

Infra

GCSE Dance (8236)

Video transcript for interview with Choreographer Wayne McGregor CBE

< Wayne McGregor CBE, Choreographer>

Q: What was the initial stimulus for the choreography of Infra?

The idea for Infra came from this idea of 'Vida Infra', the Latin for 'See Below', and I really wanted to create a piece that kind of saw below the surface of a city, you know actually, or saw below the surface of an individual of a person, and that's where it came from really. It came in a context where in 2007 there were the London bombings and London had a very particular feeling at that time. It was exposed in a really extreme way to an act of violence and people behaved very very differently and there was a different type of humanity in the city that you don't normally see. We are all so busy usually when we are in this city of getting to where we are going ignoring all the other people that are around us, and kind of just being very mono track very focused on our needs and those bombings in London actually broke open the city, where people really genuinely did have an empathy and a feeling and a care for one another. And I thought that was a really interesting, the tension. The tension between what cities are normally like and this extreme event that happened, and then what they become. And so that very much populated my thinking when I was making this piece.

Q: What resources did you refer to? e.g. books, images, art works etc.

I think always my first point of call with researching work is looking at the internet, kind of culling and foraging for information that's going to resource this idea, and you never know really where an idea is going to strike you, so if I'm looking at an image bank of stuff which is interesting and related, I think, to the idea, all of a sudden something comes to the fore, something becomes so present that feels like you need to then capture that, take it out and put it in a file and that becomes part of the, almost the history of the piece. So I think for research all the time I'm forging, I'm looking for different ways of being able to get cues and inputs into making something in the studio, so when I go into the studio I'm in a state of preparedness. I'm not trying to describe the stimulus, the stimuli. I'm not trying to take a particular picture and represent that on stage, but the real part of this is building an imagination for a work, it then can't help but come out while you are making something.

Q: What is Infra about, what is the subject matter?

It's quite difficult when you think about subject matter, because so many things influence the way in which a piece is made. For me, it's not a direct translation from one idea into something, it's a kind of a field of ideas that in some way give me a constraint in which to work. But if I was pushed on Infra I'd say Infra, this idea of inferences, what is below the surface of what people present in kind of their everyday life. What are kind of some of the emotional territories that run, that river that runs under everybody's lives, that nobody else knows about. What is that internal life, and how can you give life to that on stage where you see these very beautiful, I guess portraits of individuals and relationships changing context and evolving over time. So the subject matter is, a human subject

matter and is about an emotional content, where people are revealing themselves in ways they haven't done before.

Q: How did you develop your ideas, and what was your approach to choreographing Infra?

So I work in different ways when I'm working in the studio, so sometimes I come in and I've already got some material that I've kind of worked out or that's in my body, and I give it directly to the dancers, and that's a way of choreographing that everybody will recognise. The chorographer stands at the front, and teaches some moves. But I don't tend to stay in that mode for very long. One of the other things that I really love to do is work with what's inside the dancer, and my job is to creatively get it out of them. So it's really about their self-expression. And you do this by almost working with dancers as architectural objects to think with, so they are there in front of you and you can move them and you can suggest things to them and they offer you movements. Collaboratively you start to generate this language together, and that's a way of choreographing that I really love to do and I guess another way, a third way might be, I might set an improvisational task, so I might set an idea and that idea is something we all explore together and we all invent movements for and we start to generate the language that way. But that's only really the alphabet, that's only really one part of choreography. The next part of choreography is actually, how do those bits, of things, work together. How do you structure them? What is the form of the piece? And for me choreography then applies to all aspects of the work, it's the lighting design, it's the set design, it's the music. All of those things are actually choreographic problems, it's not just what the dancers are doing, it's the dancers in relationship to, all of those other things, and that's where I guess the expertise of the chorographer comes in.

Q: What decisions did you make about the dancers, how do you select the dancers and what influenced your choices about number and gender of dancers that are in Infra?

I always like to choose dancers partly dancers that I know really well and dancers that I don't know at all. So when I'm working I try really make a mix from that, so somebody like Ed Watson, I'll have worked for many many years with and he's been in many of my ballets. But equally I'd be very interested to work with some younger dancers, who have never been in any of my pieces. Because again I think that we all push each other to create different kinds of solutions to the physical problems that we are thinking about. So if you think about choreography as an example of physical thinking, it's about, how does a body think in a space. And you need other people to think with, dancers are very collaborative in that way. So I guess the thing I need to most in a dancer is a dancer that is curious, and a dancer this is really willing to try something new, to experiment and I think through experimentation, ballet, the form of ballet develops and that's what we all want to see.

Q: Are there any key movement phrases that are particularly important to Infra?

