A Gesture’s Worth a Thousand Words

Hello – thank you Kenan for that lovely introduction and to you all for coming here today.

Can you imagine the moment when a primitive man or woman drew the likeness of a creature on a cave wall. No drawing had ever existed before that moment. But even though they’d never seen a painting before, a powerful feeling welled up in that first artist and gave them the necessity, the urgency to use their observation of a moving creature and then still it under their hand to make an image that would last.

What shift in that person initiated their compulsion to create forms outside the immediacy of their lives? Something that could stir memory; project into the future; eventually creating a chain of experiences between one generation and another.

I picture that first drawing and feel the evidence of their energy and compulsion. I think of that first cave painter as my physical and artistic ancestor. I feel I am connected to them – we are both opened up by the complicated and sensory impact of an expression which is unattached to words. For them a painting, and for me movement.

I am both a dancer and a choreographer. These are ancient forms but their “footprints” are lost while the cave painting survives. To move people as an artist is to make a sensational but not necessarily athletic action in the present and the ephemeral nature of that action gives dance a particular and rare value. Those brief fleeting movements are the form that communicates the feeling to the observer.

My concern, is that we have lost confidence in our ability to recognise those forms – those brief movements and the feelings they create – as valuable in themselves. Instead nowadays we try to translate our experience of dance into the linear world of prose, to make verbal sense of it rather than celebrating and enjoying what makes it different from prose: the expansive three dimensional composition of movement.
Dance involves these ingredients
Firstly, actions
Created by the integrated body
Which affects and is affected by the space it is in
And also the relationships of one self to another or to many other dancers
And finally the dynamic time it takes

The richness of dance comes from the specific quality of each of those elements and how they work together.

Let’s start with the integrated body by which I mean not just our bodies but our bodies AND our minds.

We celebrate the story and the development of the mind and disengage it from the body. We’ve put the body aside as a structure we do things to. Fatten it, thin it, alter it, train it, leave it in a chair. We don’t observe or give credit to our combined intelligence and the evidence of a dynamic narrative within ourselves or one another. I think we need to be reminded that the body physically represents the time we have to live. With the body everything springs from matter, nothing else, and everything contributes to an integrated whole.

So, what does ‘the integrated body’ mean to a choreographer? To me it sums up the intelligence of our whole selves.

No one ever teaches a baby how to move, and yet from the moment a foetus is first formed it begins to learn. The baby inside the womb pushes against the belly wall and the confirmation it gets from this resistance helps it make its first judgements and record its first experiments in movement. And there is sensory feedback which tells the baby what the move felt like, what effect it had and what effect it generated. And this continues after the baby is born: no adult teaches it to roll from its back to its tummy, from lying to sitting, from sitting to crawling and so on. These are achievements which the baby makes its own. Through these
movement experiments the infant establishes its autonomy, its ability to go where it wants – to find out what it wants.

I imagine the closest I have been to that memory is when I have danced and achieved an embodied sense of my thinking. The dancers I work with now, try to capture that electrifying ‘is-ness’ which has an immediacy but also acknowledges the many layers and fragments of our experience. I am not saying that I want to limit my movement as a choreographer to the experience of a baby’s explorations, but I do want to incorporate that early intelligence that bounces movement through the mind and back into the body repeatedly.

We don’t often think about how the brain communicates with each part of ourselves through an intricate system of motor sensory nerves. Those nervous systems in turn activate the development of the cortical part of the brain; these activities produce a constant transfer and accumulation of information. This is how we have learnt to evolve and live and I don’t want DANCE of all the art forms to ditch this intelligence. Instead I want all of us to recognise dance as uniquely articulate. The integrated body demonstrates the equation where movement is an essential part of our learning and as communication, movement reveals our individual news, emotional, physical, and sensual and therefore it also betray us.

These ideas of experiencing and responding to movement are now part of how I work in the studio with the dancers. We have particular and sometimes opposing methods that we work with. It can be as simple as just moving and then we note how we experience that moving, as well as the feedback from within the dancer’s body and my observation of it. At other times we have ideas, emotions, structures, patterns that interest us and we need to find movement material that embodies them. The dancers are no longer learning to increase their movement patterns to survive, but they are learning how to extend their practice of being human.

