

Kevin Finnan on making *Scattered*

Kevin Finnan, Artistic Director of Motionhouse, speaks about *Scattered*, his way of creating a show, and his philosophy as a director; in an interview taken on 29 June 2010.

What is *Scattered* about?

Scattered is about water. What it is not is a political message about how we should treat water. It's more a visual poem about water. It attempts to embrace its power and majesty and its sensuality and it attempts to communicate that there is no life without water, and in a way we are all but scattered drops of water and that, like water, we wish to coalesce. Fundamentally, it's a physicalisation of water and we say 'what's the point of doing that? If you want to know about water you can sit in a boat or turn on a tap'; and that's true but because it's all pervasive it's often taken for granted and so you have to bring people's attention to bear to that which is under their noses, and it's becoming an ever more important resource. I wanted to do a show about water, but in a very particular way. We attempt to physicalise water through the body in a range of ways.

So what made you want to explore water in *Scattered*?

Over the last few years I've been trying to make shows which are pertinent to my own life experience. That's the sort of ground from which I make my work. I've spent a lot of time travelling in the far north of Canada. I've seen glaciers receding first hand; as well as other things like water and its relationship with people in various countries. I was very interested in all of that. Plus, of course, there was the general global element of the consciousness of the issues around water and there was this growing awareness that the conflicts in the future will be fought about water and not oil so I was very interested in the whole backdrop to making a work but I was also very clear that I wasn't interested in making a didactic piece. I didn't want to do an 'Al Gore' or create a polemic on what you should or shouldn't do with water.

We all know about these global issues and so I didn't want to say it with a hammer, banging on about it in that particular style. With me, I was very much thinking, 'what does water mean to me in my life?' It's very hard to get upset about the issue of water in the UK when we spend half of our time being flooded or rained on. We think, 'Shortage? What shortage?' for most of the year. I began to think 'what does water mean to me, how does it behave?' and so I went on a big period of research,

and I looked at water just emotionally and physically, what it means in my life. My children laughed at me when I spent one morning in the bathroom with the bathroom tap running; looking at it, thinking 'God, that's amazing' and so my children were rolling their eyes, laughing at me and saying 'He's lost it'. I just had a sense of wonder thinking about how much time we've got to spend in a day thinking about water on tap and the miracle of clean water is amazing. So I started by looking with fresh eyes at water in my life and what it means to me and where it goes and that's where the idea germinated.

In the production of *Scattered*, what's the relationship between you, the dancers and the choreography?

I did all of the initial research, and then myself and the designer agreed on the physical concept of the set and the structure because that gave the context for the whole work. From that point, I had a lot of research materials about ideas; like researching with the scientists at King's College London about the molecular structure of water. I had information from the University of Warwick about the passage of water over urban landscapes, I had a lot of other theoretical research that I had done. I also had some movement ideas, visual images that I wanted to create that were very clear in my mind.

I had all of this material and then I began a process of working through it with the dancers where I began to unpack these ideas with them, and then it was very much for them to explore each idea and create the material that came back. So the idea from me was the dynamic I wanted and the type of show, but the actual specific moves themselves came from the dancers. That was arrived at very much by me setting goals, challenges, and then exploring them within each area. As we were doing that, we would look at what we had created and throw the ideas backwards and forwards. I operate very much at two levels:

The initial stage is generating lots of material, and then as the material is coming, I work on the minutiae, helping them to create structures. Then I have to step back because what I believe is the essential core of any piece is its dynamic structure. I spend time looking at what things are and how they relate to the overall dynamic structure. My work revolves around the interaction of the theatrical image with movement. The creation of the images is a very large part of the process which we work towards. We work as a group and that's my relationship with the dancers; they're creating movement and inputting their feelings and feedback on what we're doing.