In terms of kind of movement motifs or things that are common to all, I wanted to try and build a language that first of all came from a very prosaic language, a very pedestrian language. What do people normally do? So a lot of the language is coming from walking, running, sitting, very kind of normal actions which we then in some way start to develop and make richer. So if you look through the piece, you will see these moments of very low key physicality. Stuff which is very in a way anti-ballet, so if you think about ballet being a very code deified, formal language, which is really extraordinary and very expressive. You have to learn it, you have to know what the lexicon and logic of it is and you have to be able to work with it. I thought there would be something very interesting about contrasting that with something which everyone understands. We've all got a body and we all move and all know what it's like to walk. We all know what it's like to run, through

the streets. And I thought that those two things together might provide a really interesting tension, for audiences to be able to feel what was happening on stage.

I just thought that there was something kind of very poetic, if you like, about having literally masses of people walk past a very kind of intimate moment. Because if you can imagine that moment just in a wall, just in somebody's house, this is happening all of the time. If you could imagine that moment actually when you pass somebody who has sadness in their eyes, in the street, you have that all of the time. It's just an amplification of that. I thought that would be something really interesting and also I wanted to bring the pedestrian walking of Julian's set onto the stage, I wanted a moment which was full of people just crossing, just walking, feeling as if they were going on some kind of journey at the expense of everything else. While this one figure, this solitary figure was in some form of kind of breakdown and for me it creates a very kind of beautiful poignancy, which I think really works at that moment in the piece.

Q: What is the structure of Infra, what influenced the way you structured Infra?

The structure of Infra really is based around a series of kind of little vignettes, so their little units of material, musical material and physical material that have a particular idea, so for example, I wanted to make a piece which was an accumulating piece, a piece that was building in rhythm and building in numbers, with all of the company that started with just two people in a box. And you see the language of that starting to propagate and you start to understand it, and your eye gets used to it. And then you bring some counterpoint language on, so this is two couples now dancing and you start to see relationships between. The brain very quickly starts to understand what the relationship of those are and then you build another one, and another one, until you have six couples in boxes. And what it does is almost prime the imagination, primes the brain, to be able to watch. So you see one kind of motif first, the brain gets used to it, and then over time you can build complexity. So if you think about the twelve people everybody is going to have a different view of those twelve. But when you watch one person it's actually much narrower - that the field of vision. And so you start, in a way of thinking about the structure in terms of fat and thin, in terms of forwards and backwards, rather than just how many people, and you do that musically, and you do it with lighting. How does lighting help you push a dancer forwards? How does lighting allow you to structure a space where people can read language? And for me those are the exciting choreographic problems that keep me engaged in wanting to make chorography. Because they are never perfect, right, they are just a proposition, an offer, and you see how that works and then you settle on one, but a few years later you want to do a totally different thing and that's the beauty of choreography, that it's always in a state of change.

Q: What decisions did you make about the lighting, set and costume design?

With this piece, what really drove the kind of instinct to make, was that I wanted to work with this incredible visual artist called Julian Opie. And what he does is, he kind of reduces, in a really economical and minimal way the physical signature of people down to its essence and you can see it. You can recognise who the individual is, but it's very iconographic, it's just like kind of a line drawing. I'd seen a lot of his work in that area, and I'd wanted to work with him. I wanted to place the whole of this dance underneath. Literally underneath this street scene seeing this very pedestrian, kind of prosaic street scene, as if all the bricks had been taken out of the back wall of the theatre at Covent Garden, and you could just see people passing. And so that was the very, very first idea, how is it that you can get Julian Opie to create his first work for the stage and then from there things started to develop. I had a very clear idea that I wanted to work with Max Richter, who is an incredible composer, who is able to work with music that is both electronic and orchestral. So it's incredible live instruments, as well as, manipulation of sound and found sound.

But the thing that he does really brilliantly is that he taps into, memory. He gives you evocations in sounds that make you think about other things and that's a really incredible way of being able to anchor your work in an emotional territory that we all share. And so for me, Max's music is always very wide screen, it's a landscape in which all of this incredible work emerges. So in *Infra* we were working a little bit from a T.S. Elliot poem 'The Wasteland' because there was something around the language and the scope and the expanse of that, which was really rich to fuel our imagination. I would send him a few lines and he would create a kind of musical idea from that, and send it back to me. He might just send me a musical idea from something he had had as a reference. We would just exchange in that way and then I would say this is really interesting or I really feel for this, or I'm not sure about this. And at that moment you don't throw anything away, even the things you are not sure about, because you never know when they are going to be useful. But over time you start to build this collection of material, and then honestly it builds itself, it structures itself. You just know at a certain point that that jigsaw needs to be arranged in this way, and you do that together. And so that's the beautiful thing about working with a living composer, that you have the luxury of spending time with them, and you have the luxury of being able to develop something really genuinely together.

