

breaking the habit

Adrian Heathfield discusses the unruly work of Wendy Houston

One of the sweetest and most painful twists in the experience of watching contemporary performance lies in its ephemeral nature. For whilst performance values the creation of meaning in the moment which vanishes fast and leaves little record, it often gifts memories to its spectators that seem to be indelibly etched on their retinas. These enduring memories, of images and acts, have a peculiar associative power. They hang around performers long after the deeds are done, often coming in time to stand in for the performer's identity or for the work itself. When I think of Pina Bausch's work for instance, the first thing I see is an image of Bausch through the memory lens of Café Müller. A ghostly figure dancing blind, palms and wrists open to the world, stumbling against the chairs in the darkness as another woman treads air over the face and body of a fallen man. This haunting image is partly an effect of the iconic power of certain artists but it also hints at the meaningful affinity between fine performance and trauma.

Wendy Houston is another one of those performers that recurring images stick to with everlasting glue. She is perhaps best known for her unsettling roles in the physical theatre work of DV8. Her collaborations with Lloyd Newson from the mid 80s to the mid 90s asserted an errant feminine presence within a body of work primarily concerned with the shape and feel of masculine desire. When I think of Houston I see her at the end of *Strange Fish*, somehow simultaneously resilient and frail, carefully trying to tread a path into the auditorium across the rims of a series of long stem wine glasses. Houston tells me that people often misremember this moment, saying that she performed it in bare



Wendy Houston in *Happy Hour*. Picture by Chris Hart

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feet, but the distortion is merely an index of the power of the image. It is an extraordinary sequence, full of the risk and emotional consequence so typical of DV8's work, but it also says something about Houston's own art practice. As physical performance this is not so much choreography, as action with objects. It is unpredictable, process based, and stresses the real time of the event; in short, it bears the formal hallmarks of performance art.

In many ways it is a mistake to think of Houston just as a dancer, or to approach her work solely through the frame of dance aesthetics. Over the last 15 years she has collaborated with an array of significant theatre and performance artists, moving from work with Lumiere & Son, Rose English and Neil Bartlett, to more recent projects with Forced Entertainment. The last few years have also seen her develop a series of formally innovative solo works that should make even the most conservative dance critics cautious of their terminology and critical ground. The moving body is still a key concern of her practice, but the principal scene of her experimentation is choreography in relation to other aesthetic elements of performance, such as text, objects, place and music. She has found new collaborators for this work in composer John Avery and Tim Etchells the writer and director from Forced Entertainment. In the main the solo pieces have been made without external direction and without the company of the mirror. Her choreographic language remains close to that of her dance-theatre heritage, with its melding of the everyday gestural into more abstract and symbolic forms. The familiar sense of physical risk and extremity is also present, but her often simultaneous synthesis of spoken language with movement and her use of strategies from performance art are taking her into a radically different territory.

Houston's process often begins with formal restrictions: these may be physical, textual, temporal, or musical, but they enable her to generate movement sequences that are then worked and re-worked in different relations until she is happy with the form. She operates no hard and fast rule around whether a section of a piece will originate from text, movement or sound. There is a healthy quotient of thieving in this process, from other choreographic vocabularies, from textual sources,

until the material is fully appropriated and 'owned'. Sensing her way into the material, she moves by formal and felt association which gives the work its lived-in, organic and seamless feel. She is concerned with keeping the material open for as long as possible, in a game of self trust, and she is increasingly able to shift the structure of the work late in the process (she learnt this from Etchells). This openness extends into the performance event itself - she likes



to allow an improvisational element into the work, to exercise what she calls "the thinking on your feet muscle." Houston is adept in the real-time tactics of performance art, she reveals in the moment when the polish and plan fall away and you are left in an exposed relation with the audience. "I am chasing a dare that the theatre stage does not hold anymore, a dare that it is also hard to conjure for yourself as a dancer: to keep the work alive and unknown to you."

For Houston part of this liveness is about identifying the habitual patterns of movement that her body consciously and unconsciously follows. Once they are found she can begin to work with and mutate them, perhaps even unlearn them. Houston tells me a story about her director's residency in Norway. She had been having some back trouble and decided to take advantage of their superior healthcare system. The consultant is pointing at an X-ray of her back with some alarm and explaining that the disks of cartilage that cushion the vertebrae at the top and base of her spine have almost disappeared. Not knowing her

profession he finds this inexplicable for a woman of her age and asks if she has ever suffered from a violent fall. We both laugh, as Houston's working life has been spent falling. In fact, this is the other 'traumatic' image of Houston that haunts me: she is briefly framed in light as she falls helplessly from on high in the stage space into the dark below. The image is from the opening of DV8's *If Only*. Houston would perform her nightly drop from

Filmed by Wendy Houston from *Take Me to the River*. Picture by Jessica Handman

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a 15 foot ladder into an unseen crash mat. In the deep of the night after the X-ray she wakes startled, her body caught in the posture of that learnt traumatic fall. But Houston is not telling this for its familiar tale about the real toll of work at the edge. She is more interested in the dream of falling and the way her body has learnt and kept the posture of that fall. In making work she tries to find and break her body's habits. It is a way of dancing otherwise, not simply against what her brain tells her body to do, but what her body itself falls back on in moving: a kind of creative de-programming of her body memory. As with the dream of falling, the psychic and emotional content ingrained in the flesh can be used as a generative force in her work.

Some might see her eclecticism and discipline jumping as a lack of focus, a restlessness which prevents Houston from deepening and refining her craft as a dancer. But Houston is not chasing perfection in the old



disciplinary frame. She has difficulty understanding the logic of purism which she suspects is still very much in evidence in the contemporary dance scene, even amongst some of the more innovative dance-theatre practitioners. She thinks that the goal of technical excellence is often used as a way of erasing the presence of the performer, as if the formal framework could stand aside from the person executing it. So rather than seeing the human peculiarities and ticks of the dancer as corruptions of the work, she sees them as an inevitable part of its content. She does not want to erase the personality and individuality of the performer, but instead work through these as content. Houston's approach to this personalisation of form is complex and subtle. Her work with autobiographical elements is conditioned by a sense of play and her use of the personal is always connected to wider social, emotional and sexual-political concerns. True to her dance-theatre roots she is making work that is full of sexuality and desire, but she has not fallen into the solipsism and limited address of some of the current clutch of British small-scale physical theatre companies.

Amidst all her interdisciplinary shifting there is some irony then, in the fact that the aesthetic ploy for which she is most renowned, speaking as she moves, originates in the dance class. It was here in the grip of repetitive physical processes, where the tutor slipped fluidly between talking and dancing, that Houston first felt the theatrical power of the combination. She began to see that this play between word and body never resolved into an illustrative relation where action was mastered by speech, but instead language moved in an abstract way, dissolved its sense and learnt a different rhythm. "I could not understand why anyone would want to get rid of that articulation in their work. There is no silence in a dancer's brain, but someone has put it in their mouth. I kept looking at mute dancers on stage and wondering 'what are you thinking?' So I found a way to liberate that energy, which is more present in the process, rather than hide it behind the work."

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