It’s about creating choices, being able to make ever more nuanced differentiations, letting our motor output be guided by the sensory feedback it generates. That is a development of our kinaesthetic sense. That is an intelligence that wants to be shown and shared.
But while I have an obsession, a curiosity with this medium, how do I encourage and involve you the audience into appreciating the richer details of and immediacy of this art?

Well, we all have the moving body in common, and each of us has expertise in using it. I think we forget our own expertise, our own movement signature.

Just a few minutes ago, I watched you all enter into this room and even though you didn’t realise it at the time, you were all demonstrating one of the wonders of the world: You remained upright while walking and you did not fall over once.

You fought against gravity and balanced on some very small surfaces at the base of your feet. Your entire weight and height were vertically aligned and then you put yourself at risk, you thrust one heel forward, took some weight on that, shifted that weight through and onto the ball of your foot and then by raising the same heel pressed your weight through and off your toes. To start the whole process with the other foot.

You then eyed a sofa, judged your distance move towards it, turned, folded your ankle, knee and hip joints, tipping your head forward to counter balance your tail bone reaching for the seat of the sofa. Your legs took more of the strain because you had shifted from vertical balance. As you lowered yourself to the sofa the body adjusted its distribution of tension to ease yourself to a sitting position without a jolt.

And not only are these actions wonders of the world, more wondrously still you all did it differently. Not one of you looked like any other in your actions.

And those of you who did not walk, but used wheelchairs are also experts developing skills that are particular to you, judging the necessary speed, space and distance, and the power required.

Every atom of you from the top of your skull downwards was alert to the changes in your core and made sure that you kept your equilibrium both physical and mental. Your body does not do that without thinking. The connections between mind and body were working at their complex best and would have behaved even more extraordinarily if a gunshot had been fired in the room and your had been flooded with adrenalin and a primitive instinct to survive. It is at these adrenalin–filled moments that you might get a sense of
what a dancer needs to gather together to rehearse, let alone to perform. The
dancer needs to be physically observant about every move they do.

For instance, in my last piece Sarah and I had been working on observing every
day movement, and re creating it with exaggeration and more importantly
completely reordering its natural progression, so that a familiar action such as
catching and throwing a ball can be re seen.

SARAH DANCES

Dancers use all their expertise of natural human action while developing
movement that further reveals the form and feeling of human existence. Our
choice of movement material is a carefully sifted through as anyone working
with words.

Last month Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature. A newspaper
celebrated this by publishing excerpts from previous Laureates’ acceptance
speeches. Repeatedly the authors spoke of the use of language being the
winner rather than an individual author. Their compulsion was to find a
relevant accuracy and that to “misuse words was to rob thought”. I admire
that uncluttered pursuit, a clarity about human situations, thoughts and
emotions. The words can shine outside the body and on to white, white
paper.

But I have chosen dance and choreography and I too want to achieve a distinct
accuracy. A dramatic, pragmatic, rhythmic narrative. Closer to the chaos of
our body. We are the subject and the medium. There is no “other”, no book,
no instrument, no painting. Our unedited selves become the material that we
choose from. We are the stuff of our creativity.

The discipline is to pare down from all that potential and try to find the right
move at the right time in the right place. The movement must seem inevitable
and imprinted through the entire body. When I was a performer that imprint
could feel total, oceanic, as I seemed to melt into a more receptive form or I
felt squeezed through the eye of a needle becoming an essence of movement.
I have had those same sensations as a member of the audience – an essential
state that I wish to return to and use for energy, and those felt states become
part of my long unedited evolution. They leave remains in my body and they
become an important part of my library of knowledge. To use and understand
movement as a form of communication is to show a commitment to the whole of us. Movement and stillness connect me to resources I don’t want to lose, and I don’t want you to lose.

Dancers use their physical history but they also try to disconnect themselves from a predictable form of action in order to find an accurate move, a more particular rhythm or pattern, an unclichéd phrase that brings to life an intelligence to that moment in a body; or in a whole performance; to make it what it needs to be whether simple or complicated, complete and genuine, to make it felt.