Lucy Carter has lit all my ballets in 24 years and so we have a very long term relationship. We started off very early on in the 1990s when I was still performing and she was lighting the work, and she's literally lit all of the pieces I have made. And why do I like her? Why do I work with her? First of all she is incredibly instinctive as a designer, I'm quite cerebral as a choreographer and she is very instinctive as a designer and it's quite interesting because she likes also to collect resources and information to be able to fuel her process, but she is amazing in the theatre doing it in real time. And then with Moritz Junge, again I have worked with him for a long time, and he's a designer who can really work at a broad range of spectrums. And so for Moritz I wanted to do something that was quiet, in some ways pedestrian with the costumes, especially with the crowds that walked across, but also just slightly heightened in terms of tone and he does that really well. He's got an amazing kind of facility to be able to work with dancers' bodies, because you can imagine dancers are doing the most extraordinary things. And the clothes that they wear make them feel a particular way, you know, you can't put a dancer in something they feel really uncomfortable in, because it effects at the end of the day, how they dance. We know that in life, right? If we are in clothes that we don't really feel work for us, we behave differently. And my job as a choreographer is to release, as best I can, the best performance from a dancer, and so what they wear is really, really important.

Q: How would you describe the style of the work?

Infra is a ballet and I think you know, what's important about it, is it is performed by ballet dancers, who have spent years training their bodies to do these extraordinary things. But what's amazing about ballet and the language of ballet, is that it's in constant change. There is a sense in which these bodies today are different from the bodies 50 years ago, they are eating better. They have a better relationship to understanding how the biomechanics of the body works, they're faster, they can turn more, they can jump higher. All of that sports science knowledge that we have now, applied to dance, has allowed these amazing athletes, to not only be able to improve their instrument, the technicity of their body but also to improve their creative capacities. And so the language of ballet is using language that is already known, and also exploiting the potential of these people that have trained years to do these extraordinary things. And so for me the style is a combination of very classical language and language that is just pushed. So we are exploring degrees of freedom, how far can you go when you are doing something like that? How is it that you might actually be able to, whilst doing these extraordinary things with the legs and the arms, move the back, which isn't often the case in ballet. Certainly not in terms of a kind of a loose articulation.

How is it that you can actually do complex co-ordinations, where your body is doing different things at different times - almost misbehaving. How can you do that? All of those are kind of co-ordination and control issues that you need amazing expertise to be able to do. It's not free dancing, because everything is totally set, but they have to have had that amazing training, to be able to unlock that side of their creative ability.

And that is what excites me about working with a ballet company, it's the potential to work with a lexicon or a logic that is known and pushing that to make an alphabet that is unknown, and those two working together and hopefully inspiring an audience.

Q: How did you want the audience to feel when watching Infra?

I think what's really important about making work is it all comes from you. It's not about having a voice that's says you should work with this kind of music or the rule is that you should do this. It's about having no rules, and about you really making sure, you do what you feel is about you. And if you can do that you will always find an audience for your work. Because people are interested in what is in your imagination and what have you got to say about the world in which you live. But what you want the work to be, I guess, is you want it to touch people in some kind of way and it might be emotionally. That's one way in which work might touch them but it also might be in a way which is quiet confrontational. It might be that actually they question what it is that they are seeing. It might be that they don't really know what the thing is in front of them. It might make them have to re-evaluate some of their assumptions about what dance is, or about what classical dance is. The purpose of art anyway is to provoke debate, it's to stimulate imagination, it's to promote thinking. It's not about, for me, having a nice evening in the theatre and enjoying something. Enjoyment might be a part of it, but it's not the only part of it. Ultimately you want the audience to leave the auditorium with images in their head, and a sense of moving in their body that carries them through life.

Q: Are there any particular moments the audience should look out for?

Rather than looking at the piece and going 'What does all this mean?' I would ask the question, 'What do you see?' and let meaning emerge. So if I see, I see a guy in the corner, I see another guy approach him, I see an orange light, just really note it in that way, as you are thinking about watching and all of a sudden, meaning starts to emerge, and that's really exciting when you do that, because you are kind of a co-conspirator, you are a co-creator of the work. And the work is meaningless until it's put in front of an audience. But the audience has to be willing to be able to construct meaning in that way. So I wouldn't look out for a certain thing. I would just look and go what do I notice, what do I see, and don't worry about what is the literal meaning of that work. And then afterwards start to talk about that with your friends.