

Michelle Heaven, April 2006

in conversation with Elizabeth Boyce

I had a great time making the work. I had to discard being very precious about anything because of the time constraints. We had five three-hour rehearsals.

It all relates back to the very first piece I made to that track of music [*Baba O'Reilly* by The Who] when I was fifteen years old. I was at a Catholic school. I think I was leaving the following year. Because it was a Catholic school it was considered a gift to the school that we shared our talents. They asked me if I wanted to and I agreed to make a little dance piece to present in front of the entire school.

I didn't realise at the time how big that was.

I think back to myself making it in my room at home. I would listen to some of the words in the music. There was a hint of relationship to the words but mostly it was just 'me dancing'. It was about the passion that I had for dance and getting that out to the music and really exploring that for myself.

In the actual presentation of the work, the audience sat in the round. We were on cement with just a carpeted texture on top of the cement. It was awful to dance on.

I got quite overwhelmed about three quarters of the way through and completely forgot what I should be doing. When you're absorbed in what you're doing and you're really present in that place, there's a leap of consciousness if for a moment you look at yourself from an exterior perspective. It was at that moment that I really lost my confidence. I lost one step and then it was gone because I was so focused on moving to the music.

It was like paddling upstream for moments until, luckily, it was close to the end. There is a specific rhythm that sets in at the end. I definitely found my end position, let's put it that way. With great gusto.

So I took all of these feelings and my memory of the time and my Mum seeing a nun the next day and her commenting on how much she enjoyed the other piece, a classical ballet, which was much more up her alley. Up her alley! She wasn't really into The Who.

In making the new work I needed a place to start and I extracted the strongest memories from that time. They include the costume, the music, the sense of amateurishness and that aspect of blanking - that fear due to inexperience and also the oddness of the surrounds and the area constraint that I had - this was really prevalent in working with Gerard. I had created a mark on the floor for him to stay within.

Also the nuns and the feeling of it not really being what they would perhaps have expected me to perform. I think they were thinking that I would do a balletic rendition for them and I went the other way. A rock song. The Who.

It was great to hear the music again. I always really liked The Who.

I remember looking for music when I was fifteen to make a piece to. I was so naïve; I just didn't know. My step-dad is a musician and he really liked The Who. I said, "Do you know anything I could use" and he said, "I've always thought this song would make a fantastic dance work." It's definitely got something going for it. When I was younger I really liked it.

In the context of a Catholic school it was not the thing that you do. I think I liked that too. I was slightly rebellious. Rebellious in a harmless way. For me to come out with my hippie scarf on and dance to The Who when the other girl had pointe shoes, it was a dichotomy. Opposite ends of the scale.

I guess I was starting to play into that sense of really doing this. Through my ballet school I was performing really regularly as well. I did conduct home performances. Mainly for Mum.

My passion is still there, very strongly, but everything's so particular now. There didn't really need to be a reason for me to dance then. It was just about dancing. That's not so much the case now. It really

has to come from somewhere unless I make a specific decision to explore pure movement but usually that's not enough to interest me now.

Gerard and I were playing with the naivety. It's beautiful, that naivety, when I think back to how I made that work and the passion that I had.

Choreographing on someone else is a reasonably new thing for me. I'm quite excited about that because you learn a lot stepping out of your comfort zone. I was quite nervous to begin this project even though I know Gerard. In a way it was an ideal situation for me. He was fantastic and really supportive.

I think it's hard to start. You've got somebody standing there and you've got to tell them what to do. I'm completely comfortable with the time that something takes when I'm working alone but I don't expect somebody else to share the same patience. I'd like to have all the answers straight away, which is not very realistic.

When I have a particular thing in mind I go through the process of exploring that, in this case with Gerard. Through that process other doors opened up that I didn't necessarily expect. That was really fantastic, sharing this process with Gerard because his body and physique would find different things to mine. That was quite exciting.

I'm so used to imagining things and I do that a lot when I'm making work. I like to imagine what it might be. But it was fantastic to be able to really see it and then make decisions based on what I was seeing. It's much more instant than my experiences of working alone. I probably take a lot longer to get to the end point unless I have somebody outside. You're not sure if what you're seeing is what you want them to see, either.

