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Speaking and dancing at the same time: An interview with Jools Gilson-Ellis

Diana Theodores

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JGE: Prelude to the interview:

Sometimes, as a solution to something that isn't a problem to me, I might say I am a poet, because it seems to me that I am always that. Sometimes, instead of saying I am a writer and choreographer, or an interdisciplinary artist, or an artist that works across disciplines, I might say: I am a poet. Perhaps this is an inhabited poetry, one that can't behave itself enough to keep to paper, but must instead erupt into bodies, and through the wide ache of song, or inside a dirty cupboard on a dock. My poetry won't behave itself, so that I must corrupt dancing with its voice, so that dancers say to me about my work "there was a lot of text" and theatre directors say "there was more dance than I expected."

The Project, Dublin following a performance of 'The Secret Project' and The Phoenix, Exeter, UK after a performance of 'Spinstren'.

DT: Can you give a bit of background to 'The Secret Project'?

JGE: The Secret Project was developed between 1996 and 1999, during residencies at STEIM Studios, Amsterdam, the Institute for Choreography & Dance, Cork, and from 1998 through a co-production between The Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, and ICD in Ireland. We wanted to work with motion-sensing technologies in performance and develop poetic and emotional spaces in performance. The meeting of my work as a writer / choreographer with Richard Povall's design of poetic / sonic intelligent spaces had a great deal to do with this. Before making this piece we had completed a two year collaboration on the CD-ROM *mouthplace*. *The Secret Project* was our first foray into writing / movement / sound in *live* performance using new technologies. As in all our work we were interested in combining the haunting and the tender with a raucous playfulness.

DT: Can you elaborate on this notion of creating 'intelligent spaces'?

JGE: Richard and I want to make spaces that are emotionally driven, and sensitive in particular ways. We want to use these technologies to conjure ghosts, and not just any ghosts, but ones designed to be intelligent in specific ways. The term 'intelligent' used in relation to these technologies, is simply more up to date than the term 'interactive.' During the 1990s, the term 'interactive' meant that you could have some kind of relationship with this digital system; you could affect it, and (hopefully) it might affect you back. The term 'intelligent' in relation to newer systems, is intended to suggest a more nuanced relationship, - that these systems have an 'intelligence' of sorts. It doesn't mean that they're clever, because they're often not (laugh), it just means you've programmed them with a certain kind of liveliness.

DT: Your collaboration with Richard still seems a bit mysterious, a real 'secret project.' How does it actually work?

JGE: (laugh) It does? Richard is a composer and digital artist. He's makes all the sound and video, and designs the intelligent systems. I do all the writing and the choreography, but we collaborate on all aspects of the work to some degree. We've worked together for eight years, and we're both married to other people, which may be why we've continued to work together for so long!

DT: Does Richard respond to your writing? Is that where it starts?

JGE: Yes, that's often where it starts, although many of the ideas for *The Secret Project* came from working with the digital environments. *Spinstren* began with the written text. Sometimes it happens that we start with a text, and then it ends up as a section with no text at all. 'Red Top' from *Spinstren* was like that. This was a text about singing, and we both loved it, but we couldn't find a way for it to work in performance, until I finally realised that I didn't want a description of singing, I wanted singing. In the final piece 'Red Top' is a singing section, performed in an intelligent environment to make my voice / body plural. Richard and I collaborated closely on developing this. We are always interested in how bodies can be extended by technologies in unusual ways. We are not interested in technology for its own sake, only for what alchemy we might conjure with it.

DT: In his reviews of your work Michael Seaver talks about the link between the physicality of writing and dance. I'm interested in talking a bit about the notion of the choreographer as writer.

JGE: I think they have very similar processes. Writing, for me, is always a process of finding something emotionally quite crafted. I usually write and choreograph at the same time, and writing is always a physical act for me, but it's an emotionally physical act, rather than something that's danced out of me. It's a physical / aural / oral thing to me. In the process of writing, I am already uttering it, already mapping it physically. The thing that I am always interested in, is speaking and moving at the same time – the pressing of text into flesh and of flesh into text. It seems to me that in so many dance pieces, a space is made for text to happen on its own terms, rather than really wrestling with the physicality of utterance in a time of movement. Utterance is just another kind of physical gesture...What I mean is that a powerful sense of the physical body informs my writing process. Perhaps this is true of all good writers, but as a writer / choreographer, it means that this inherent fleshliness is a resource in the process of choreography. I don't only write for dancing, but I hope my writing would always move in the reader like a choreography.

DT: Do you have any particular preparations for writing? Do you create certain conditions for the kind of performance writing you do?

JGE: No. It's always happened at the same time or just before going into rehearsal... I feel like so much of the writing that I've worked on has just fallen out of me.

DT: Does the movement fall out of you in the same way that the writing falls out of you, when you're 'in the faith?'

JGE: If I am on my own it can, yes, but with others present – no, I'm more intimidated! No one can get in between my head and my computer screen, in the way that a group of dancers waiting for choreography can come between your private impulses and making them material. I've traversed so many worlds from theatre to installation work, and *The Secret Project* was the first major dance work that I made, even though I had been making performance for years. But if I let go of that fear, then yes, it does fall out of me. But because it falls, I can lose it (laugh) and I find that with voice too, with singing and harmonies, which I've been playing with more

and more. I can always make them up but never remember them ...and obviously that's the difference with writing... if you've written it - it's there.

DT: How do you remember movement?

JGE: I find it very hard. If I'm working with other dancers it's more straight forward because they remember it and they tell me what I did!