I'm also working with the composer and filmmakers; we're going backwards and forwards in terms of me giving them my feedback, and then they go off and have their own ideas; then their ideas influence me, then mine influence them as well so it's very much an exchange going backwards and forwards. Louise also comes in and out of rehearsals – she is my outside eye and sounding board and has a great overview on the piece as it is developing. She will encourage me to edit and work deeper, she will notice if I have gone off on too much of a tangent. So she is also part of the exchange. There's no point in collaborating with anyone if you're not going to be influenced by them. So you're setting out this reflexive, refractive system that's going backwards and forwards, changing and developing all of the time. This allows each work to be the sum of works of many artists working together, guided to a goal.

Can you give us a brief choreographic outline and description of components in *Scattered*?

The choreographic outline of *Scattered* is very much, as is the case with a lot of my choreography, image-led. In every show we do, the early part of the process is creating the mental images of the work that you are going to communicate through, and understanding what the movement language might be. The structure will hold it all together. *Scattered* is very interesting because the eventual structure that we arrived at came from an idea from the film makers.

You are always trying to identify the internal logic that holds the show together and once you have that you can then develop all of the components. You string them together, and then it all begins to take a shape because you understand how and why one thing goes to another and therefore you begin to make decisions about what the physical language is doing from one thing to another, as well as the rhythm of the piece. For *Scattered*, the idea that we arrived at, which would be the guiding principle; rather than the narrative logic was the thematic logic.

The solution put forward by the filmmakers was that we would structure the show chromatically in that we would start with white, go to blue, then green, then yellow, green, blue and finish with white. This was a chromatic journey from north to south of the globe. These are the colours of water and the world – how it's coloured by water. This became a really interesting idea to me so I structured the show so that we knew we were going to start in the icy regions, and considered what type of movement language that entails, then we would go to dark blue, then green, and then yellow would be the middle of the show; then out of that we would travel through green, blue and white.

That is, indeed, the structure of the show. It tells you what the movement languages are, dictated in time by the structure. You know that you're going to have more rigid and spiky movements at both ends and the softer, more flowing elements towards the middle with the exception of how we chose to portray the deserts. Each section, therefore, had its movement language dictated by its colour but also by how we chose to portray it.

That's the structural description, also within it there was a long play with the physical structure that we were using which produced a very particular type of movement language from all of the sliding and falling. So we've got the overall chromatic structure, we've then got the movement language of the world; how to use the slope and the type of movements that you get, obviously you don't want to use it all in one place, you've got to thread it through the show; and then there's the contact – lifting and catching – that we do, then there is the movement that relates to each particular image; whether we're cold and frozen in the north or whether we're lizards in the desert or we're responding to choking and thirst in the factory environment or whether we're afloat in the ocean in the rainy, sensuous world. So each of those creates a movement language and they're located in their sections but they all have to be wedded together to become a structure.

What devising process was involved to make this?

The key to our devising process really is play. There was a very long process of play with this - from the very simple process of creating the structure, and then simply using it as a playground, then just endless hours of play and experimentation until you eventually begin to create a language of how you integrate with this space. That was the fundamental, then as we generated our images through research, through conversation, through experimentation, we would then come up with a series of exercises, workshops, games, intentions. A choreographer's job is to bring virtuosity of intent to the process so that you're really trying to bring the skill and a love of what you want to achieve and share it with the dancers to enable them to be equally empowered in experimentation and you have to give support and validation to that whole process because it is a long time. Jonathan Ives from Apple talks about how, when ideas are presented, they've created this culture in which no idea is ever dismissed, that somebody comes to them and says, for instance, 'I think that we should make a laptop out of pure titanium', and then it would be easy for someone to say 'titanium has such-and-such a mark-up price, we'll never be able to do it' and so ideas are dismissed and disappear. They don't do that at Apple; they sit down and say 'okay, why titanium?' and they really take a while to treat ideas as seedlings

and they let all the seedlings grow for a little while before they choose which ones they're going to pursue.

The devising process that I try to do is to encourage everybody to come up with their own ideas; and with my own ideas, I don't dispense with them until I'm sure they're not right. To determine whether they're right doesn't depend on whether they're good or not; it's about how well the material they produce fits with the other material and with the general idea. Some of the best things we make sometimes don't get into the piece because they don't fit.

