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UNEASY FICTIONS
Jools Gilson-Ellis

Daghdha Dance Company
Ten Thousand Steps
Limerick City Centre, Ireland
Sunday 10th June, 2001

Begin

How far is ten thousand steps? I estimate walking across my living room that six steps equals about fourteen feet. According to such mathematics, ten thousand steps would be just under four and a half miles. Is this a foolish way to measure steps - as if they were only linear? What about the dancerly notion of 'steps' as a series of gestures, turns, falls and impulses? What kind of knot would ten thousand of such 'steps' comprise? I remember from navigation that one knot equals one nautical mile per hour, but I'm not sure that helps. Mathematical musings perhaps, but the Irish dance company Daghdha recently performed a site specific work called *Ten Thousand Steps* which played with the geographies of space and place, by walking, talking and dancing us around a city, and I want to ask again; how far is *Ten Thousand Steps*?

Review

Ten Thousand Steps takes place in the oldest part of Limerick City Centre – St. Mary's Parish. We are split into three groups, and led by an actor / tour-guide around St. Mary's. At three sites, there are dance performances – one by the river, another in a concrete courtyard by Fannings Castle, and the last near the old dock at the Sandmall. I loved the ambition of this work, the gesture of working contemporary dance into the rhythm of an old community. It looked gorgeous – cream laces, Victorian lines, scarlet loud hailers, all set amongst the lanes and courtyards of the old city. I wanted to love it, but instead felt jarred by the abrupt shifts of tone. Myles Breen, our tour guide, led us around St. Mary's with the brash confidence of a vaudeville entertainer. The kids seemed to love his audience participation games ("make a sound of whinnying") but it irritated the hell out of me. When we discovered two performers in scarlet by the waterfront, their story was a melancholy one of love across the religious divide. Kasumi Takahashi and Douglas Comley wove their physical web with considerable emotional depth, framed by the river to the left of them, and a group of boys watching from above. Myles, who really would have been more at home on 'The Good Old Days' jollied us along to the next site in a state of exalted declaration. His demeanor made it difficult to meet the serious and provocative tales the performances told. Despite this, the framing of characters along Nicholas Street led us fluidly into the danced narrative of the secret sexual and emotional lives of one Limerick family in the early 1900s. Performed to the sound of an old 78 on a gramaphone beside us, this slippery saga sometimes escaped me, but it was haunting to watch, as twins and sisters and

priests moved in strange tumblings and calms. The last performance came upon us from behind in the form of two opera singers John Scott and Natasha Lohan, leading us to April 1919, when Limerick became a ten day Soviet. Whilst these narratives were compelling, the opera was another moment of clashing tone, as precious vowels sang out into the working class neighbourhood. People from St. Mary's sometimes peeped from windows, or stood at doors, but there wasn't a substantial sense of a community presence. Finally, we are taken to St. Mary's Prize Band Hall, where we are fed unpleasant hors d'oevres - I could have done with a cup of tea and a cake. Pushing around my pickled onion, I watched the last part of the afternoon - Chuma's 'In Gear' which she re-worked from last year. This is an intellectual piece, strangely heartless after the knotty narratives we've just witnessed. The audience of kids and families on old wooden chairs, were distinctly restless after twenty minutes. 'In Gear' is performed by the main company – aches and twists of duets, framed, restricted and compelled by a cube frame and a series of clocks thrown and received, cradled and abandoned. But this is not a passionate piece, not a work about love and nationality, sex and the church, or working class revolutions. It is cooler than that, and as such sits uneasily with the other works. Three hours after I picked up my ticket, I left the band hall. *Ten Thousand Steps* was something of a rag-bag of styles and intent. There were ghostly, wonderful moments, but there was also a confusion about what exactly 'site specific' meant in this work. Was it 'of' the community, or just 'in' the community? Where was the community? And what was the relationship between its disparate parts?

