

Edited transcript of Salon Evening with Jonathan Burrows.

Liz Aggiss. I wanted Jonathan to come, because I met him in Findhorn (Scotland) on a course for people who did not know why they were in dance any more, and Jonathan mentored this event. It was a fantastic week where I met a lot of dispossessed dance artists. I thought this was a good opportunity to bring him over - he has recently moved to Belgium. I gave him a rough brief but I think that we can be as loose and as flexible as possible.

Jonathan Burrows. The interests and prejudices that I have are entirely coincidental to do with who I am and what I have fallen into, and things that have worked and things that have not. One of the reasons that I like doing things like the Findhorn event, or talks like this, is that I feel that we have moved into a period of time in dance where we appear to be holding onto our own positions slightly less. There seems to be a possibility to hear about what other people do, and not feel that what you do is threatened. For me, this was not always the case. When I was wondering what we might talk about tonight, I did reflect that some of the ways in which I think have been borne out of the feeling that I have to fight for my corner, but now I do things like this because I enjoy hearing where other people are coming from in relation to where I feel I am coming from. So if at any time anyone wants to say anything, then this is only more interesting for me.

Mainly, I was going to say a little bit about the context of what I've done and the kind of things that I am working on now, but also a little bit about how my work is set up, because in all the workshops that I am leading with other choreographers, we seem to spend a lot of time talking about how we survive and what possible modes of production there are and modes of distribution for the thing that we do. I thought that I might touch upon that because I have fallen into a very particular way of doing things.

To begin at the beginning, I suppose the obvious thing that is unusual about me, is that I was a member of The Royal Ballet, and I was there for 13 years. I used to feel a certain shame about that because it's a long time to spend in such an institution, but I'm just getting to the point now where I can admit that there were reasons, other than financial reasons, why I was there for 13 years - I liked the job. I liked aspects of that kind of performance. I didn't see myself as a very good ballet dancer and nor did The Royal Ballet. They were looking for new choreographers at that time so they gave me a contract as an apprentice choreographer, and it took me many years to realise that this encouragement to choreograph was a mixed blessing. On the one hand it led me to where I am now. On the other hand to some extent within the school this suggesting of other approaches was the kind of thing they did when they didn't know what else to do with you. The Director of The Royal Ballet at that time was Norman Morrice, and his invitation was serious and he was always supportive, but nothing like that had happened before so most of the staff understandably didn't know what to do with me, so I ended up at first carrying spears. They wouldn't let me into a pair of tights.

I think that I felt frustrated by not being able to define who I was as a mover, and I think that's what drew me towards contemporary dance, because I found there an environment that would accept and nurture how I did move. Which wasn't easy because I did experience a lot of prejudice as a ballet dancer going into the contemporary dance world,

not least because the women's movement was very strong in those days and pointe shoes and the representation of women in ballet was something that was a politically hot potato.

But I was lucky to fall in with the beginning of Riverside Studios in London, and I became a volunteer ticket-tearer when I was a student and that introduced me to the first generation of Judson Church artists who came over to the UK. The earliest thing I saw was Douglas Dunn, who in a way has slipped slightly out of the radar, but he opened the first ever Dance Umbrella. It was a piece called *Gestures in Red*, which was silent and I think it must have been about 40 minutes. I remember that he started out lying down, and he lay down for a while and then he pushed himself around on his back by his feet, and this all took about 10 minutes. Then he slowly got up and people were leaving in droves. This one man shouted out 'this is an insult to my intelligence' and of course, I thought it was the most intelligent thing that I had ever seen and I was thrilled by it. It was the first time I had seen someone move wearing their own body and not a body acquired from somebody else. Now its odd because Douglas Dunn at that time probably wore a Merce Cunningham body, but I don't think I realised that. When I was with Liz doing this workshop at Findhorn, we did this exercise to write down an important piece and why it was important, and it made me reflect that I think that every piece that I have made ever since has been an attempt to recreate *Gestures in Red* by Douglas Dunn. I think its the blueprint in my mind. I even wrote him a letter recently to ask him if he had a copy of a video because I thought it was time that I watched it, but he never replied.

