

DANCE GAMES

Presented by Freddie Opoku-Addaie, Mary Ann Hushlak and Stephanie Schober

Freddie: The concept for *Dance Games* came from my watching a documentary. My mother had videoed it for me whilst I was in Ghana between the ages of 4 to 9. The documentary was about the cultural structure of an Ashanti (tribe) market. In a clip, a group of schoolgirls were playing a game of passing a stone along the floor. It was more a skimming action as the stone was passed from one person to the next, all of them crouched down in a circle. The pulse was a beat and it 'served' their singing of a song about a heroine, Ya Santuwa, who is a legendary figure in Ashanti Ghanaian history. Returning back to England at the age of 9, my mum showed me this documentary. What I first remember from it was how simple the game was and whether there was anything similar in this country, whether there was any game like it.

Then, in 2008, working with a youth group made me think of this game and why I hadn't seen it in this country. I found myself asking why hadn't I seen it in this country, in particular because games are quite universal. And so I wanted to see what an urban East London version could be. The game is, after all, a movement game and something indeterminate.

This initial piece was called *Set in Stone* and it absolutely was an urban London version of the game. Just after the work was re-staged, a friend gave me a book by Edward T. Hall called *The Silent Language*, and said, you must read this. May I say I've not yet returned it to him and I've underlined it and underlined it and it is full of post-it notes.

It fed my thinking about culture, games, and I'd always wanted to do more with this particular game. I wanted to concentrate just on this concept of passing the stone, duration and what else could happen within this frame with the parameters and rules being constant. As a choreographer, I always knew there'd be a certain way and a certain aesthetic that I'd use. I wondered how might others address the same parameters. And so I approached Jorge Crejis and Stephanie Schober and *Dance Games* was born.

Stephanie: I want to talk about the beginning of the project because the initial moment of setting ourselves up was really important. Collaboration between three choreographers was a new process to each of us and we needed to think carefully about the commitment we'd be making to each other. So from the start we wanted to create a situation in which we could feed into each

other's process, as something significant and also at the right time. Our basic question was, how we could use the collaboration as a strategy to explore the game. We believed that this would help us to develop ourselves as artists and also to set the seeds to eventually create new work that would surprise us. There was just this curiosity about how the mix of our three voices could bring that game to live.

In our first meeting Freddie introduced the game to us. Because it was such a concrete starting point - everyone understands games - the conversation between the three of us evolved quite naturally. We began to break down the game, and identified bits that caught our attention. And we established a framework, namely, some parameters and rules that we would all work with. We imported 3 things directly from Freddie's original game, which were:

- maintaining a regular pulse
- always passing the stone on to another person
- moving the stone along a set pathway

We all felt that in some way this approach touched on our individual fields of interest. We have all explored rhythm and pulse in our previous works. We also felt comfortable with submitting ourselves to a very structured set of instructions rather than working from an open space. So we were confident that we could bring something to the table, and we got quite carried away.

Having established the three parameters, we then added the set of rules. Some of our choices were carefully considered. For example we decided that we would all work with the same tempo. Jorge got out his mobile phone, found a metronome app and we sat there listening to different tempos, deciding on one, which would be similar to a very slow resting heart rate pulse of 36 beats per minute.

Space was another element that we spoke about. The game suggests something three- dimensional that could be viewed in the round. We set a sort of cyclical pathway that would come back to its own beginning.

Some other choices would be more random, for example we decided to pass the stone 20 times on the long diagonals and 12 times on the shorter lines across. We did the project in the year 2012, easy to remember.

So there we were - we'd created a lap, which would take us back to our starting point and in one lap the stone touches the floor 64 times [20+20+12+12] at a speed of 36- beats/ min.

We had the budget to invite 5 dancers, which would open up a lot of possibility. We then realized that if the stone could be passed randomly between people, rather than always to the same person, people could be

freed up. They wouldn't have to touch the stone every 5th beat.

We all met – the three of us and our dancers - at the Royal Opera House for a first rehearsal, to have a go at the rules we'd created. The three of us joined in, needing to try it out for ourselves, with Freddie, Jorge or I taking turns to step out and watch the basic rules being played out. One of our first challenges was to get a sense of what the shortest and what the longest times were in terms of having to touch the stone and being able to break away from the group and do something else.

We were completely absorbed by the task and there was a feeling of contributing and participating, between all of us, dancers and choreographers. We felt we knew what we are doing and saw potential in the concept. We have all experienced creative processes that become too rigid, and processes that are too open, which are equally suffocating. But it seemed that we had struck the right balance. It became a guiding principle, without our really discussing it. When you choreograph by yourself, you kind of just know this, but here it was clear that maintaining the balance – opening or tightening the process – was now essentially part of the structure we'd created and we had to stay aware of that.

After the first rehearsal each choreographer then spent three days in the studio with the dancers. It was important to us that each choreographer had some time to explore his or her own ideas after the parameters and rules had been set up collaboratively. We had the opportunity to stimulate the process in the dancers in our own individual way, to create our own individual material. We also watched parts of each other's rehearsal.