The devising process is very much this sense of opening up, exploration and experimentation. Giving the dancers physical briefings, ideas, talking about a very very simple premise such as the fact that water connects through what's called the bonds of attraction; it makes chains so there's a bit in the dance where they all make hoops with their arms. It's a very simple representational notion from a scientific fact; and that structures the choreography around it. At another point, we show how the physicality responds to an environment so you have the painful, frozen dance at the beginning and the fluidity of the two girls who I call 'the mermaids in the pond' when they're dancing to the drips of water on the floor. It's all about a very physical, sensual relationship with water at that point. So the devising process is reflective of the product and the product is the summation of the devising process.

Do you want your dance to have popular appeal? Does your work attract audiences beyond the traditional dance audiences?

Yes, I feel that there are dance enthusiasts who come and see my work, but I feel that its real success is its ability to reach out beyond dance audiences. I make work which is composed with a particular image language; in particular, colour and speed and dynamic; so that the work really engages with audiences and since we've been doing the outdoor work we've really been seeing the effect on audiences and how it affects the dancers. The goal is made ever more central to reach out to wider audiences and more diverse audiences all the time. I'm very proud that *Scattered* has managed to do that. That is the central thrust of the work.

Talk us through some of the movement images in *Scattered*.

There are simple ones which are generated through play with the structure. Before we ever came to the designer we knew what the slope might be. We all dressed up in crash pads and jumped off a balcony to make sure we could do it without beating ourselves up too much. We did this with a slope until we got the right angle, and

then we spent time exploring the slope and the silks and what we might be able to do and what we could do physically. Out of that, just playing on the slope, came the idea of a human waterfall. That came from just putting one person on top of another and just sliding down and the film guys were there so we talked with them about having a waterfall section, and they created this physical waterfall which they interact with, which then develops to become a mountain of crates and then a waterfall of bottled water. It makes a political point but in quite a subtle way. That's how simple, physical play emerges into a meaningful image. The whole opening of the show, where they come on and it's just barren and cold, was an image that I had in my head before I even started; I wanted the world of water from its warm sensuality to its barren alienation; the use of the frozen Arctic north was quite a nice image in terms of speaking about the fundamental human condition: we are essentially alone and alienated. We spend our time trying to reach out to others and connect with others. Each water molecule does essentially the same thing: it attracts and repulses and eventually collates and wants to become the sea. I find this to be an interesting metaphor for the way we live.

So basically, I knew the opening, I knew how it would look and how it would work in my head before I started. The image of the tap came about when we were just playing with the film guys and we played with the silk and it was just such a beautiful, simple image. The woman climbing the column of water was like a column of life. It's a beautiful image that actually says everything about the show in some respects and it comes from playing and engagement with other artists.

Another example is that of the interaction with the bottles and the use of them as fish: I felt that it would be really interesting for them to show that a part of performing a piece about water contains an absence of water apart from these bottles with tiny amounts of water in them. The bottles had to have a journey to go on so they became the fish and they became the things that are sought after by people and things that people struggle over. That simple act of transforming them through movement from objects to fish and back again gives richness and texture to the whole performance and I liked the gentle humour that that has as a counterpoint to some of the darker moments in the choreography.

The idea, for example, in the waterfall section where the waterfall changes and becomes an escalator just came from the film guys. They knew we were running up the slope and came up with the idea of escalators. Again, there was a tremendous artistic openness and also a marvellous sense of fun. I really enjoy that within the work, I think that's what makes it so rich.

What were the highlights and difficulties in staging this piece?

The difficulties were that it was a very ambitious project for the company and it is the biggest thing that we've ever toured. It's a very complex show with a complex structure, with bungee aerial work built into the structure; logistically it was a real challenge. We were only able to make the piece because we had fantastic support from the Arts Council and we were able to make it over a much longer period than we would normally. We only worked on it part-time because we were touring other pieces, but that allowed us to make the depth of the piece.