Liz. You might be disappointed (if you watched the piece again).

Jonathan. Yes, its true. I listened to *Tubular Bells* last night. (laughter)

Scott. Were you disappointed?

Jonathan. The beginning is astonishing and the end of the first side is brilliant, but there's a lot of prog-rock noodling that you forget about.

Scott. I was wondering if a dancer who leaves the Cunningham company in the late 60's early 70's is different to a Cunningham dancer who leaves the company in 2008 in terms of their relationship to their body and their relationship to technique?

Jonathan. The remarkable thing about Cunningham is, if you look at Pina Bausch's company or William Forsythe's company, its very hard for artists that leave them to define themselves as choreographers. Yet Cunningham has facilitated a passage for many people who went on to make extraordinary work of their own. I'm not quite sure why that is.

Scott. Is that still true?

Jonathan. I'm not sure.

When I was at Riverside I also met with Rosemary Butcher, and the strange thing is that I also performed for Rosemary Butcher over a period of 13 years. It's that balance that keeps me sane. I had this very strange experience last week, because for the first time ever I am revisiting a piece that I made 10 years ago called *The Stop Quartet*. I have been rather terrified because Henry Montes, who performed it with me, bullied me into saying I would perform it, and I said "but I am 48 and much fatter than I was and much less fit than

I was and I really don't want to do it". Its not how I want to live any more. He said "well, I won't do it if you don't do it" and I panicked because I wasn't sure I could remember it without his help, because the piece was about his physicality. Foolishly, I said I would do it and since then I've been waking up in a cold sweat at night. Finally, I worked on some of the material from it and was astonished to find it was quite kind to my body. I suddenly realised that there's a large part of me that belongs to a certain period of time of moving in England, which is about soft forms, which was influenced by the work and workshops of that generation. Judson people and X6. I never think of myself of moving like that but when I went back into this piece and I could feel the very benign influence of that way of approaching the body, and I realised that I've push it away because I thought it was a spent force for me. Perhaps I couldn't find ways to work with it. So it made me reflect about the time that I spent working with Rosemary Butcher, because although her work can't be defined in those terms and has moved always somewhere new, at the time I worked with her we did move a lot in that way.

The only sensible thing that I could say about the work with Rosemary was that the last piece I did with her was Scan in 1999, and I remember having a conversation with her after the premiere and I said "We've been working together a long time, and I just want to say that I have absolutely no idea what you do". I don't know how she works - its a complete and utter mystery, which I think is why I managed to hang on in there - I was waiting for clues, but after Scan I realised they were never going to come.

She laughs because after practically every piece I go backstage and say "that was the best piece you ever made". And the solos that she made recently with the repetition - I thought this work was astonishing. It bore no resemblance to anything that I knew of any of the work that I had done for 13 years. But the influence of Rosemary's work on my own work is utterly invisible to me. I think it must be very strong, but I don't know in what way and I don't want to know.

Having described this softer body and improvised body - I am the world's worst improviser, but with Rosemary I had to do quite a lot of improvising....

Charlie. Why do you think you are the world's worst improviser?

Jonathan. Because if I'm in a situation of having to improvise, I now walk on stage and blush - I feel completely paralysed with fear, and at this moment I can't get over it. I made in 2000 a wholly improvised piece which I could cope with, but on the whole it is not a mechanism or methodology for performance which has ever treated me kindly, much to my enormous frustration. Its a self-consciousness thing - I used to fight it and I've given up now, and I just think its my personality.

Scott. I might think that there is an interesting measure in what you described of walking on stage and finding yourself in that circumstance. I might think, perhaps somewhat perversely, that there's a value in that.

Jonathan. I think there is. It furnished me with a principle for performance that has been extremely liberating, and it happened after the first time I walked on stage and I blushed - it was about 4 or 5 years ago and I thought - this is ridiculous, I'm 43, I've been on stage since I was 17, and I'm now having this sudden rush of self-consciousness. So I came up with a performance principle to cope with it and its called "if you feel self conscious,

become more self conscious' and I'm loving that, and it's become very useful in all of the performance that I do.

