



Ruth Pethybridge

Five Songs: more than a metaphor

What is the connection between dancing on a rooftop and the elderly in care settings?
Dance Artist **Ruth Pethybridge** reveals a recent work by choreographer Angela Praed



Above top: Symon Wheelhouse. Photo: Steve Tanner

Above: Tee Jay Randall and Laura Martin. Photo: Steve Tanner

It may seem like a tenuous link but for choreographer Angela Praed it was visiting the elderly in care settings and seeing the complete removal of risk from their lives that inspired her dance installation: Five Songs on the Rooftops.

When I first came across Five Songs it was in one of Angela's classes. I learnt some of the movement material in a sports hall, far removed from its intended setting. Even then it had a kind of clarity and simplicity that allowed me to be fully present in the movement. The emphasis was on presence and intensity rather than dexterity and technique, which meant that it was accessible to the wide range of performers that took part in this remarkable event. This movement stood on its own and yet was always designed to be placed in the most extraordinary of settings – the rooftops of Truro, Cornwall. To rehearse it in situ beforehand was impossible so all we had to take us there was our imaginations.

This article looks at Five Songs on the Rooftops, which took place on 12th June 2010, through my eyes as a performer, the artist who conceived of it: Angela Praed, and responses to it. I will also suggest that Five Songs raises important questions about how we view and experience art through the notion of 'relational aesthetics' as defined by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud.

Despite its extraordinary setting, >



Above left: Sally Robbins. Photo: Steve Tanner. Above right: Ruth Pethybridge and Demelza Rouncefield. Photo: Steve Tanner

Five songs was not a ‘spectacular’ show. It was a quiet performance of duration, one that challenged performers to find a new definition of what it meant to perform. It meant embracing challenges of feeling cold, of disengaging, of losing our place in the score, of performing to no-one but seagulls. It also gave the chance to find something new in each repetition and to go deeper into the material each time.

Performers are often used to experiencing ‘being seen’, framed by a very particular space and engaging with an audience who have come to see the work specifically. Angela said that it appeared there was almost an anxiety about whether anyone could in fact see us when the day finally came, about who we were actually performing to (apart from the seagulls). Audience members were free to become so for as little, or as long, as they chose.

What is more, Dancers were placed on rooftops where they were partially obscured, or too far away from the edge to be seen throughout. Rather than lessening the impact of the piece, Angela points out that this meant there were “observers in places and angles no dancer or choreographer could perceive or pamper to.”

Because of this, there was a wonderful element of surprise that Five Songs elicited. Angela had made a clear decision beforehand not to publicise the event and so apart from a few whispers on the wind, people were genuinely surprised, bemused and delighted to stumble across this

vision of people on high. Bourriaud states that “art is a state of encounter” which the dictionary defines as “an unexpected or casual meeting with someone or something”. This performance was not what Bourriaud refers to as a convivial ‘contract’ or agreement (1) between performers and spectators to come to a certain place at a certain time, to a place with an embedded set of theatrical and social conventions. Instead, it offered moments of exchange between performer and observer and between performers and their physical surroundings. There were points at which I felt like I was the one doing the watching, as someone unaware of my presence carried on with their daily tasks below. Rather than vulnerability, I felt a sense of omnipotence and power as I guided their pathway with my hands from up above. I also sensed what it must be like to be invisible to the world.

Despite the illusion of invisibility and struggling to maintain our presence at times - how do you project your energy from 300ft? - lots of people did notice us. It certainly reminded people to look up and see the sky as they ploughed on through their Saturday shopping. It interrupted something mundane and turned it into a question. What are they doing there? Who are they? What is it all about?

One dancer (Karen Lawrence) reflected on this:

“Chatting with the passers by was enlightening. Responses ranged from ‘jumper eh!’ through to ‘what’s this?’ to a long conversation with a lady who

said that it’d given her a moment of peace after many bereavements, seeing us up there confirmed for her that her relations were still with her that there is a magic to living we all too often ignore, and sod it if her husband thought she was bonkers!”

For Bourriaud, art is “judged on the symbolic value of the world it suggests to us.” (2). This passer by noticed how it made her reflect on the possibility of a world beyond her immediate surroundings.

