

Artificial Things

GCSE Dance (8236)

Video transcript for interview with Artistic Director Lucy Bennett

<Lucy Bennett, Artistic Director>

My name is Lucy Bennett, I'm the artistic director of Stopgap Dance Company. Stopgap creates original dance productions with exceptional disabled and non-disabled dancers, we tour nationally and internationally.

What was the initial stimulus for this choreography?

The initial idea for scene three in *Artificial Things* was a bit of a day dream. It was snowing and I started to imagine what it would be like to be trapped inside a snow globe. And I thought about all of the happy scenes that you get inside a snow globe and I thought about whether we could create a sad scene within a snow globe. And I actually saw this image of Laura, one of our dancers, on a collapsed wheelchair with someone watching her from afar. And I think I thought about whether he'd just left her, if he was coming to support her or whether he was just observing.

How did you develop your ideas?

As a company we work quite collectively on the material and we say we devise it together. So I bring a lot of tasks for the dancers to explore and develop. We spend quite a lot of time improvising and filming the improvisation and picking out movements that we like and developing it. We spent a lot of time in scene three, watching the way that Laura Jones moves in her wheelchair. We found ways of echoing her details her style her rhythm. And then we would find our own translations for Laura's movement and create a kind of unison of textures we call it; where we tumble around her, creating circular patterns with her, using her movement material. In fact, I really enjoy watching that section from above, because you can see all of the tracks in the snow, of the circular patterns. We also tell a lot of stories in the company, so many personal stories are woven into the piece. And the final solo that Dave Toole does is very personal to him and that's why there's a track of music that's quite old fashioned, it's a song that his father used to sing and he always dedicates that solo to his family.

How did you approach making this dance?

So to begin with we always, at Stopgap, invite in a few like minded teachers and choreographers in to help us with the process, we call it springboard workshops. And one teacher in particular that influence the final scene was Charlie Morrissey. He's a contact improvisation based teacher and he came in for three sessions and really worked the dancers on their listening to one another and their sensitivity towards each other. And that really gave us a good foundation to launch into the choreography of scene three.

What would you say this dance work is about?

So, the audience have been through a range of emotions watching *Artificial Things* and this is the final scene. I think to begin with in scene one the audience are curious, and in scene two they're shocked and surprised and saddened. And in scene three we have to let the snow settle. It's kind of the fallout of the rock and roll in scene 2. So there's a lot of time and space within this piece. I think it's about finding a resolution, about finding a harmony. The dancers are in a state of shock and they have to rebuild and find a new way of moving forward. They do this through bring humble, learning from each other and listening to each other. I think it's a lot about memories, about the past living with you as you move forward.

How did you create and develop your movement material?

So, as well as the improvisation and the filming and working on duets and group work, we also sometimes take influence from images. And I was kind of interested in the idea of time passing but people being kind of trapped in the past or history repeating itself. And so we looked at a lot of portraits of families and different groups of people in gatherings; from the kind of Victorian period or the Edwardian period. And the dancers really looked at the facial expressions, the gait, the physicality of these people from the past. And we just created a section where we moved from image to image.

Are there any motifs or movement phrases that are essential to this work?

In scene three I wanted to reflect scene one a little bit I guess I wanted it to be an echo or an, I guess, an explanation of history repeating itself. There are some similar movements in scene three to scene one, and I wanted the audience to kind of recognise that there was a similar shape or the same shape but maybe because the dancers had been through so much, they'd been on this journey, that the way they portrayed this movement looked different as if it was more experienced. There are several kind of tumbling sequence within scene three which get repeated but maybe in a different direction or with a different person doing a different element of the dance. And within those tumbling sections there's little details from Laura's movement vocabulary; like her chin or her shoulders that you could look out for. That hook all the dancers in together so that although they've got different physicality's they're blending really nicely in the unison.

What is the structure of this dance and why did you use this structure?

The structure of scene three is quite different to the way I usually make structures actually. I usually have quite a lot of shifts in dynamics and energy within a piece, to I guess surprise the audience. And so in scene three I really wanted to challenge myself, but also as a reaction to scene one and two which have been quite boisterous. So scene three is a really slow and gradual build up to a climax. And there's lots of space in the beginning for the audience to observe and just kind of calm down after scene two. And then gradually it builds up through kind of harmonious dancing to something that's a little more lively. And then at the end it's quite poignant because Dave reminisces and we're reminded that we're haunted by our regrets.