When I met Kevin Volans, the composer, it was through Matteo Fargion. It was at a point when I had made some choreography, I had made a few pieces that seemed to work. I now witness this in younger artists and I think I've got it figured out. There's this funny thing where it just all falls into place and you don't think you're doing anything. But actually you've spent 25 years researching this first piece, and it's full of everything that you've ever liked, and all the structures and techniques and tricks of every film and piece of music and dance and play and book that you've read, and you are in the privileged position that at this moment they are invisible to you, so that you can work with your hands empty and get a full bowl. Then a presenter in Bruges takes an interest in you, and says you must come and you can work in this studio for two months and I'll give you 30,000 euros and make another performance, and then you get completely lost because you try to do in two months what it took you 25 years to do the year before. It's second album syndrome.

So I had a moment like this, and I thought - I need to train. I need to study. I studied how to be a dancer and I don't know how to be a choreographer. So Matteo said to me "Why don't you ask Kevin if you can study with him?", and I said "He's a composer", and he said "Well, it doesn't matter". So I wrote him a letter to ask if I could study with him. I saw the letter afterwards - it was very precocious - it said "I think I have found my own style, but I don't know how to structure things". And he was fantastic because he wrote a letter back and said "Yes, you can come, but the first thing that you need to know is that I want you to forget everything about style."

The interesting thing about working with Kevin was that he really taught composition. He made me analyse scores of everything from Chopin to Stockhausen (who he had been an assistant of). Reading a lot - watching a lot of dance videos and analysing them from a compositional position. And I think it tickled something in me, which is to do with my personality and the way that I think, and its given me a lot of fuel for everything that I've done since. I've made a virtue of squeezing dance falsely into the framework of music, which is extremely limiting to my own art-form - I know this - but it gives me a focus where I have to struggle to make it work, and by squeezing it through the wrong hole, it comes out a different shape all the time and this I find exciting. I don't know if I could make another kind of work, but at the moment I'm not bored with making that kind of work. It's not necessarily an indication of what interests me - I'm interested in many other kinds of working - but I think I've accepted for myself that I think its OK to go in the direction of what you can do rather than feel disappointed if there is something that you want to do and you are not able to do. I still have a fantasy that I would like to choreograph a ballet. But I really struggle - I have no feel for the way that ballet is put together, and I have to accept that.

There were two important things that I got from Kevin Volans. They are very simple dictums, but they have furnished me with endless possibility. The first one is this -

Not only must things change, but the rate at which they change must also change.

I'm going to show you a fragment of Steve Martin performing, Its the best possible example of this. It is certainly not always true, because things that don't change are fabulous, but its a tool for noticing when the balance of things becomes too even and everything has a similar pace and lasts a similar length. I think in dance it takes us a long

time to figure something out physically, and so we want to use it well, and then we use everything we make well and then everything has a similar duration, and it gets dull. So Kevin encouraged me to sometimes be fragmentary and then to make something last a lot longer than it should. It's a play with proportion that I find endlessly fascinating. And it has a sister concept, which is -

Things that are predictable must be both predictable and unpredictable, and things that are unpredictable must be both unpredictable and predictable.

Which is just a way of noticing that if I make everything unpredictable, it becomes predictable, so if I do something that is also predictable in the midst of the unpredictability, then you don't know what I'm doing and you want to know what happens next - it becomes unpredictable again. And this wondering what might happen next stands in the absence of narrative, it becomes a kind of narrative.

SHOWS STEVE MARTIN - *The Great Flydini*
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgihOXdWPu4>)

What I love is that the eggs that come out first are the least interesting material, but he brings three out one after the next, so it builds this expectation. Then the next thing is the cigarette, which is fabulous material and then he dares to go back to the egg. It would be clever if he just did it once more and then the next gag, but he goes back into the loop of repetition. So it goes three eggs - cigarette - two eggs, and then the phone rings. The phone is the best material so far, but it gets even better when the woman comes in, and then you get the cherry on the cake of the gag when he answers the phone again and gives it to her.