The health and safety precautions were of course a huge consideration for an event like this. They impacted both on our positioning and our ability to perform the movement as we had rehearsed it. Angela admits to feeling frustrated at times with this:

“What I realised during the event was I had to trust the duration would have an effect, the accumulation of people across the city and that I had intended to let this sit alongside the city’s day. I have to admit at times I felt ‘they’re too far back’, ‘I want them on the very edge’ but this tug and desire is the essence of the five songs project.”

This ‘tug’ was felt in a very real way for the dancers in the form of yellow and black safety harnesses. The question of risk central to the piece also became central to the logistics, much to the disappointment of many of the dancers involved. It was not that all risk was taken away, but aesthetically the harnesses bound us to a specific place and made the movement that I had previously experienced as sublime, at times feel



Above left: Jo Tagney. Photo: Belinda Whiting. Above right: Sebastian. Photo: Steve Tanner

clumsy and awkward.

By removing risk from our lives we too become bound. Hence the concerns of the piece were embodied in its material conditions for being. The harnesses were not just health and safety equipment, they were a metaphor for how we think about art, the risk the artist is willing to take, or how far the dancer is prepared to push their body. What's more, they reminded us how ideas meant to protect, like 'care' and 'safety', can also constrain.

Angela reflects on this:

"I have to admit I was surprised when the health and safety team brought out the full body black and yellow suspension harness. We had agreed a much more subtle restraint harness around the groin and to be as subtle as possible! But as I watched the dancer harnessed to the hilt, held back two feet from the edge looking perplexed and slightly ridiculous shackled to a rope over the bird wires with two minders standing by I thought, 'This is it. This is exactly the point!'"

This work forced us as performers to look at our own relationship with risk, although I was disappointed by the restraints of the harness, I was also grateful for them. Health and safety protocol saves plenty of lives but it is important to also ask where does this protocol end and our own responsibility for our bodies begin? For the elderly in a care setting too, this question is paramount. Risk taking is part of what it means to be human, as children we would never learn to walk

if we didn't take the risk of falling over and as dancers moving and making we continue to embrace this risk daily.

For Angela this 'shackling' took her back to the inspiration for the piece as she watched the dancers struggle to accept it... or not. She reflects:

"I watched dancers accept the shackling, I saw the frustration at being held significantly from the edge, I felt the tension between minder and mover. It took me full circle to the care setting from which this material had grown. But here the bodies involved had the physical power to fight back and make choices. I witnessed the sneaky letting out of rope, the increased pulling on the harnesses, the moving out of the demarked areas to the edge and eventually the dancer reclaiming the body and removing the harness altogether."

The resonance with angels was inevitable as we stood on those rooftops and indeed was an image that Angela had mentioned. Seeing the world from that perspective certainly gave me the chance to engage with people who I would never normally cross paths with (perhaps because I would choose not to) but from up there I felt safe in the distance and able to see everyone's common humanity. As one of my fellow dancers Jo Tagney commented, she felt she saw the best in everyone. Isn't that an angel's job?

This reminds me of Bourriaud's notion that:

"...through little gestures, art is like an angelic program, a set of tasks carried out beside or beneath the real

economic system, so as to patiently restitch the relational fabric". (3)

Perhaps 'restitching the relational fabric' is the only way that we can develop more inclusive, healthy ways of caring for each other in later life; without removing the element of risk that keeps us in touch with the essence of what it means to be alive.

There is no way of knowing the huge variety of responses that this performance inspired. Perhaps the way we measure its impact or effect is less easy to manage as there is no group of people neatly housed in a theatre that could be called our 'audience'. Rather, there is an accumulation of very distinct encounters throughout the course of the day.

Angela saw this work as a shift in perspective for her too. Her choreography in the past has sought to deeply engage viewers emotionally in intimate settings.

Instead, in *Five Songs* she let go of a lot of control and gave it over to the public. In so doing she took her own risks and gave an immeasurable gift, reminding us to take risks in our own lives and performances, whatever our age. The dance became so much more than a metaphor.

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References

(1) page 29, (2) page 18, (3) page 36. Bourriaud, N. *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presse du Reel, 1998