

How the Body Falls — a spoken essay for Charlotte Vincent

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Charlotte,

This is an essay *for* you; an essay about being held and about falling; about the body and change; about friendship and time and work; about us and what we stand for and have talked about; about you and who you are and have been; about what connects those 21 years of work, as work, as personal expression, as connective tissue that holds you within a network of other artists and writers and thinkers — yes, its about, somehow being held.

Our encounter came late in my performing life, and in yours. We met after each of us had stopped performing and what we have shared over the past 6 years — as creative partners and as collaborators — is all the richer for acknowledging that loss, because what we share comes directly from our experience as performers, emerging, through the triumphs and trials and failings of our bodies, into a space we now share, as hosts, tentative, confident matrons of *The Table*, a project intended to recognise and connect women artists through conviviality and conversation, and that we hope will take flight and create new kinds of creative spaces. Tables and table settings are close to my heart and well as yours — coming to the table, making space, setting a place, being invited, being nourished, are such powerful metaphors for women, and metaphors are our trade.

When we finally met in 2008 we already knew each other. Paradoxically you told me then that you knew my 28 year old body very well. You had learned a part that I had made in 1984, for *The Carrier Frequency*, a piece of physical theatre collectively authored by the company I co-founded, Impact Theatre, and which was revived for the millennium by another company, another generation of makers — Stan's Café. You learned my steps from watching a grainy video. You held me in mind. You took me on, a fact I still find oddly moving. That show, underscored by the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and his reflection on Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes, poetic thought brought to Impact by the writer Russell Hoban, has acted as a bass line, almost, to our working relationship, a source of common understanding, especially about what loss and change mean to us. Our show, *Traces of Her*, sounded our own experience as performers within the shadow of that mythical figure, Eurydice, always on the verge of return to the dark, always on the verge of agency; buried, lost, yet clear sighted in her turn away from the world.

In *The Carrier Frequency* I fall, and fall again, and again, and again, into water, out of myself. On one level a metaphor, a symbolic journey, yet, by the time we met, we reviewed those endless falls, as part of a rhetorical gesture negating all the pretty performances that we had so consciously rejected. We ran and fell, we carried and strained, we worked to break through to a different kind of performance language. And all the time we were falling, falling, falling away.

*And tonight, this heavy earth is falling away
from all the other stars, drawing into silence.*

*We are all falling now. My hand, my heart,
stall and drift in darkness, see-sawing down*

from *Fall (after Rilke)* by Robin Robertson

That bond between us is both very private and very public, hard to speak about. We stage it together by working together and *what* it binds is that knowledge that the traces of performance will always be with us, whatever it is that comes next, and so this essay is in part about that performance world, the one that we grew up in and to which we have each contributed across performance generations.

You and I, with a decade and a half between our ages, come from different theatre making generations — different but profoundly related. And I say ‘theatre’ rather than, in your case, dance, deliberately. Your timed, precise, direct and sensuous work for the stage, for the eye, for the mind, takes its meaning as much from theatrical form and purpose as much as it does from dance. It proposes, exposes, narrates, stages conflict, resolves, debates — in fact, I see your shaping of choreographic space as marking an expanded arena in which embodiment *itself* is present as part of an enquiry into who we are — as women, as men, as ageing bodies — which never takes representation for granted, and which draws its sources from drama, literature and ideas. Its uniqueness, for me, lies not only in the way you make phrases and form and choral complexity, but in the way in which you believe in the body’s power of recuperation. Above all the falling away, and all potential for loss, it retains its unique capacity for joy. Your work is almost classical in its elementality — mimetic, hieratic, big, epic — which makes your recent piece, *Underworld*, all the more poignant and resonant. In that piece you return to myth, to echo the bound to the earthness of the Eurydice story, set within the underground caverns of Victorian Leeds. It is a piece in which

the dancers strain to free themselves, and yet, in which the beauty of the underworld is all too apparent.