The idea that the rate of change must change can be a very dry thought, so I was so delighted when I stumbled across this sketch by Steve Martin. To find something that I recognised to be the play with proportion that I love to do, but it's a comedian doing it in a completely different context - it's obviously something that's out there anyway.

It is interesting to dissect where you come from, and I'm sure that everybody has as many different strands as I do, some of which they are able to recognise and respect and some of which probably need to be buried, but which do their work as strongly.. The other thing that I like about Steve Martin - there is something very disciplined about the trick of the one arm and the beautiful way in which he executes it - I've liked showing this in workshops because I know that, as dancers, the technique that we have is both a blessing and a curse. It gives us an enormous range but it also affects the way that we think about movement. It imprints upon us in a way that makes us want to escape from it in order to conceive of something different than the thing that we are full of. And there you have this guy very beautifully using a technique, but at the same time his performance is spontaneous and virtuosic. He's playing innocent of what's going on and is reacting to it, but is also letting us know that he knows that we know that he's not innocent. So I love this clash of the very technical, and the very intelligent in the performance attitude, and that is something that I've become increasingly interested in.

But the root of an attitude to performance that I've been engaged with for a long time comes from Morris dancing. Morris dancing is a laughing stock within English culture sometimes for very good reason. I've been round the fringes of Morris dancing for a long

time, and a lot of it is accountants playing Merrie England, and doing it with a huge lack of grace. But I was lucky, because at the Royal Ballet School, Dame Ninette de Valois had this very interesting but bizarre idea, that if she was to forge an English style of ballet, then the pupils at the Royal Ballet School must learn English folk dancing. The school were very fortunate to find two men - Ron Smedley and Bob Parker - they are both 80 now, and they taught the Morris dancing. When I was 14, they took us to a village near Oxford (Bampton) to dance with the boys team. Bampton is one of the six Morris teams which have never stopped dancing, except briefly for the period of the First World War. They only dance once a year on Whit Monday, and they only have a few rehearsals in the weeks before. They don't dance at any other time. which is a attitude towards production that I like very much. I go every Whit Monday to see them and I've got a bit of video of the two musicians dancing. They have a performance approach that is absolutely particular. They are performing and they are conscious of performing, but they have an attitude that very clearly tells us that they would do this whether we were there or not, and it is very important that they communicate that to us. They invite our gaze, but they also invite us to know that they don't need our gaze. That doesn't cut them off from us as an audience, but it liberates them towards a kind of performance which goes quite far without wearing the nature of its performance on its sleeve. Its something that I have tried endlessly to find in my own work .

SHOWS THE CLIP.

What are the questions I am asking myself at this time? I think they are something like - *how can I move and how can I make something?* Although *how can I move* has been slightly replaced for me by *how can I perform*.

The Stop Quartet was a meeting of this very compositional way of working, working with counterpoint, and trying to find ways to perform that had something of the qualities of those two musicians from Bampton Morris. The counterpoint is something that I've been obsessed by for 10 years. If I am trying to share time very intricately and intimately with someone else, I experience this freedom that I don't experience anywhere else, because I lose sense of myself. I have a friend that is a percussionist called Robyn Schulkowsky, and she put it this way - she said, "I have to be completely in it, and at the same time I have to give it completely away to the person next to me". And that's the thing that I have come to love. Some people watch what I do and think it has to be completely restrictive, because we have to count and we have to read scores, but for me I have discovered this ability to lose self. It doesn't happen all the time, but it happens some of the time. In the pieces with Matteo in particular, the more we perform them the more we can do it, so I can forget what I'm doing and can be laughing because Matteo's gone wrong, and still be in the midst of a very complex interlocking pattern.

I have begun also to be interested in identifying certain principles for each performance. I wanted something that would gently give freedom in the direction of how I wanted to perform, but at the same time would give me some boundaries. It would not stop me going over the boundaries, but would let me know where I was.

