
Motionhouse

DANCE THEATRE

Interview with Kevin Finnan

Artistic Director and Creator of Driven

Kevin Finnan speaks about Perfect, his way of creating a show, and his philosophy as a director

Perfect has become what is essentially the final part of a triptych that began with Fearless and continued with Volatile, although Kevin Finnan concedes that the exploration of a theme in three finite parts was never his original intention. He has long been interested in the relationship between people and the space and environment in which we live. With Fearless, the subject was paranoia and phobia, with Volatile, the intensity of relationships and communication, and with Perfect, Kevin will be looking at themes around time – essentially the fourth dimension.

"Yes, Perfect does represent an end to this particular cycle of work," says Finnan, "but I see it more as a culmination of the theme, rather than its completion. There are still many ideas around the idea of space that I want to explore. In fact, each new production reveals far more questions than it answers, so I have no doubt that I will be wanting to delve more into the area in future work. However, what will change will be the way in which I do it. The last three productions have had very strong links in terms of set, and this will definitely change post-Perfect."

So what comes first in the creative process? *"Oh, the set, definitely the set. That's always the first thing we start to develop, although it will undoubtedly evolve later. The materials within the set obviously need to be right for touring - portable, easy to build and dismantle, and the right size to fit into our touring van, as well as into the theatre spaces to which we tour! It needs to be relatively simple, and in this case, be able to cope with projection, plus, of course, fall within the budget, which is often very contained in itself!"*

"We first saw a model in spring 2004, so about 9 months before the show was due to open," explains Finnan. "Simon Dormon, who's been collaborating with me for a number of years as set designer, had the brief some months before that, and quickly got into working up his initial ideas and ball park costings." One of the key elements of the brief is that the set must be designed to allow the work to be as accessible as possible, so able to be placed in a wide variety of spaces, both indoors and out. "I wanted to ensure that the whole of the structure works in a tight dynamic, so that there would be a steady flow of exciting dances throughout the show. I try to constantly move images and put in thrilling dance segments, which, it has to be said, is also a concession to commercial need – I do want, both personally and for Motionhouse, to reach as wide an audience as possible", he explains.

"Inviting the audience to engage with the work is central to the piece" continues Finnan. *"I'm in the privileged position, as are all choreographers, writers or, indeed, makers of any piece of performance work, of being able to share my thoughts and*

observations with members of the public, and, believe me, some of those ideas can be quite esoteric"; he says with a smile. "But because the work is for an audience, I have to be careful how I present my views. The challenge for me is finding images and ways of expressing the ideas that will be attractive, acceptable, thought provoking and, above all, identifiable to audiences, so that they will leave having been stimulated to explore their own thoughts and ideas on what they have just seen".

Because the set is so crucial to a Motionhouse production, lighting, too, comes into the picture at a very early stage. *"Particularly in this instance because we are using projection, it's vital that it was worked up at the same time as the set model,"* Kevin explains.

Perfect has a very real feel to it. It represents slices of life in a sometimes stark and harsh way, but at other times light hearted and comedic. Finnan explains: *"The struggle for Perfection haunts us all – we dress to impress, cover ourselves in a veneer, and most of us constantly live within the confines of what society expects of us. Time is yet another dimension, and a constraint, on how we live our lives, and this led me to thinking how, as our civilised society builds the perfect home, shelter mutates into containment, and we're living our lives in a world that is increasingly time poor, with the pressure never to admit to not being busy, busy, busy. But with the result that the real focus of life often gets lost. That's what I'm hoping to recreate with Perfect. At the beginning the set is a white box, which the dancers gradually strip away to reveal the steel wire cage in which we exist."*

So is Perfect about containment or even confinement?

"Well yes, but in a much broader sense" explains Kevin. "With places like Sangatte and the refugee situation so heavily in the news, it would be easy to draw parallels, but what I really wanted to explore with Perfect is the emotional journey as well as the physical, so Perfect will be looking at our social space and internal and external comfort zones."

I wanted to understand the creative process in general a little more. How does Kevin Finnan actually approach the making of a new production?

"I almost always have a very strong vision and image in my mind of the opening few minutes of a new production, and ninety nine times out of a hundred this treatment actually stays and becomes the opening of the show in a virtually unchanged format. The rest of the piece may go through all sorts of modification, twists and turns as we start to build the choreography, but that opening scene is virtually certain to remain intact." he reveals. *"Another thing that is guaranteed to happen every time, is that as soon as I get a show on the road, as soon as its made, I start seeing all of the things that I wish I had done with it. I'm always very happy with the piece once its made, but its that ideas generation again – everything you do leads to more, 'well what if' situations and 'now that we've gone there, I really need to investigate what would happen if we looked at x,* continues Finnan.

