

AUSPICES: A Journey from There to Here in 21 parts

Dee Heddon

1.

How did I end up here (project managing the NRLA 30th Anniversary Catalogue)? This is a personal story that unfolds over twenty-one years. I have come of age.

2.

Amongst other things, I am an academic who specialises in the 'genre' of autobiographical performance. As such, I am suspicious of 'origin stories', since it's the benefit of hindsight(s) that allow(s) the past to be written from the present. I am suspicious of origin stories, but I rather like peddling my own. Apologies if you've already heard this one (the point about origin stories, of course, is that they are infinitely repeatable – and rewritable).

3.

So, this is where it began... A young girl from the West Coast of Scotland. Never been to the theatre. Applies to study Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow, aged 17. Goes to the theatre. A lot. Struggles to suspend her disbelief. Doesn't really 'get' the form: i.e. someone pretends to be someone else somewhere else than here (the theatre). She has to pretend to be somewhere else than here too. It's difficult.

4.

So, this is where it began... It's 1989. A lecturer (Dr. Brian Singleton) takes her class to Third Eye Centre. It's her first time. She sees a show called 'Herbarium'. It's like nothing she's seen before. This is what she (thinks she) writes in her diary on the 18th October 1989:

I went to Third Eye Centre tonight. A class outing. To see a performance, 'Herbarium', by Polish company Scene Plastyczna.

I don't know how to describe it. Bright lights. Haunting music. Figures in white, flying through space. A body emerging from a cocoon. An egg? Slow movement. Fast movement. No movement. The unveiling of unknown things. I don't know how to describe it. I don't have the words. [A note to her self from 2009: she will come to realise that she never has the words.]

The hairs in my neck rose. My breathing quickened. My heart raced. My eyes opened. Adrenaline rushed through me. I don't know what I saw. I can't decide what was before me. My thoughts flew with the flying figures, entering another place,

*and another,
and another,
places in my mind that I've never been,
soaring through my imagination.*

Exhilarated.

Breathless.

Alive.

Unable to talk. To come back. Still flying off somewhere else.

5.

So, that was where it began. She could not have known, then, that she would still be flying, all these years later.

6.

It is 1990. She returns, this time on her own, to what she now knows is called the National Review of Live Art. Look closely: there she is, sitting on the stairs of the Third Eye Centre, in front of Neil Bartlett, grinning. She is in her final year of University, writing her dissertation. It's called 'Performance Art: A Voice for the Voiceless'.

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Thanks also to Dr. A Cameron and Mr. G Gieseckam for guiding me through the material.

7.

Her dissertation is about women performance artists. She writes about Lisa Watts' 'Breadmaking', Fiona Wright's 'Bride Kicks', Anne Seagrave's 'Or Even What Leaving Was'. She interviews the artists too.

8.

This is some of what she writes in 1990 (though words fail her of course):

Breadmaking

In front of the audience is a long table. The studio door is open and Watts enters, wearing a mini-skirt, a tight top and stiletto shoes, carrying an assortment of bags. She stands behind the table, facing the audience, and places the bags on the floor. She then lifts one up, opens it and holds it upside down. Dough slowly begins to ooze out of the bag and slurp onto the table top forming a sticky, wet, malleable surface. Once this bag has been emptied, Watts proceeds to empty the two remaining bags, so that eventually the whole table is covered with a layer of thick, gooey dough. She then begins to knead it – tentatively, slowly, gently and rhythmically. The pace increases, her movements become more frantic and urgent, and finally anxious, Watts' arms are plunged in the dough, her face getting nearer with every kneading action. In apparent desperation Watts climbs frantically onto the table (shoes and all) and bends down, with back to the audience, kneading forcefully, increasing the speed continuously, so that her breathing becomes harder and faster. She kicks *[sic]* her shoes, rips the feet out of her tights, and in a frenzy lies face down in the dough, writhing about in it. She turns over, so that she is now lying on her back, and repeats the same actions. Suddenly there is a black out. Watts slides off the table and runs to the wall down stage right, throwing herself at it. She then runs to down stage left and likewise throws herself at the wall. The lights fade up. On the walls are two black strips of paper, each bearing the dough imprint of Watts. The performer exits, covered from head to toes in a layer of white gunge.

[I remember all of this as if it was just yesterday. Re-typing my/her words brings me back to my twenty-one year old self.]

9.

This is some of what Lisa said in 1990:

I like effect in a way, and I like almost controlling what people are seeing. ... Food seemed so personal. ... It didn't have the formal constraints of pencil and paper....The political content comes from something really personal. ... I just cannot accept that things are not equal. I've

never accepted it. My political feeling is still there, but it's certainly lost its edge. ... The message is about the housewife and the sex symbol.

10.

This is some of what she writes in 1990 (though words fail her of course):

Bride Kicks

In the upstage left corner of the performance space there is a white, lacy, flouncy dress, laid out neatly, with a square of white material placed at the top of it. Wright enters, wearing a white lacy vest-top, with short sleeves, and white frilly bloomers. Her hair is cropped closely into her head and she has Dr. Martin boots on.