The first principle for recent performances is ***how I feel is how I behave***. This one I've used a long time, and its the idea that if something makes me laugh, I can laugh. If I feel irritated, its OK to feel irritated. If I feel self-conscious, I can be self conscious. If someone walks out, I can watch them walk out. And this gradually led to these stepping stones -

There are no mistakes is one, which Matteo and I hang onto very strongly. We are making very complex choreographies, and we are frightened of going wrong. The first time we performed *Both Sitting Duet* - Matteo describes how he didn't breathe for 10 minutes, because we thought if we lose each other - that's it.

Eventually we did go wrong, inevitably and then we found that the body is much quicker than the mind. Our bodies just went on doing it, and we went wrong in so many ways and we realised that it didn't matter. The second piece - *The Quiet Dance*, where we walk up and down moaning - it's completely illogical and there are no clues as to what's coming next. We were performing it and we both realised we were on the wrong side, and it dawned on us that we had turned the piece around, and we had made the front the back and that we had to turn it back around without letting the audience know. We did it.

The tricky thing is that now we get a little worried that we go too Rock and Roll that we care too little about how it goes, so we have to find other things. Because at the heart of all these performance principles is a desire to be natural, and I deeply suspect this desire - its about wanting authenticity. Recently we didn't get a response from an audience that we expected to get a stronger response from and we were in crisis. Matteo said "we just keep on doing what we do". I said "I think you're right, but it makes me too unhappy. I just would rather not do it at all, rather than continue, if nobody is liking it." So I wanted to add a new principle which is ***we can fake it if we want***. The irony is as soon as we fake it it becomes natural again, and whilst we try to hold onto the natural, it's very fake. We never rehearse, we only discuss like this before every performance - what is this context? what will this audience expect?

The question now for me is that in the last piece we allowed language in. I've been teaching workshops with Adrian Heathfield, and he said "now you have let language in the problem is that you can't push it back out again". Language works so extremely well for what you want it to do, that once you've allowed it its quite hard to countenance what to do without it, but I'm not sure that I want to use it any more. We used it as sound, in a sense, but somehow, tied up in that is that I want it to be valid that I just dance - and yet I find it extremely hard to find the validity in it. I have to invent all sorts of strategies for myself. It feels like something exhausted - but I keep reflecting back on the pieces that are danced which have needed nothing else. I'm finding it very hard to trust the ground under my feet in that respect. I see a generation of young people who are so phenomenal physically, that I slightly lose interest. I blame William Forsythe in a way, because think he upped the anti - I saw the Forsythe company two weeks ago, and the physicality was just mind blowing,. At the same time it made me think I wanted to see Steve Paxton again, struggle in *The English Suites* with his own body - the fact that I could see this 20 years of work written in his body and that it wasn't easy, and that he wasn't resolving everything - in a way it was more interesting to me.

Is it enough that I get up and dance for you? I find myself all the time questioning. Its not that I doubt it on any level, its just that it is doubting itself in my presence.

Jonathan Swain. I am interested in when your systems break down ...

Jonathan. If the thing is too easy or if we master it too quickly, both in body and mind and the body-mind, then it gets a bit flat. Then we always top it up with another layer of complexity. There is a bit in *Speaking Dance* - Matteo is playing the medlodica quite badly

and I am shouting "Big Big Small", he is playing an Italian folk song that he has just sung and he has a structural game where he turns it all around, So that is the first process. I am shouting "Big Big Small" but its 2 words on a loop of three - so this is a silly loop that I have played for 14 years - it's in every piece that I do. The effect that this structure has on the performance of this material is that I can do it with huge gusto but I don't have to perform it, because then it would seem that I was trying to be absurd. Actually I am lost deep within structures that are crossing over, which happen to involve me shouting "Big Big Small" with gusto. Its like a mantra. You repeat the words of a mantra in order to forget self, because there is a focus which allows you to be free.

The difficulty being that, as we discover how it works, we constantly have to re-approach it. Because we know too much - we will eventually have to stop because we will know too much and we have to go back to empty hands as it were.

Scott. I want to ask about that notion - the question is about improvisation. If you know too much or if something worked for the last couple of performances and if you become attached to it, how does change occur in these circumstances? And what is the value of change? And then I want to throw the word improvisation in there as a value - or, what is the notion of stasis?