Everybody talks about *Scattered*, about how fantastic the inspiration and the filming actually is and how fluid it is, but that's a product of being able to work on it over a long period of time. The music, the film and the dance were all meticulously crafted and put together and every time we would alter the film, we would alter the dance and the music. Every time the music changed, we would alter the film and the dance and every time the dance was altered, the film and the music would change. They were all continually changing and shifting and each piece was like a little mosaic, you would move one piece and you would have to shuffle everything else so that it fitted with the rest. That was an enormous challenge, to make sure that each of the art forms could have its full breadth within the piece but make sure that the piece really worked at its most fundamental level, which is the integration of film, music and the human body. That was a massive challenge only made possible by the support that we got from the Arts Council.

Are there any particular sources which inspire your work?

Scattered is an accumulation of personal experiences, so as I mentioned earlier there was that direct experience of being up in the glaciers in Canada, there was the section with the Brazilian music with all the flowers – that whole scene is directly inspired by the meeting with the water scientists at King's College London where they told me about the attraction of the chains of molecules and how they operate at a microscopic level within water and so each part of the piece has different sources. It's not like there's a series of texts that are a meta-narrative; it's just not true. It's just a whole conglomeration of different thoughts.

How does *Scattered* compare to other Motionhouse works?

I feel that *Scattered* is a logical development on the last couple of shows in that we've been trying to do aerial work in a particular way and in a particular structure. With *Perfect* we engaged thematically with the notion of time. When it came to *Driven* I had a more narrative structure within the piece and that produced a

particular type of result. After that show was over, I knew that that whole period of work was finished and that we had to move on in a different way. We got rid of all the cuboid structures and I took from the past the fact that I'd found that the thematic way of working with material for *Perfect* had been the most nourishing and engaging. I felt that I wanted to take that and go deeper into that way of working again. I'd also begun exploring ideas with film in those two shows, which previously I hadn't bothered with. I knew that there was a whole notion of how to interact with film and I knew that we could go beyond that; so the whole development of our wall came from that. I knew also that I wanted to be more cohesive with the physicality of the show; I wanted it to be of the environment so I knew we had to have a very specific environment, therefore the movement was very particular to the show and I took on a bigger company. It allowed us to have more influences within the movement so we had a wider source range which we could draw on.

I feel that in the way of interacting with the film I was influenced by my outdoor work in terms of the speed of delivery, the speed at which you accept images, how fast they go and the rhythm of them within the piece were brought from what I'd learnt in my outdoor pieces – seeing people's attention spans come and go because when they're outdoors they can just walk off if they're not with you all the time. What you need to do is hold them to tell a good tale, to have a good relationship. I brought that back to bear in *Scattered* with a vengeance and so I think that the show's much more cogent dynamically.

Are you making a political or social comment through *Scattered*?

As I said in the beginning, *Scattered* is not a polemic. We all know that water is an issue so the show attempts to bring up the world of water and what we care about – to make it present once again. Water is one of the greatest things that's there, that is omnipresent in our Western lives and is very hard to care about because it's just there. If you could just take a moment to bring it clearly into focus once again and say 'actually, this is a miracle in our lives and you should think about it', then it has a purpose. If it gives people pause for thought for a minute to think about it, then the next time they hear an argument or a debate or an issue about water, then they might think about it in a different way. That's a very different method to making a show that says 'wasting water is bad, we should share.' I'm just trying to create something that makes people say to themselves, 'look again'.

How do you integrate the movements, costume, scenery, lighting and film? What comes first?

From early on I had theatrical images of what I wanted to do, and I might have had some movement ideas, and we agreed the world in which it would come. From that, everything else comes: the movement, the film, costumes, music; everything. It has to have a clear context.

The mood and the atmosphere of the piece is constantly changing throughout. Apart from the action content, what helps you achieve this?