As soon as she has entered... Wright begins to walk around in a large circle, looking directly at the audience. ... She lies on the floor and slips the white dress over her head. Then she places her head on a section of the square material, and wraps the rest of it around her head a couple of times. She stands up and it is immediately obvious that the garments denote a wedding outfit... Wright suddenly jerks her head downwards and spits. With her back to the audience she begins to make soft, gentle cooing noises, interspersed with small jumps and shuffles of her feet. The vocal noises becomes increasingly disjointed, louder and angrier; the feet movements more forceful. Wright turns to face the audience, and her cooing is once again soft and gentle. Suddenly she turns her head to the side and spits. ... She wraps the strip of material around her entire body. Writing is painted onto it... After a few minutes an image of herself is projected onto her stomach, and cannot be removed. Wright becomes more panicked, her projected image is likewise screaming (silently) as if motivated by her sheer panic and fear. With resignation she lets the dress fall again, and slowly places her hand on the image and begins to trace her fingers over it gently, tracing the contours of her face and open mouth. The projector is switched off. Wright then crosses to centre stage, and takes a piece of rope which she puts around her head. She then removes it and places it on the floor in a circle, which she steps into. Once inside it she picks up the rope and holds it between her legs. Finally, she begins to skip. And spit.

[I remember all of this as if it was just yesterday. Re-typing my/her words brings me back to my twenty-one year old self.]

11.

This is some of what Fiona said in 1990:

The character in Bride Kicks is a bride, and she just popped out of this poem about the sea. She's just a vessel for me to speak. ... The reason I probably don't look like dance is because of the way I confront the audience. I look at them, which a lot of dancers don't do. So it's going behind the varnish, the paint. ... My feminism has become less loud on the surface but much more radical inside. ... Identities always shift. Nothing is fixed. Women are very marginalized and therefore very mobile and dangerous. I use this in my work. ... I think there's a hell of a lot to be said for women not being 'nice' and presenting their darker sides. Women are presented as types, which is just another mechanism of patriarchy to 'fix' them – they're either that one, or that one, or that one. If she moves between any of those things, there's a great confusion.

... I like to think of performance art as wading into the shit – going into the argument, the debate.

12.

This is some of what she writes in 1990 (though words fail her of course):

Or Even What Leaving Was

A large video screen is in front of the audience. Anne Seagrave enters and stands to the left hand of the screen, behind a microphone. A tape recording begins:

Bang Bang
Bang Bang Shut Slam Close Shut Slam Close
Slam Bang Close
Slam Bang Shut Slam Bang Close

Variations of this are repeated rhythmically, and new words introduced, looped onto the tape recording, until the word **doorways** becomes foregrounded. The recording then gives instructions on how to open doors. The instructions are repeated frequently, and Seagrave acts out the movements. An animated sketch of a door is projected onto the video screen, appearing and disappearing repetitively. The sound tape then changes to – **a Kick to open, a shove to close** – repeating these instructions. Seagrave again enacts the movements, becoming breathless as she does so. Her breathlessness is emulated by heavy breathing on the tape, and then both Seagrave and the vocal recording rhythmically speak about the seductive nature of doors – **Press your cheeks against my side Press it hard and breathe** –

As this poem is extended to introduce other sexual allusions, an image of Seagrave appears on the screen, struggling to open the animated door... Seagrave then posits the questions: **Is this no more than an erotic dream, where the object of her desire is so ridiculously unobtainable?** A new video image is projects – **OR EVEN WHAT LEAVING WAS** – and remains for a number of seconds.

In the second section the same formula of recorded vocals, projected images and Seagrave's active involvement with both is repeated. However, the focus has shifted from doors to the physical act of leaving – the fear of leaving; the way to leave; - even what leaving was. **Leaving had elastic attached for fear of loss.** The **Bang** opening sequences is cut into the section too, so that the uncertainty of leaving is compounded by the fact that doors are shutting. Seagrave reveals that she has lost the concept of leaving, and the tape asks her questions to jog her memory. She comes to the conclusion that the door is only a metaphor for her 'mind's eye'. She requests to see what is on the other side, and feels the sensation of her approaching death – the ultimate 'leaving' and ever present 'exit'.

[I remember all of this as if it was just yesterday. Re-typing my/her words brings me back to my twenty-one year old self.]

13.

This is some of what Anne said in 1990:

This piece is about the sort of energy needed to get one step beyond, which is an immense feminist issue....

14.

We can surmise from all this writing and thinking that she did in 1990 (when, coincidentally, Glasgow was also European City of Culture), that her journey had not only well and truly begun but had gathered momentum.

15.

By 1999, the 12,000 word undergraduate dissertation had become a 90,000 word PhD thesis: 'In search of the subject: Locating the shifting politics of women's performance art' and she had become a Dr.

16.

She attended the NRLA 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009...

17.

In 2005 she was a participant in the NRLA Goat Island Winter School. That year, she also moved back to Glasgow and joined the Board of New Moves International.

18.

In 2006, she published a book on devised performance, writing about Goat Island, Forced Entertainment, the People Show, and Third Angel, amongst others. She also curated an NRLA talk, 'Sited Recited'.

19.

In 2008 she was a participant in the NRLA Marilyn Arsem Winter School (where she held a fallen tree on her back for 2 hours). She began to think seriously about performance, trees and forests. She also published a book on autobiographical performance.

20.

In 2009 she project managed this Catalogue.

This is how she ended up here. This is a personal story that unfolds over twenty-one years. She has come of age.

21.

But I know better; the personal is never singular. Life stories depend wholly on others and this particular story of my life, growing older and growing up with the NRLA, is indebted to many, many others.

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