The research process is invariably central to Kevin's creative process. The initial research revolved around space and performance. *"The set is the start point" he maintains. "Because of the very strong link between space and performance, my most recent productions have always had the basic set concept well in place before the company began working on choreography, so the dance language that we arrive at is very much inspired by the physical environment presented by the set itself."*

Perfect encompasses more daring and far-reaching elements of aerial work, which Kevin only begun to explore with Volatile. *"I see it as really moving the concept of the spatial story further and further, so the early research was very much to do with space and performance. Time then very strongly came into the fray, and we use film to play with multiple timeframes. I'm intrigued how one's perception of incidents and circumstances changes over time. What seems of earth shattering importance today, might very well be trivial in three or four days time, and I wanted to see how we might treat this within Perfect."*

Books can also be a vital source of an idea, and none more so than in the case of Perfect. *"I read a book called The History of Barbed Wire"* continues Finnan *"Sounds incredibly dull, I know, but think about it. Think about all the instances in history, right up to the present day, where barbed wire is used to confine people and animals. It revealed such overpowering images that it became one of the most influential drivers within my research. As always, things have moved on from that, but that initial emotional driver has definitely impacted on the images we have now, even if the barbed wire itself has gone."*

The next part of the process is when artistic decisions come into play. Finnan is adamant that the theatre stage shouldn't take control. *"Within the set, I have complete control – it's my world and my space to create what I want. The dancers' own devising of ideas is both crucial and central to Motionhouse productions,"* insists Finnan. *"Knowing who the members of the company are going to be is vital,"* he explains, *"because although the devising process doesn't officially begin until three to four months before the show premieres, the dancers will already have lived with ideas for several months, so the thought process can really begin in earnest. I allow total free play and free space. On any given day, something may come or maybe nothing, but the end result is that working in this way, very real emotions, characters and situations will form."*

This way of devising a piece also means that material is made to the dancers strengths; their own ideas are paramount to making it happen. When new dancers join the company during the course of a longer tour, they always add their own trademarks to their role, and to the piece as a whole, so a production very often has to be subtly, but significantly, reworked throughout the course of its life. *"Technically, the performers skills are central to devising the material. It isn't an easy way of working, and many dancers do find it difficult working within the constraints of a set. Every minute of every performance, and every move, takes place within the three dimensional confines of the set, and that is a skill in itself, although anyone who actually sets foot on one of our sets is amazed at how small the floor space actually is. It's testament to the dancers' skill that they make it appear a much larger space where so much is happening, often all at the same time. That said, working in this way does foster incredible creativity,"* explains Finnan

Music is another signature part of a Kevin Finnan production, and at this point, the music collaborator, in this case, Sophy Smith (who also composed the Volatile score), starts work. *"I believe the music has to be filmic as well,"* Finnan explains *"It is generally a mixture of dynamic new writing alongside some familiar, but often surprising pieces. This mix again helps to engage the piece with the audience"*.

"Once the piece is well into production, but before it is fully 'made', we give it its first public airing. What we do is hold an open rehearsal at our studio in Leamington Spa, and the specially invited audience is made up largely of the commissioning venues and board members. It's a pretty nerve wracking day, because they are essentially

the people who are paying us to produce the piece, and I know many Artistic Directors or choreographers would completely balk at the idea of showing unfinished work to such an audience, or, indeed, any audience. But fortunately we've always had extremely positive feedback. We make the work for an audience, after all, so it's important for the venues as well as us, to experience 'work in progress' and it definitely enables the venue teams to understand a little better what the new show is all about"
says Finnan.

So after Perfect, what next? *"Well, it will be a complete re-think. Although I could go on exploring the spatial themes forever, I know it's time to find new ways of doing it, and different ways of presenting the ideas. I'll probably never stop being inspired by the ideas of space, it's something that has always driven my work, but, it's equally exciting, if not more so, to find new ways of doing it. The satellite performances, Intimate Sitings, that we produced for the first time with Volatile, were another way of looking at the spaces in which we live - seeing how small domestic spaces can be explored and the relationship constraints that they impose. Intimate Sitings was very successful, but it also threw up even more questions and ideas which is why we've developed Chaser as a satellite to accompany Perfect."* he says.

Finnan also enjoys working with other collaborators, and his work is by no means confined to Motionhouse; a combination, he says, which keeps the ideas coming. *"I've worked with many inspiring people in the past; people like Rosa Sanchez"* (with whom he produced Arcadio) *"and I'll continue to do this. It's hugely liberating, and gives me lots of artistic freedom, so you might see a production of mine that surprises you, because it's so different from the productions I've been making for Motionhouse. If you watch closely, though, you're sure to see one or two giveaway signature moments in there that will leave you in no doubt."* he reflects. Amongst Finnan's major influences are the internationally acclaimed Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage, well known for taking liberties and leaps of imagination with his subjects, and Wim Vanderkeybus, who builds spectacular and inspiring images in a quest for unusual situations.

So in summary, what are the real trademarks of Kevin Finnan's work that we can expect to see in Perfect? *"It has to be visually innovative. My work is about the image that is created in the piece. I'm also fascinated by film and the moving image",* says Kevin. *"Secondly, it's exploring the relationship between these images and the dynamics – that's what will make it work for the audiences, and finally, I would say that truth is vitally important. Every movement within the choreography has to have a reason to be, rather than the choreography simply being the reason itself"*