The *Album* process was so fast and furious that I was going with decisions. I probably could have taken a lot longer and I could have altered the material time and time again. It was quite liberating because I would normally piss around quite a bit. It would be part of the process to kind of undulate whereas I was targeting into stuff much more quickly because I felt I wouldn't ever get there.

As it was, I think I was the only person who didn't finish my work. Everybody managed to have some kind of resolution and I'm still lingering towards what mine should be. Gerard's character was never really sure what he was doing anyway, so in a way it was fairly apt that it didn't quite get finished.

There was about a minute remaining and the song has a climactic end. At the time I felt, obviously, that I needed to source an appropriate ending. I thought that I'd like to bring on all the other dancers and create some sort of finale around Gerard's character. But now, partly because it's so tricky rehearsal wise (there are so many other people in other rehearsals to consider) I feel maybe it's wiser to keep the ending pretty low key.

I'm just looking forward to getting back with Gerard and seeing where it got to. I think once I do it will be quite clear what to do. I've got hints of what it should be but can't really make a decision until we get in the studio again. Having the time to say, "Let's see where we are now" is quite vital to making the end relevant, I think.

It's not too long and we've got five rehearsals to get it all back and find the ending. I'm hoping it'll just pop up. [Laughs]

The correlations between the old and new work are the soundtrack, obviously, the spatial definition or restriction, black tights and the re-created performance anxiety and blanking. I wore black footless tights in my original performance and I wanted an aspect of the costume to remain.

And then the inclusion of this juxtapositional element, which is this other character to the movement performer. I call her the nun now because, due to the notes that I wrote, people made a direct link to that. But initially she wasn't that. A bear trainer? By no means were my ballet teachers really like that but there is an element of that old fashioned, didactic... I liked playing his nervousness against this

external figure. Not really for that character to be that present in work but just having her or him there. I just needed some counterpoint for Gerard's character. For some people it was a nun figure and I quite liked that. The character had a sense of awful, just awful... I quite liked that too.

I like intricate movement, so it was also a chance for me to explore that with Gerard. I'm interested in detail at this point in my career. Detail in the sense of the minute details of movement, the specifics of the movement.

I made a decision to concentrate on the rhythmical composition and the torque of the movement. Other than the essence of this character, the amateur performance aspect and my connection to my feelings from the original work, I didn't cloud any of the specific movements with any other meaning. I just enshrouded it in that concept and focused on rhythmical composition.

I enjoyed the neutral-ness of the evening of the development. It wasn't a big production and it never felt like it should be.

I think that the reality of what the funding situation is now, and the fact that we are booked in to do a show soon will keep us all quite simple. There's something quite nice about that as much as it's disappointing. It would have been good to have more time to play and extrapolate but there's something interesting in just going for it and thinking, "Oh, well. That's what we get when we work with these kinds of constraints." And everyone's in the same position.

There was something quite refreshing, about the evening of work. Everyone's was *so* different but it was quite sweet, the connection that we all had of it being from our youth and past.

On the night, I was incredibly nervous. I became that nun-like figure because it was easy for me to do it at the time. But I was still so nervous because I was just sitting there, basically, nothing to do.

Being a choreographer ups the ante because you are showing your work. You're not just being looked at as a performer within somebody else's work. So, there are more things at stake for me there.

Sometimes it's even worse when you really believe in something and you put it out there because other people might just not get it. You never know. It might not be to somebody's liking. I'm growing in that I'm learning that it's doesn't matter so much if somebody doesn't like it. But it's always nice if people do, obviously. It's much easier.

I guess you feel you've succeeded in a way if people enjoy what you make, unless it was your objective to make them not enjoy it but that's certainly not why I make work. It's a weird balance of what is important to you and how you want to do something and, when you put it out there, whether or not it's actually going to be accepted.

When I was younger, I think that aspect of the work wasn't so important. It was about how you did it. And then, if you forgot a step, you'd failed in my opinion. That was what was going on for me. It was really problematic that I'd forgotten those steps in the show. Whereas now, if you forget a step but you still manage to get the link, it's still not great but it's not the be all and end all. What's important is the overall picture.

When you're showing in the dance community, there's a sense of support but it is a very critical domain as well, I find. People have really specific likes and dislikes.

There's a lot going on in Melbourne at the moment. There are a lot of different angles, which is great because I think that that pushes people and pushes work into new lines, and that all excites me and interests me.