Working outdoors has really helped me to understand how a dynamic works and so we make our shows more like films. Films have rhythm, they have colour, light and music and they're put together to be continuous. I don't know if other dance people do it but it's my sense that the music supports an image – the music is, in my opinion, a dynamic journey. It's about the rhythm and the pace of the images offset against the music and so it's very much a sense of trying to create a feature film: you're making a living film. People go and see it but it's not projected, it's live but it's a film in that the music is on the film, the people are interacting with the film so from the minute it kicks off it has a beginning and you're trying to take people into the world and create change, dynamic, colour, light, movement; the themes are unfolding and you're trying to interweave everything so that you have an overlapping wave form throughout. The speed goes and goes and goes and picks you up and picks you up and if you want to do something slow you have to dynamically take it up and then slow it down or, as in *Scattered*, you have the bit where it's slow; really slow. Then it gradually builds and builds and builds, and builds and builds, and there's a huge build all the way through, almost until halfway when there's another change. So you're very much working on these dynamics and the changes of them. I think that's the key for me.

The dancers do not have characters in this piece. Is there individuality?

Yes. It's interesting that you say they don't have characters. I think it's a definition of what character is. The dancers are themselves at various points in an imaginary situation, so to me that is a character. It's maybe not 'you are PC Johnson who enters the drawing room having discovered the body', it's much more the sense of being present to a moment in the performance because if they're not living the moment and being a character; all performance like that is a fiction; their characters, when I say 'being themselves' I mean being themselves on stage which is a fiction, in a moment which is a fiction. They are trying to be truthful with themselves; they're dancing a movement that they've made together in relation to

images that we agreed upon which they're trying to live through again to the audience. For me it's about trying to make them as believable as possible.

They go through a series of transformations where they are themselves and then another moment they're buried alive and then they become lizards and then they go and think 'that's fantastic' but in any film you see these days, people can turn into flies and then come back and then everybody happily accepts it so it's that same sense of what is possible. They are characters but not in that very rigid definition of what a character may be. It's a shifting thing that they have to make real at every moment. I can see when they drop out of character.

How would you describe the choreographic style?

The choreographic style is heavily influenced by contact improvisation, and then it's a range of influences of various other contemporary styles and then another layer of random influences that have come from everybody. I would be tempted to say that, in some respects, we don't have a style but then when you look at our works you can clearly see that that's absolute rubbish. We clearly do; but it's like any actor or any artist. You never get away from who you are, you have your thing and you try and extend and develop and change it but it's always your thing. Our style comes from the contact base and then absorbs everything around it that it can find.

How do you intend to embrace modern technologies in your future work?

That's an interesting question. We recently performed at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival and it's huge – the third largest theatre festival in the world. The director there came up to me and said; 'When I was first told about your piece and saw the DVD I was a bit suspicious of it.' He's seen a lot of work embracing new technologies and to him the embracing of new technology is usually used to show how clever the artist is and how amazing the technology is without bothering about the content. What he felt was special about *Scattered* and why he loved it was that the show was emotional and passionate, and really moved the audience in Romania; the technology was amazing but also transparent. My interpretation is that the technology was interactive, but it became another thing without an obvious 'ooh, look what we can do' expression. It's about content rather than technology.

In *Scattered*, we had the technology but we worked in a very old-fashioned way: we did something with modern technology, graphic integration and software design manipulation etc. But then old-fashioned disciplines of counting and timing made it work in the way that we interacted with it. We interacted very simply but with tremendous discipline. I think that that's the key. Whatever modern technology you

use, you have to absorb it into your world and understand its place before you can use it. People have been using film for years and Louise and I used it way back early in our career and I was unhappy with the result because I realised that I didn't have my intellectual artistic tools to deal with the medium properly. I had to wait until it was the right time, and when I got there I began to explore film and then *Perfect* and *Driven* opened up the issues, but was in *Scattered* that I could say 'right, this is what we do with it now' and we interacted in a particular way.

So, going forward to other new technologies, I would need to go through that process and bring it on each time but it's fully my intention to keep working with film and I'd like to expand it into other areas as well but that's all down to time, money and opportunity.