Freddie: I do want to come back to some of the insights and ideas in *The Silent Language* that made me think. I will read two quotes in particular because I keep coming back to them and they definitely informed where I was and am with *Dance Games*.

“For anthropologists culture has long stood for the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things.’

“Patterns are those implicit cultural rules by means of which sets are arranged so that that they take on meaning.”

What I realized we had found in *Dance Games* was a behaviour pattern – and material also, as in the stone. But what I was interested in now were the different attitudes that could be revealed. I wanted a contrasting dimension that I couldn't do myself. It needed to be a collaboration; collaboration is what it was and is still fundamental. In fact, I would go so far as to say that culture is collaboration and vice versa. I would also add that culture is NOT about being explicit; it's about an unspoken code and finding

ways to learn and really hear, see and play with the parameters and rules of a code.

An additional point - we had also decided together which performers we wanted to work with. We knew we'd need some very patient and proactive individuals, who could be flexible and willing to engage with three choreographers in a single piece. Our dancers were: Nathan Johnston, John Ross, Maria Olga Palliani, Matsumi Saito and Jamie Morgans. Nathan injured his back in the process and I stepped in as a performer in Stephanie's duration.

Mary Ann: I'm the dramaturg on the piece. As a dramaturg, I work in different ways, depending on when in the process I come to the piece, which is to say if I'm there right at the beginning working with what might this 'thing' be, it is quite different than if I come in when the material being created is well on its way. I want to stress one is no 'better' or preferable to the other. It's simply a different looking.

In *Dance Games*, the material was pretty much made. In that context, I tend not to want to know anything about the piece. My attitude is akin to a film editor who never wants to be on the shoot because on the shoot there's all the stuff (visually, aurally etc) that happens around the shooting frame and we keep that extra in our mind, whereas rather if the editor sees only the rushes, it's only what the audience will see. But, also, my not wanting to know anything is, partly, so that I look very fully and very closely, and partly so we can discuss from a clean slate what I 'get' and don't 'get', what I sense and what I see. Coming in as a collaborator with the parameters set and material made is absolutely fine; simply put it probably means my questions and suggestions will be more about shaping what's there, in this case three lots of what's there.

At my first viewing of *Dance Games*, I was initially mesmerized by the stone, both as object and material and the sound, the care that was taken as it was placed on the floor, the tempo and how the performers totally focused. By the end of that first rehearsal, I was completely aware that I was looking at a 'game' structure and I immediately thought of the first chapter (6 pages of it) of a book Johan Huizinga titled *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element of Culture* – note **of** culture, not **in** culture.

I knew these 6 pages would help enormously in assessing what makes us recognize game codes and therefore what could later be brought to the fore, or not. Suffice to say when Freddie then outlined the parameters to me, I wasn't at all surprised by them. Nor was I surprised when Freddie mentioned Hall's *The Silent Language*. For all that Hall was an anthropologist and Huizinga a cultural historian, they worked from similar assumptions. In short, I was on the right page in the collaboration process.

As the R&D went on, my practical questions for a next stage and performance were about how could the material from the three choreographers be juxtaposed, layered, spliced, emphasized and/or repeated. And where, spatially, could an audience be? Our post-sharing discussion – with the four of us – completely worked from the set parameters, the framework and the material. By now, this collaboration couldn't be self-centered. It had become a different way of looking at each of us and a way of working together. By being aware, we tapped into the unspoken differences and the meaningful similarities, which, in my view, is what collaboration and culture is.

Stephanie: At some point each choreographer became frustrated. We needed to find a process that allowed us to keep playing rather than feeling stuck and having to remember too many things at once. We were searching for ideas that could be introduced and would remain within the rules. Making a small change had a domino effect because, for us as the choreographers everything else needed to be reconfigured in order to stay truthful to the rules, and for the dancers, having to reconfigure their 'auto-pilot, it was even more complex. This was unnerving to do under time pressure and really required more time than we had. We definitely questioned the amount of rules we had given ourselves

We presented the three sketches in a sharing to an invited audience at The Place and then met up after to evaluate and make future plans.

One audience member said: I want to see more competition! This was a question that began to concern us. Where is the competition located in this set up? We came to realize that we'd need to refine our definition of a game. Who is playing against whom? Why do we so care if someone makes a mistake? How do we draw the audience into the game and can we or should we create empathy with the dancers?

Freddie: We now want to do a second stage of development and the questions/concerns that I'd want to put on the table for us to investigate are:

- I'd like to open out a rule, that within our parameters we can add or drop **one** rule. I would exclude behaviour patterns and material already made.
- With *Dance Games* being a collaborative culture, another idea I'd like to try out is to invite an outside 'editor' and see what he or she would compositionally make of all our material.
- And finally I'm interested in experimenting with the staging in terms of the audience and whether it could be watched from one side, two sides, three sides, four sides or from above.