Our different generations as theatre makers — mine beginning in the late 1970s and yours in the mid 1990s — are beads on a string of experimental practice which, for those of us inside that legacy, is coherent, rich and powerful. As theatre makers in Leeds in the late 70s Impact Theatre was informed by film makers and writers, choreographers and dancers — Ian Spink, Sally Potter, Andrei Tarkovsky, Pina Bausch, Heiner Müller, Heinrich Böll, Doris Lessing, Anna Kavan, Angela Carter, Rainer Maria Rilke & Russell Hoban — all these provided the backdrop, the score, to the context of the time — a dark, gendered, extremely physical dance theatre that destroyed the preciousness of Judson and of new dance. Impact, Brith Gof, DV8, La Fura dels Baus — all these smashed their way quite literally into theatre spaces, sites and landscapes, and into narrative coherence. You and your company emerged to distil and extend and create signature work in a richly expressive style that took no prisoners, that insisted on making work that *directly* addressed social issues in forms redolent with risk and danger, underscored with sensuality and even sumptuousness. All of us — it almost goes without saying — looked beyond Britain to Europe, made work as Europeans, and your work has held this at its heart. The conversation you have had with European makers and dancers and musicians is part of an extended collaborative cross referencing that marks the signature of your practice. That European conversation is inevitably multi-lingual, not just in terms of what is said, but in terms of the musicality, the physical quality, the cultural mix.

As a young artist you addressed a vibrant legacy — you were held in a conversation amongst artists across dance and theatre about what making *means*, about how to do it, about how to *be* on stage, and about how to speak about that work and argue for it. You stepped through that conversation to create your own original work, work that is now itself a legacy of two decades and more — a repertoire, a language, an archive, a contribution, a flexible, long lasting, inventive, approach.

What makes the work unique, to me, is in part the way you fold into it the conditions of its making, and what you think those conditions *are*. You extend them into society and ask us to remember how we come to be here. For you conditions are always politicised, but never reduced to their politics. Instead, they take off out of the social, they jump away, they challenge. In your work the surfacing of the turbulence of desire, the greed for the other, the horror of loss, is expressed through choreographic statements that draw our attention to the way we stand, sit, kiss, throw, fall

and are held — now, here, today, with all that surrounds us and all the dereliction of our broken world.

The first dance theatre I saw was Ballet Rambert and *Second Stride* — the first directed by Richard Alston, and the second the result of the collaboration between Ian Spink and Tim Albery, with music by Orlando Gough. In the 1970s Alston had already shattered dance, had already crossed from art to choreography, and Spink and Albery had begun to make work that enabled dancers to move beyond the frame, to think, to act, to express autonomy, to make their humanity present.

Everything changed after 1982 and the event of seeing Pina Bausch's company at Sadler's Well's, a series of events that was, I guess, as ground breaking as seeing the Cunningham company in 1963, at the same theatre, had been for Richard Alston. Bausch was like the return of an expressive dream, a tradition we did not know we had forgotten, but which had been fostered and flowered — and buried in the vernacular ordinariness of Judson and American new dance. Tanztheater had fallen out of fashion. By the end of the 1970s dance theatre making had become submerged in systems and sequence, duration and repetition. Bausch brought a dark, febrile glamour, and she brought play and story and age and body and decadence. Like the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, she reintroduced the mythical contemporary, the German tradition, the other, the dirt. Her broken chords, her searching physicality, her bricolage, all of these I see in your work. You broke away too, not held within the constraints of form, but pulling out, straining the body in new ways, jigsawing contact work and physical theatre with expressionism, exercising a precision in figuring a space that could hold, frame, limit and free the performer, channelling tensions, creating dynamics.

Music and musicality are central to this vision. You have not only worked, as I see it, with theatre's forms and purposes, but with the informing structures of music, and with the dynamic power of the presence of musicians. Creating an onstage conversation between musicians and dancers, crosshatching the attention you give them as a director, bringing the eye of the viewer into play, working around and across languages, feeding into, from and around the play of energies on stage adds tension and layering to the work which, at 21, has gained authority, reaching the depth of resonant meaning you have worked, fought even, to construct.

21 is of course meaningful in other ways — a tongue in cheek reference to the keys to the door, the final conferment of adulthood, with all its suggested responsibilities. You felt that call to adulthood a long time ago. Since the mid 1990s and your mid 20s, you have been, unusually, CEO

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of your own company in effect — artistic director but also its brand marketeer, its advocate, its strategist. The strength to commission, host, produce, and enable others has been central.

Enabling others — that takes trust and courage. And it is where you land, now, for me. Being held, falling, landing. My interest in you is now in what you do next, not only as an artistic director, but as someone connecting the social and the artistic. Creative lives are not easy lives. For women they make motherhood and family frustratingly hard to manage. In 21 years women have seen things get better, and worse. We know, I think, that things do not progress, they merely change. Your 21 years are a testimony to a rare ability to combine leadership with artistic flare. Your expanded vision is one in which art and life can come together, and in that crucible, new things can happen. I want to see what happens next and I look forward to being one of the people there with you.