've met a man with the most huge sense of humour and a real sense of being in the world. He has taken on the problem that was given to him and he has re-learned how to move in the world while having to think every millisecond. We've got an excerpt of a film about him, which will help.

MB: Yes, yep.

[Video Plays]

Ian Voiceover: I have to scan the path ahead. Not immediately in front of my feet, probably about six or eight feet ahead. So I'm planning all the time exactly what's coming up, so I'm 'gonna be aware of where I'm 'gonna place my feet so I don't compromise myself.

Narrator: Everyday is like running a marathon.

Ian Voiceover: An athlete will train and train and train for certain competitions, and that's their peak, and that's what they strive for.

Ian on film: [Speaking to a man on the street] After you mate.

Ian Voiceover: I work at my peak and pinnacle every day. Its sound dramatic and almost an over-the-top statement, but it's not. I, I live at the edge, for want of a better term, all day every day, there's no leeway.

Narrator Voiceover: The simplest of actions can tip him over. Shopping becomes an exercise of mechanics.

Ian on Film: Swedes are quite funny, sometimes there's a good size, they can be really heavy, or quite light. Quite strange beasts I think. And that can do an awful lot to your balance. I'll get into a safe position from the feet. I'll freeze my legs quite rigidly so I know they're not going to move around a lot. Freeze the upper torso a little bit so that I'm in a safe, good, rigid position. I can now start hanging off of that frame other movement. But I have to be aware that it's a heavy object. And the law of physics says that if you have a heavy objects extended from a narrow base, you're 'gonna topple over. So, you actually have to think, or I have to think consciously, about what picking up that object is going to do to this framework.

Narrator: Eggs are even more of a challenge.

Ian on Film: The problem here is controlling the fine pressure between the fingers, so you don't crunch them too hard or hold them too loosely and let them slip through your fingers. It's this very, very dexterous, very, very fine movement that one, very difficult.

[Video ends]

SD: So, when I pick up this glass, he couldn't feel the glass and he couldn't feel the weight of the water. And as he drinks, he can't necessarily feel the change in the weight because the water is entering him and leaving the glass. So, I mean, one of the things I wanted to say is, it's not that I believe at all that we should only work with utterly basic everyday movement. I just want us to be re-excited by that, in order that when we decide to amplify that and go

into far more extended movement we realise the origins of where we started from. It goes back to the cave painting.

SD: In these original moves that we all have, are the beginnings of this sort of huge expression that we're able to extend as much or as little as we wish.

MB: Yep. And I'm reminded very much of Marina Abramovic's views about the way we are in the world. And again, she worked in this gallery space and the drill as she called it to slow people down, began with a sipping of a glass, a very small glass of water, which she asked people to make last for five minutes and just be aware of every element of the sip of water. And all of that was about creating enough space, so that people could then look at the performance, the various performances that unfolded over time. I think for almost everybody that came in, because everybody had to do it at the beginning, it's hokum to begin with, and then they would begin to enter that awareness.

SD: It's the devil's in the detail and each of us have so much more detail than in a way we allow ourselves to recognise.

MB: So the meeting with Ian led to the creation of a work?

SD: Yes, with other things. GOMA, an art gallery in Glasgow asked us to contribute to an exhibition about the everyday and various Scottish artists were contributing their works, and we were not invited to respond to their works, we were invited to make a work which would sit amongst these other works. And a Finnish artist and I, Helka Kaski, made *Manual*, in which the request is that Helka goes up to a member of the audience and says, "would you help me complete this work?" And wonderfully ninety-nine percent of people said they would, and then she said, "well I'm going to lie on the ground, and you tell me how to get up off the floor in detail." And each person slightly rolled up their sleeves and went "oh yeah, this is easy, I can do that". And ten seconds in they were going "Oh damn, how do I do this?" We have a film, an excerpt of it.

[Video plays on screen]

Participant: Not quite such an arched angle, perhaps a bit softer so push your, move your foot forward.

Helka: Okay. How far?

Participant: Just a bit.

Participant: Can you rotate your legs back to the position they were slightly?

Helka: Back where they were coming from...

Participant: Rotate them to the... with the weight on your knees okay?

Participant: In towards, closer in to your body.

Helka: Umm, okay. I'll just shift a little bit to the right hand first.

Participant: Slide it towards you.

Helka: Yep, so that there is space.

Participant: So that it's opposite. Equal weight under your shoulders.

Participant: Can you use your left leg to push yourself up?

Helka: Not quite because now I have my weight on the right side.

Participant: If you put your hands on your left knee, can you use that as a lever to push yourself on to that leg so that your pushing upwards?

Helka: So push myself on this leg?

Participant: Yep, so push it upwards. And sliding your right leg under at the same time so your foot is forward.

Participant: And now pushing upwards, all the way.

Helka: Pushing upwards from my feet?

Participant: Put your right hand on your, on your left knee.

Participant: Your right hand on your right knee. And now push upwards.

Helka: Oh push with my hands not with my knees?

Participant: Pushing with your arms

Helka: Okay

Participant: Straighten your back, sliding your hands up your legs. And straighten your back. And straighten your legs. Straighten your knees.

Participant: I think your now standing.

[Video ends]

[SD and MB laugh]

MB: It's absolutely fabulous.

SD: Though there was a sweetness to it because it was a real, genuine conversation between the two people. And a very human, uh, this movement that we have in common, that we have as people, and yet it could be shared with two different kinds of information coming into it.

MB: Yep. Um, I recently trained to, or am training to be a yoga teacher, a practice that I've done for many, many years, and you train with other people and the comedy aspect of that is as you have to start to speak the instructions, rather than showing them and your fellow teachers do exactly what you say, and you realise how phenomenally complex it is to explain to someone to place their leg back and to move into a lunge. Falling about laughing realising how bad our words are at capturing what we do with our bodies.

SD: Yeah. And then of course that's, it's, it's how bad we are but we've got an opportunity in a way through sport, through dance, through choreography, through yoga about what else can we connect to now.

MB: Yeah. Absolutely. So, my final question for you Sue. If you had to choose one single choreographic moment that holds a special place in your heart, what would it be?

SD: I think I'm cheating a bit. But I think it is actually choreography. I have learnt pretty well, to be who I am now through an attention to dance, and choreography, and movement. And it has taught me richly. And it has connected me, not only to the most wonderful artists involved in this art form, but I can speak with architects, scientists, geographers, anthropologists, visual artists, writers, and I simply need to be honest and bring this skill, this...I don't want, I don't want to say knowledge in a pretentious sense, it's just, it wells up in me, the experience that I've had through working with this art form. And it wells up in me and I can do things with it. And I've, to some extent feel that choreography and dance and movement are so ripe to enter more fully into this world, with this, a sense of our politics in a way. A sense of what we're able to achieve.

MB: Well I think if you were on *Desert Island Discs* you wouldn't be allowed to take the whole of choreography. But since that was such a fantastic answer I'm going to let that pass completely.

SD: [Laughs]

MB: Can I thank the audience for being here, and being online with us, and ask if we give Sue a round of applause.

[Applause]

SD: Thank you very much.

**Recorded live on Friday 22nd September 2017
Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, UK.**