Stand Back

Yoshiko Chuma, a Japanese American Choreographer, has been Artistic Director of Daghdha Dance Company in Limerick, for twelve months. Daghdha is one of Ireland's oldest contemporary dance companies, and at just twelve years, this is indicative of the brevity of Ireland's contemporary dance scene. Chuma's New York background includes a series of small and large-scale site specific works. The title of the work made for St. Mary's Parish suggests something of Chuma's nomadic existence, commuting as she does between New York and Limerick. *Ten Thousand Steps* involved dancers from Canada, Japan, the US, Estonia, the UK as well as Ireland – quite the postmodern fusion of the international and the local. The scale of this fusion sometimes allowed us to glimpse another kind of Ireland. In Mary Nunan's piece 'On the Waterfront' it was both compelling and disjunctive to watch a narrative about an Irish woman, being played beside the River Shannon, by a Japanese dancer. Outside of Ireland this might seem an ordinary thing, but this country is O so new at immigration, and struggling with its own brand of racism. Similarly, in Jodi Melnick's 'At Fanning's Castle' a black British dancer played an Irish priest, from the 1910s. Quietly, I think, we witnessed something astonishing in these ordinary / extraordinary moments. Perhaps precisely because they were not commented upon – were performed as if this were a thing we had all seen in Ireland a hundred times before.

Feigning Fiction

Myles looks at us, and tells the story, but we watch the dancers. Because we are set up to read stories, we glimpse connections between the heard narrative and the flurries of touch and distance between the two dancers. The scarlet amidst greens and greys, assaults us. We hear the river too, and the steel cube becomes a frame for history, somehow caught here before us, in a story of doomed love and drownings. There is a strange quiet in the audience. We are

moved. We are moved because we think this happened here. Only afterwards, even after I write the 'review' section of this article, do I discover that this story was made up. It never happened. I feel set-up. Perhaps I've seen too many site-specific works which evolve out of the resonance of a place. I'm not sure why it bothers me so much, but it does. Playing with fiction in this way is often used as a device. Forced Entertainment used such a mix expressly in their site specific work *Nights In This City* (1995) by mixing up the practical fact of urban Sheffield as seen through a bus window (the audience were taken on a bus trip), with comments such as 'Welcome to Rome.' The difference, clearly, is that in *Nights In This City* irony is directly apparent, and the disjunction between what is visible and what is said is a theme of the work. In *Ten Thousand Steps* this was not the case. Instead, our tour guide stops at intervals to tell us what we presume are 'real' stories about Limerick castle, and other landmarks, and seamlessly introduces the fictional stories, as if they were another practical fact of the city. Interestingly, when I interviewed the writer Miriam Lohan, she spoke of using irony, of sending up a certain kind of melancholic Irish narrative – of doomed love ('On the Waterfront') and familial complexity ('At Fannings Castle'). I explained in interview that the densely complex familial saga ('At Fannings Castle'), where everyone seems to be called 'Mary' lost me. Lohan replies that this was 'devilment'. Yet such devilment fails in performance if it isn't made available to an audience, and certainly the Sunday group stood in earnest in front of the performance at Fannings Castle. There wasn't a giggle in sight.

The story I saw last was the one based on an actual event in Limerick. 'At the Sandmall' was choreographed by Chuma and Anthony Phillips. Of course, when I was watching the work, I had no idea that this was 'for real' and the others fiction. Although a compelling piece of Limerick history – a ten day Soviet, happening at the same time as the first trans-Atlantic flight arrives and departs, it was unclear what connections it had with St. Mary's Parish. My memory of this piece is dominated by those few local residents who had happened upon it – a young man leaning against a lamp post rolling a cigarette with a grin on his face, a labrador sitting watching politely, an old man 50 yards away standing at his gate. An elderly couple from St. Mary's were in this piece with their grandchildren, but they acted largely as visual props in period dress. Mostly they sat still whilst cacophanies of narrative and choreography happened around them. One of these stories would have been compelling for a ten minute piece. Instead the two together made confusions out of choreographies of flights and strikes. Dancers curved in and out of Chuma's signature metal cube, punctuated by the visual and aural declaration of red megaphones. This seemed to me to be the least integrated performance of the three outside works. Two opera singers either side of the performance riffing on 'Lim – er – ick' in trained vowels seemed awkward and out of place.

How Far?

So how far is *Ten Thousand Steps?* This work achieved a great deal in bringing contemporary dance practice out of the hallowed halls of performance venues, into the public spaces of an Irish city. There was a great sense of an 'event' on the Sunday afternoon that I saw it. The choreographies of Mary Nunan, Jodi Melnick, Yoshiko Chuma and Anthony Phillips, are skilled, playful, delicious tumbles of bodies. The dancing in this piece has its own logic, but it only meets textual stories with a side glance, like the wrong ends of magnets pushed together. In this sense, the work is less successful at meeting / integrating /

resisting its context explicitly. *Ten Thousand Steps* travels a distance, but it is a fractured journey, in which some people know the way some of the time, and others hesitate to ask the locals for directions.