Jonathan. In order for me to go forward, it is not about reinventing myself but reinvesting in myself. I was recently looking through old notebooks, and I found a notebook filled with exactly the same writing that ended up in the piece that "Big Big Small" is in, which I had no memory of writing it at all. So in trying to decide how to begin, my first thought is what have I put aside that I didn't know what to do with. So I go digging around, rather than trying to think, what could I do that I don't know how to do. I have only been able to do something new if I collaborate with a new person, but I am very aware that there are not many people that you can collaborate with in the world - the idea that it is something that you can learn is a complete fallacy. You can either collaborate with somebody, or you can't, and it is about having somebody that you can establish a relationship with where you don't have to agree. That is the only place where I have found new energy. Change, for me, seems to come from opening up behind, in order to go forward. I like that idea, the idea of challenging the thought that I have to be creative. I think, deep down, I have never felt very creative, and I have always felt a bit awkward about that. I don't really have ideas. I just enjoy working, so this liberates me from the thought that I have to have an idea.

Scott. What comes to mind is Cage and Cunningham, and chance procedures as a way to remove that predicament of being an individual, and having an ego, and having values. It's a way to get yourself out of the way.

Jonathan. I've got a fantastic quote from Cage - he said this to Barnett Newman, the painter - he said "When you are working, everybody is in your studio - the past, your friends, the art world, and above all your own ideas - all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave."

It's leaving in order to be more present in some way.

My current definition for choreography is - choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice. I like the idea of making a dumb choice, but not making a choice is also a choice.

I will read you one more thing from the painter Gerhard Richter - this is from his notebook - he is talking about how he would go about something, in comparison with what it actually is which is the heart of it. He says "What shall I paint? How shall I paint? What is the hardest thing because it is the essence. How is easy by comparison. To start off with the how is frivolous but legitimate. Apply the how and thus use the requirements of technique - the material and physical possibilities in order to realise the intention. The intention - to invent nothing, no idea, no composition, no object, no form. And to receive everything - composition, object, form, idea, picture".

I just thought I would finish by saying - I have moved to Belgium. I thought it was something I should mention, because I think that the context within which you work plays a large part in what you can do and how you are able to think about what you do. Of course, one of things that we are all struggling with is the politicization of the funding mechanism here. I got turned down for funding last time, even though Matteo and I have been touring all over the world with the pieces that we had made, and we were applying for the third piece. We asked for £17,500. (Actually, we got it in the end because we organised an email campaign). The Arts Council officer - the way she behaved was to say - this is ok, you just apply again, but I felt very depressed about it for a long time, and I nearly stopped the piece.

It has affected my decision to move to Belgium. I've cut down my infrastructure so enormously in order not to have to pretend that my work can help disadvantaged people. I have a huge empathy, politically, for disadvantaged people, but "Big Big Small" shouted by a balding middle-aged man will not help them. I know this. I am not going to pretend it will.

There's a dedicated layer of facilitators who are administrating and managing work, who have learnt to negotiate the constant demands of the funding system, but I see that it dictates the kind of work that gets made. It's not bad people doing this, it's good people who are doing it so that something happens. It's not that I'm stubborn - I find it quite hard to work to a criteria, I have to follow my own path. So, now we administrate the work ourselves entirely - last year we had 50 performances, 41 abroad. Matteo does travel and finance, and I do marketing and technical. We have a manager, Nigel Hinds, who does the contracts for us and we pay him a cut of the fee. This works, but its quite exhaustive. I get 25 emails a day to do with setting up performances. It is frustrating - its something to do with the age that I am - I recognise I am competing against younger generations, both in the market-place, but also in terms of funding.

In order to make a living, I have to tour so much that I can't stop to make a piece or research, so that's why I've gone to Belgium, because there I can find time. I feel like an English artist, and the humour in the work is very English, but I don't work in England.

The thing that I long for, is that we begin to redefine for ourselves our modes of production, but more importantly the modes of distribution of what we do.