I have spoken about us all having expertise within our bodies.

We also have a response to the spaces we find ourselves in. The connectedness that comes with being in a home space; the feeling of liberation when in a landscape with distant 360° horizon; the cold grey stony vastness of a cathedral space, or the claustrophobia of someone too close to you. We know that we read spaces and have a physical reaction to them.

A dancer and choreographer’s use of space is part of their work and their response to the breadth, width and height of the performance space informs their decisions about where to move in it. This is essential to how the work is done and seen.

While rehearsing, the dancers and I have spoken about the air around us as something has a physical texture even if it is transparent. It makes us think of the place we are dancing in as particular to that one work. We think of things like the temperature of the air at the edge of our skin and how that heat changes as it reaches the ends of the space or another performer. We imagine the air takes on different weights and textures as we nudge it or slice at it with torso and limbs. We displace the air and rearrange it. The dancers make a positive mark on the space’s negative. Like making a mark on a canvas the dancer’s kinaesthetic ideas organise, play with and even give feeling to the space they are animating.

There can be the emotional distance between dancers who fluctuate their moves to and away from each other describing a communication with tenderness or ferocious accuracy, magnetic or repellent force, or simply a judged distance. The dancer plays with gravity using their anatomical structure, in the same way an architect can pitch their buildings off centre.
Both dancers and architects reorganise our predisposition to being up right. Think of Libeskind Imperial War Museum North in Manchester – projecting into the sky at unusual angles.

Mostly we move vertically, eyes side by side, ears level. We are even, stable and able to meet the world efficiently. But unlike your body, your mind, if it’s anything like mine, flickers and tumbles through different layers from thought to sensation, memory to imagination, abstraction to figuration, image to clear colour. I love it that a dancer moving, manages to be alive at each of these layers. They walk, run, turn, dip, twist, turn and fold, spreading into space, retreating into the soft parts of themselves. The world is a sphere and we experiment with that spatial idea with every facing of our body.

My father often told me that timing was everything. He loved singing and took me to the Opera, he loved food and wanted me to learn to cook; he loved humour and took me to see comedians like Tommy Cooper, Ken Dodd. He loved sport but went on his own. In all of these events he told me to feel how something was timed.

But it is only recently that I have really become conscious of some of those early experiences and begun to explore the intricate impact of timing in dance. Just as cooking a slow fragrant stew has a different timing to cooking a stir fry, or timing in comedy can be the difference between a belly laugh and a wimper, timing and rhythm are essential to the choreographer’s art. At a simple level the dance lasts a certain length of time, but beyond that each piece has its own internal beats and pace and each movement has its own duration and these invisible timings are as important as the movement.

Spaces between one movement and another can also become rhythms and rhythms in dancing help define the structure of an action. Timing and phrasing of dance movement are like grammar in the written word. They shape and make legible how the observer reads the movement.

I recently made a piece in which I asked each dancer to make a portrait in movement. We tried to incorporate so many of the ideas we have concentrated on in the last few years – the ideas I’ve been outlining today. To make sure we
were distinct in what we were doing, its connection to the space it was in and the intricate timing that enlivens it.

Sarah and I can not do it justice out of context, but we are going to show part of it.

The dance is, I hope, simple in its placing; Sarah is presenting something and is conscious she is being observed even when she does not face you.
The single movements were chosen from a family of actions triggered by a text – a mixture of emotional, practical and sensual actions. These were then placed in a ‘score’, a cross between a musical score and a drawn map, and that score dictated when each action appeared and with what intensity and length it could be done. The point was to try to see if we could move as we thought.

We wanted to capture our ever-moving flicking, flipping minds; to demonstrate that our thoughts aren’t linear until we make them linear by saying them out loud, or writing them down;

We’re also trying to illustrate that our senses, memories and desires are always layered and interleaved with the day to day – doing and thinking, the practical or the habitual.

Finally we wanted to show that while we think we have a hidden private place and an outward public one, movement betrays us and it is fascinating in its betrayal.
I hope you enjoy it.

Thank you.

SARAH DANCES

Siobhan Davies