What decisions did you make (and why) about the number and gender of dancers?

In scene three there are two females and two male dancers and they've all got different physicality's and different ranges of experience, which is something Stopgap's really interested in; in having a range of physicality's, ways of learning and perspectives on the world so that we can explore humanity I guess. Within scene one and two there are actually five dancers, there were three males and two females and I was kind of interested in the final scene, what would happen if we took a really strong presence out of scene three and how would the kind of group dynamics change with one person missing; how would they fill that kind of gap. And how they, how would the audience sense that kind of sense of loss of one of the dancers who was such a strong part of the company not being in the final scene.

What decisions did you make (and why) about staging?

It's set as a stage production, but within the stage production the design was heavily influenced by Goran Djurovic, an artist that I found during the research process that really clicked with my ideas of kind of politics and hierarchy and group dynamics. And we decided to set *Artificial Things* in an artificial world. It's kind of almost a display cabinet on stage, so there's a frame within the stage which the dancers never go in and out of and within that frame there's what we call a vitrine, which is a display cabinet which one of the dancers is in. The designer is called Anna Jones from curious space, and I work quite closely with her on lots of other projects. I really like having a design element as part of the company's work and really kind of giving the choreography we do a sense of place and sense of time.

What decisions did you make (and why) about lighting?

I was really lucky to work with a very experienced lighting designer Chahine Yavroyan. He's quite an exceptional artist so actually I shared with him the work and kind of let him do his thing. He knew that I was after a really filmic look to the work and so I know that in scene three he created lots of gradual build up of light and there are not many sharp changes and it's kind of like a warm sunrise that builds through the piece.

What decisions did you make (and why) about costume?

The costume came under Anna Jones' area and she was in charge of design. Scene three is kind of like a worn down version of scene one and scene two, they're quite ghostly figures, their costumes are quite washed out, they're quite sparse. And there's plenty of skin on show for the sidelights to just highlight so we can really see the movement material.

What decisions did you make (and why) about accompaniment?

For scene three I worked with Andy Higgs, I was really interested in his piano compositions because it reflected the first composer Chris Benstead actually. It was a really organic process working with Andy, he spent a lot of time in the studio within the creation process; observing the dancers improvising when they improvised. He used both the inside and outside of the piano which I really liked and he spent a lot of time recording kind of snowy soundscapes and also recording the paper snow that we worked with.

How did you work with the accompaniment?

Andy worked within the studio with the dancers, he watched and observed whilst they were dancing and gradually built up the composition. He worked quite closely with Dave on the solo because Dave wanted to use a track that his father used to sing. And so we got the rights for that track and then I really like the idea of this music from the past floating in on the wind. So throughout the piece you hear a gradual hint of that track, until it comes in in the final scene when Dave does his solo.

How do you want the audience to feel when watching this dance?

So I think the audience would've been on quite a big journey with scene one and scene two, so they would've followed the characters through the ups and the downs of the kind of group dynamics of the piece. When they get to scene three I think they will start to see the harmony within the group and how we can rebuild and work together; the listening and I think they will connect with that and enjoy that. I think they will find a resolution and a sense of peace towards the end of the work. But I think the final scene of kind of time moving on with the kind of ticking of the clock, and the portraits, the old fashioned portraits that we see, that sense of family and that sense of being trapped in the past. I think there is a tinge of sadness, and although we do move on and we do find a way to move on, we can't forget the things that maybe we're not happy about.

Are there any particular moments the audience should look out for?

I think I would like the audience to look out for details within the unison of how the non-disabled dancers have translated the movement material of Laura who uses a wheelchair. Just to really see that kind of harmonious unison. I think that's something we worked quite hard to achieve without us all being exactly the same shape and the same rhythm. I also think the end solo of Dave Toole's is worth looking out for. The moment when he finally takes the jacket off of the kind of headless dummy that's been in the piece the whole way through. And just trying to maybe work out what it is that Dave is saying with his solo – the story that he is telling.