

Earthfall



Earthfall are one of Wales' leading physical theatre companies, intent on readdressing the relationship that exists between performer and audience. Penny Simpson talks to Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen, co-directors of this dynamic company.

Explorations into movement, text and image are conducted by an eclectic range of performers, from trained visual artists to indie musicians. Their work has translated on to the film screen and on to CD, but its roots lie in experiments to push the boundaries of the physical world their performers inhabit, allowing for the impact that can be made between personal history and a show's themes.

"We describe it as a cross-art performance style," explains Jim Ennis, who is co-director of the company with his partner Jessica Cohen.

"It involves theatre, dance, sound and installation, all means to draw in an audience emotionally and physically often in surprising new ways. We find that many people attending our shows are from a non-dance background, drawn by the element of experimentation that speaks a language not limited to a learnt technique or form of notation, which they can find alienating."

"The idea is to let the personal history of company members shape the performances and so move across geographical and linguistic divides."

i and i, for example, saw the macrocosm of world politics brought into a room shared by four people. It premiered on the borders of a country torn apart by civil war and it was created inside a sculpture made by American artist David Kalan. Company members brought their own experiences into a complex story of human relationships, torn between violence and tenderness. *forever and ever* went a stage further and built on the story of Brazilian dancer Margarida Morini, whose friend was arrested and tortured by the 1970's military regime.

"We build up our shows on two key elements: improvisations and provocations," adds Jessica Cohen.

"Provocations are bait for performer, director and ultimately the audience. In *i and i*, for example, there was Kalan's ambiguous sculpture - was the male figure dead or alive?"

"The first phase of a rehearsal is the time to introduce new company members to the style of movement developed by us over the years. We want to use movements that are not dictated by tradition, but allow for confrontation and a lower centre of gravity - literally earthbound. If someone has not trained in dance, we don't want to mould them to a particular vocabulary of movement. We try and incorporate instead the idiosyncrasies of their own way of moving into the performances."

Another key element is the use of live music in their shows. There are always at least two musicians involved in their performances - quite literally moving physically amongst the dancers, or actors. In the past, performances have featured a staggering array of instruments - bagpipes, sax, clarinet, and barrel organs.

More recently, the company have begun collaborating with film makers on new projects. This has enabled them to introduce performers from across the generations - from five years old to eighty - as well as take further their innovative reinterpretations of personal histories. Colleagues span former painters, nightclub bouncers, coal miners, as well as BAFTA award winning composer John Rea.

"The thing about our works is that we personalise them, whatever the setting," adds Jim Ennis.

"We bring them to a level which is relatable to anyone, whether it's in Aberystwyth, or Amsterdam. Ultimately, they're all to do with human relationships."