DT: Let's talk about working with dancers. At what stage did you bring Cindy (Cummings) and Mary (Nunan) into *'The Secret Project'*?

JGE: Richard and I had worked for some years on this piece before they came in. I had already performed some of the solos at various festivals in Canada and the US. I asked Cindy and Mary because I wanted to work with women who were choreographers in their own right, and who were interested in working experimentally. I loved working with them – they brought a confidence, sensitivity and sense of humour I wouldn't have found in younger dancers. One of my abiding memories of working with Mary was her voice work in Irish. This was partly a translation of one of my poems ('Out Loud') and partly improvised language developed by Mary, used in an interactive environment. This meant that Mary used her voice live, but also that her movement triggered pre-recorded samples of her voice uttering a similar pool of Irish language... It is a poem I wrote, translated by Mary into Irish, uttered by her, and choreographed by me. Mary does a 'caught butterfly' dance in the space of her own voice, fluttering inside the sound of darcahtus (darkness), and taking her series of shiver- jumps as she whispers 'puca!' (ghost)... she tangles language with movement, so that we lose a clear distinction between when she is speaking live before us, and what she spoke into a microphone months before. Presence becomes complicated. She haunts us by haunting herself into believing in ghosts.

DT: There's an extraordinary sense in this work that it is a world ordered by breath. The breath sound quite literally surrounds and envelops the audience and seems to motivate everything that happens.

JGE: The breath is like a map, it's a route into . . . it's a route into the living being of another person. I hesitate to talk about it because the only kinds of language I find available to me are overly spiritual. On the one hand, I want to use that kind of

language, and on the other I don't, because this is something quite material as well as spiritual. As movers, the movement of breath is the absolute key to wanting to watch a dancer or not. I also think it's the key to writing, often there isn't breath in writing and I know it is in mine.

DT: The work throws up a lot of questions about ways of 'hearing' and 'reading' this 'movement-soundscape.' *The Secret Project* opens in pitch blackness, and then we hear the sound of breath. It's very dramatic and of course very physical.

JGE: Yes. I often find sound, and particularly the spoken voice, more compelling than the visual. . . . You have to be separate from something to see it, but sound surrounds you. Seeing and hearing have profoundly different relationships to the body in this way. In dance we *look* at bodies, often from a distance. I want to make a hearing, a sounding, that makes us *look* at such bodies differently – a kind of architecture of listening. In feminist theory sight and looking are associated with masculinity and hearing / sound with femininity, and I want to resist such a difference, and revel in it. In 'breath,' the opening piece of *The Secret Project*, I was fascinated by trying to capture an emotional place and not making it sentimental, but also not shirking the emotional intensity of it either. I think breath work in performance is in danger of this... if it is not performed well the emotional intensity is so much that all people can do is just go 'whoa!' You need to give people space to enter into the work, and it can be a very tenuous, compelling, difficult place to which you invite them.

DT: And your work does take audiences into unexpected places. Can you talk a little about your site-specific work?

JGE: Last year I was commissioned by the National Sculpture Factory in Cork to do a site specific installation on the old docks in the city (*underbreath* 2002). The work of moving people into the site of the Bonded Warehouses and designing how they were able to look, involved developing processes of unlocking cupboards so that the audience might gaze at steel etchings of found text (the seizing of two cacti by customs officers, descriptions of how to measure the amount of brandy in a barrel etc.). This is not a profoundly different thing than moving dancers around a theatre space, and asking them to speak my poetry, Here, I move an audience, I bring them

to a space in the city that they are surprised they've not been to before. And because they must un-lock narrow cupboards from a ring of keys, they have to come very close to the building and look inside its cavities, but they will also stand back, and often wonder at the 19th century architecture; the low skirted roof above wooden struts, and the river flowing on two sides.

DT: Do you find making work for ordinary, proscenium venues limiting, given your work in performance art and installation?

JGE: Different disciplines have different languages and ways of presenting work. Dance is largely an industry based on selling 60 minutes of choreography to venues. *The Secret Project* (1999) and *Spinstren* (2002) were both pieces made for traditional theatre spaces. Both these works were made as moving pictures, framed by a (real or implied) proscenium arch, and actually, I liked this discipline. These works have to be able to tour as well, which adds other limitation to the possibilities of experimentation. What is hard, is that if you make work in different disciplines, your entire energy isn't focused on raising your profile in one of them. So, for example, when it gets to booking a tour for a dance theatre piece, our work might not be as well known as it might be, because we only make dance theatre every few years, and our other output might be installation or sound work...But most of my recent arts council funding has come through the Multi-Disciplinary route, which has resolved some of the confusion detailed above, and feels more genuinely appropriate to the kind of work I make).

JGE Postscript:

The meeting of writing and dancing in my choreography, and the performance work of half/angel is largely (but not only) through the voice. Since 2001, I have studied Roy Hart voice practices in the UK, France and elsewhere. I spent six weeks in Paris studying full-time at the beginning of 2003. I chose this particular voice practise because it is very physically based, and explores a wide range of sound making, partly through resisting the classical idea of vocal ranges. This work feels very much in process, but I have found ways to sing / sound in new physical places; I literally have 'new' voices. These are discoveries about internal and external space. Such work is a sounding cartography; a more detailed mapping of the body, and for a choreographer / dancer, this is a revelation. I am beginning to develop practices which involve moving and singing at the same time. For myself and for half/angel, we don't know where this work will lead us, but it is moving us in a new and rich direction. I heard

sounds in the studio in Paris that were unearthly, funny and chilling. I want to hear such richness from the ache of a dancer's body. I want to hear what dancing sounds like.