

# MAKING DANCE TO SURVIVE TORTURE

by john scott

**My company, Irish Modern Dance Theatre,** has interesting dancers: Ashley, Cheryl, Derry – all ex Cunningham – plus Becky, James, Philip – fierce, passionate Irish dancers. Then in 2003, my company, my life and my work turned upside down when I was approached by an organization called the Centre for Care for Survivors of Torture to give dance workshops for their 'clients'. Since then my company also includes Florence from Togo – spine damaged, body covered in burns – no dance training, Kiribu – whose husband was shot in front of her and her family. She has bad knees but when she raises her arms – the intensity of her gaze and the emotions pouring out of her makes an entire audience and cast catch their breaths and weep. There's Nina, a former athlete and teacher with a serious form of Asthma. Then there's Saed, a young nomad from Sudan – who jumps like Nijinsky. He received surgery for injuries he is too ashamed to talk about.

**"Torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed, or intimidating him or other persons." UN Definition of Torture**

I wondered what a Torture Survivor looked like. The first day, I entered the room with 10 dignified people. Mike Walker, the organizer, said not to ask questions – the clients are not ready to talk. Talking about the past triggers flashbacks. The aim of torture is not to kill the victim, but to break down the victim's personality. A big effect of torture is total loss of trust.

I told them I was happy and honored to meet them, that I understood they had come on long, difficult journeys to be in Ireland, in the room together. I said my work did not tell stories but was abstract, that we would experiment with dance. They could choose to say and do as much or as little as they wanted. They nodded. This marked the beginning of our 'deal': No questions asked, no information given. Just move.

I was scared to push physically in case of their injuries. We made a circle and I taught an exercise from Anna Sokolow – thrust out your arms with massive force, hold them out and slowly lower them while lifting inside and lowering the arms thinking up, up up. We gradually raised our arms. I told them to imagine they were opening to the sky – some of them smiled. I told them to exhale and hold their arms up. Kiribu, lifted her arms slower than the others and softly sighed and opened her mouth in a radiant smile. She held them up and closed her eyes and swayed from side to side. I was winging what to do next. I copied her and got everyone to do the same. Looking at Kiribu hold her arms in a beautiful arc, made me feel tears coming to my eyes. We all felt a profound moment of peace. She describes what she does thus:

**"I like to open my hands, it's like beginning a life. I want to be free, with just purity in the air. "You go to a psychologist and you talk – it is like rewinding the tape of your life. They tell you to talk everything from how things went wrong, and that is sad. "**

I knew from that moment that I could never leave them. I did my best to hold onto them. And they held onto me.

I tried exercises from Pablo Vela and Meredith Monk's workshops: Name improvisations, making a gesture or movement or sound from their daily lives, then one from the past. A Nigerian man kept throwing his arms out with terrific force with a look in his eyes that burned through you. Someone began waving. He said he was waving goodbye to his family, who had all been massacred. A man and woman did a rotation with their necks and backs, then she raised her head, and she was glowing. I was overwhelmed by the richness of each tiny solo, of how each person moved and where the impulse to move came from.

People came on wet winter nights – despite ailments, complex schedules, living in hostels with rigid timetables and curfews – sometimes ten in a workshop – sometimes one – but we kept going. Every workshop was different based on the need to involve everyone present. One night I had two ex soldiers, we did fast physical things and jumps. Another group did arm movements, sound, language,, anything to keep the thread to keep them working together. It felt like water divining – looking for a flash, for something to validate their involvement, find their dances. We kept trying new things for each new situation.

One night only one man came – Sebastiao. I suggested cancelling the workshop but he cried so I gave a whole workshop just for him. He was tense and couldn't do anything fluid. I got him to breath and move his hands. I then asked him to

talk, any language, he gasped like someone who was drowning, he waved his arms and made one of the most beautiful dances I ever saw, breathing the whole time. He said:

**"I closed my eyes and I was doing that movement with the arms, thinking about my homeland, about my past, everything what happened in my country"**

At the end he cried – he spoke a dialect he only spoke with his family who were now dead.

At that moment I knew I had to make a performance and show these beautiful, heartbreaking and totally compelling dances we were making. They were not dancing to be beautiful or to entertain. They danced because they had to.

**"When we dance, I could say I'm in heaven because I'm mingling with so many people others can't see – I'm mixing with people who are dead, it's like I'm talking to them with my hands" – Kiribu**

I wanted to show their dignity, their individuality as people, not as victims. Over months of workshops working with two of my dancers, Aisling Doyle and Philip Connaughton, we looked for material. The only clear thing was that there would be a performance on 26th June – the UN day in recognition of Victims of Torture.

Fall and Recover became the working title but as we worked, no other title was appropriate – the description of Doris Humphrey's technique matched their situation:

**'Dance occurs in the frightening moment between falling and recovering by the arc swept by a body moving between equilibrium and uncontrol'**

In the Tower of Babel section of Fall and Recover the dancers speak 11 different languages at the same time – the languages are like music all telling a terrible

story – and we the spectators understand.

They articulate the unspeakable – the performance gives us a chance to see their soul inside their broken bodies and lives.

Performances became a political act of defiance – Showing Refugees, without passports – performing, speaking, dancing – forces the audience to confront and acknowledge a part of society they do not normally see. Laurie Uprichard just put FALL AND RECOVER in DUBLIN DANCE FESTIVAL and it still leaves audiences stunned and found a vast new public.

**"In the dance is how my life was before everything went wrong." Kiribu**

I started to learn the daily reality of being a refugee and become politicized. My company rehearses, tours, makes grant applications – like any dance company. But I also go to court houses, call lawyers and sometimes write affidavits to appeal Deportation orders. Sometimes I go to the Irish Garda National Immigration Bureau (immigration police) and wait with a dancer with a Deportation Order – waiting for it to be stamped. And watching to check they aren't taken inside and snatched away to the airport.

I have read case histories documenting rapes, arrests. It degrades me to know intimate information about the people I work with. I watch them respond with dignity when someone calls 'Dirty Nigger' at them in the

street. When their cellphone rings it could be news from home, from children they can never be reunited with, from a sick mother they cannot visit.

I now use everyone in all our works. Charles Atlas is making a new piece with us. Sara Rudner and Chris Yon work with us too. We have danced in Brazil, Palestine and Israel. Some people have moved on and no longer need to dance. Many still come. We get new people too. We are like a family and I feel I am one of the luckiest choreographers alive.

**"In my heart I say: "OK. It will be OK. I open my arms and say it's alright, that's my past. I have to move on" Kiribu**

*Fall and Recover was part of Dublin Dance Festival 09 – It will tour in spring 2010*

*The White Piece was part of the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival 09 – it will tour in Winter/Spring 2010*

*Photo by Chris Nash*

*quotes from interview with Frances Burns/BBC Radio 4 program 'DANCE SAVES LIVES*

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