



## MAKING OUTDOOR DANCE

### the path of tragedy

Over the course of the last few years I have been on a journey to explore the type and nature of content that can engage audiences for outdoor dance.

I intend to briefly chart out this process for the reader and highlight some of my personal discoveries. For the purposes of this article I wish to focus on the making of three specific pieces. Each of the pieces was a step on the path to understanding that contrary to popular expectation tragedy is a powerful and popular form for outdoor performance.

### Chaser

When I decided to make Chaser it was with the intention of making a small, 15 minute long, three-person show. The show would have a small set and be highly portable. The context for the show was that it could go anywhere and crucially, that it would be seen by non-dance audiences or even members of the public unaccustomed to live performance at all. At this time Motionhouse was not connected to the outdoor festival world.

Initially, Chaser was sold through theatres and would perform on it's own, often unannounced, in shopping centres and high streets up and down the country. To meet this challenge I chose to work simply and clearly with the piece. I set Chaser in an easily recognisable context - in this case a bar - and the show

engaged with easily recognisable content, that is relationships. I also worked from the received notion that the show would have to be entertaining and upbeat.

It is always my intention that my shows should have content and emotional resonance so I knew the show would have a journey. The first two thirds of Chaser were designed to be as entertaining and unchallenging as possible to engage audiences. It is a simple performance style and is unashamedly audience focussed in its material wobbling close to the cheesy in some places. After the flirting and dynamic dancing the show moves toward showing that everything we do has a consequence. One of the female characters, who in the course of the story has been "dumped" by the others, in a fit of depression becomes self-destructive. She repeatedly flings herself from the top of the bar towards the concrete below. This violent interlude breaks up the possible relationship of the other two causing each of the characters to go their own way chastened. Chaser is a very simple show. What challenge there is in the show comes at the end when the audience have been as entertained as possible. The nature of the dancing changes, it becomes more abstract, and the mood becomes very downbeat. Chaser has been incredibly popular and we still get requests for the show years later. I was pleased with its success and I felt emboldened to push the nature of the form and particularly the content with the next show.



**Motionhouse** - Chaser (featuring Claire Benson, Fernando Pasquini)  
Photo by The Lift

## Underground

The context for the making of Underground was very different. By this time we had made contact with the world of outdoor performance festivals. The Without Walls consortium of festivals commissioned Underground. This performing within a festival context means that the work is no longer “out there” on its own. It has a context to sit within and although the work has to connect with its audience it is not completely alien, at least to a section of its audience.

I was determined to create a work with more complex material in terms of form and much more challenging content. After the bombing of the tube trains in London I decided that I wanted to make a show about this. The set for Underground is a skeletal metal structure in the shape of a tube carriage and it is brought to life by the movement of the performers. The context of where they are becomes easily recognisable and apparent as public transport. The proposed content initially alarmed the commissioners of the work and there followed some interesting discussions about what was permissible and ethical in terms of content for outdoor performance in the street festival context.

The argument that held most sway with me was one of responsibility. It was put to me that when making a show for theatre audiences the public buys a ticket and

knowingly enters into a contract with me as the creator of the work to engage with the content. In this context I am free to challenge them as I see fit. In the street there is no such contract so it is beholden upon me to engage with my content responsibly. What if a survivor of the bombing were to happen upon the performance unknowingly? What were my responsibilities?

I decided that I would stick with my content but see if I could engage with these concerns ethically. Underground is a much more sophisticated show than Chaser and engages with the broad theme of life on the tube before returning to the bombing. It ranges from observing the strange beauty of the movement on the tube to experiences as diverse as the loss of personal space to the fear of mental illness and the strange.

My solution to the problematic of the content was to treat the bombing metaphorically. The inspection of the bomb scene that starts and finishes the show is extremely abstract. The bomb going off results in a case exploding with red flowers. My intention was they would be construed like the flowers of remembrance. This metaphor meant that for those that wished to examine the symbolism the content was there. For those who wished to read the show on another level the show had a different but very engaging arc.

Personal conversations with audience members have told me that different audience members are construing both of these readings and which one depends on the nature of their own personal experience and inclinations. Underground has been phenomenally successful and tours constantly throughout Europe during the summer. It has been touring for years and shows no sign of abating.

I feel that with Underground I engaged with the tragedy of the bombing in an implicit way. The work has to be read and decoded to engage with the content. Because of its multiplicity of possible readings Underground cannot really be categorised as a tragedy.



**Motionhouse** – Underground (featuring Olivia Quayle and Claire Benson)  
Photo by Dave McKenna



**Motionhouse** - Cascade (featuring Laura Peña Nuñez and Alasdair Stewart)

## Cascade

By 2010 and the making of Cascade I had come a long way on my journey. I felt that I could now challenge expectations of entertainment and the notion that street performance was just divertissement. For Cascade I knew that I wanted to engage with disaster and the suffering of the worldwide floods. I knew that this show would not worry about entertaining but would seek instead to challenge and provoke a visceral response to an overt and, this time, fully explicit tragedy.

The set for Cascade is a roof tilted at an angle and a lamppost also tilted. It is an image of flooded homes that is becoming all too distressingly familiar. I wanted to embody for the audience there on the street the images of suffering that were on our news broadcasts. My intention was to not let us turn away from what is happening, but instead confront it as a tragedy of flesh and blood rather than one distanced by digital media.

This time I felt powerfully that my responsibility was to not allow the audience to avoid the tragedy. My ethical challenge was to speak clearly about what was happening in the world.

Cascade sets out to create engaging and sympathetic characters that we follow in their struggle to survive. The destruction of those characters at the end of the show is explicit and unambiguous with the possible exception of one. The ending is singularly bleak and explicit as the drowned drift away. The dance vocabulary utilised in Cascade is much more

complex and demanding than any of my previous outdoor works.

The response to the show has been astonishing. Audience members have been genuinely moved and I have regular reports from members of the audience of being moved to tears. I believe, based on my own experience that people crave this kind of engagement. Theatre on the streets has every bit as much power as theatre on the stage. In fact its visceral immediacy gives it far more than it lacks from the technical sophistication of the black box. I believe that tragedy is the most powerful of theatrical forms and should be utilised more within performances on the street. Tragedy touches the soul and contains within its form the possibility of truly transformational experience for those who wish to engage with it.

I have been told by peers that in my composition of Cascade I have been "very brave" to have risked that type of content in the street. I feel that for my work in the street the exact opposite is true. That in fact for far too long I have been too timid.

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