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Intellect

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Interview with independent dance artist Cecilia Macfarlane

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Abstract

In this interview, independent dancer Cecilia Macfarlane talks about her project with the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN) in 2013. To date, Macfarlane has undertaken eight trips to Japan, primarily to introduce her community dance practice to Japanese artists. However, during her visit in 2013, she was invited to learn folk dances from the north-east of Japan, in the Tohoku region most affected by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. The interview is movingly interwoven with Macfarlane's experience of losing her son. The sudden devastation following his death is described by Macfarlane as a 'personal tsunami', which is discussed alongside the loss and destruction wrought in Japan by earthquake, tsunami and nuclear devastation. In this way, autobiographical material is brought to bear on understanding the experiences of the survivors and to contribute to the development of Macfarlane's artistic process alongside the project.

Keywords

Japan

tsunami

community dance

folk dance

[grief](#)

[site-specific](#)

The project organizers at the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network identified that the Japanese inhabitants in Tohoku were receiving assistance after the 2011 tsunami disaster but also needed to take active role in rebuilding. Norikazu Sato from JCDN notes that

...something that a local person said left a deep impression on me – ‘It is necessary for us to stand on our own feet already, it’s better now if nothing comes from outside’. Like this statement, we finally did not go there to give aid, and this project became the impetus for us to be able to go to Tohoku and make something together with the people there. (2014)

With the pressing awareness of how easily so much can be lost, this project focussed on preserving local traditional dances – particularly as there is currently a lack of successors for continuing these dances. The aims of the project included developing a festival and making films with English language translations to share Tohoku’s local folk culture. Including Macfarlane as a resident artist was proposed as a way to help those from outside of Japan to find the films accessible, with a view to develop the project into an international scheme where people would visit the area to learn the dances.

Macfarlane’s process of learning these set dances is contrasted with her own somatic, site-specific and community-based practice, which she continued to explore during the course of the project. Maintaining her practice throughout the project was

important to Macfarlane, and it also allowed her to deal with the experience of learning these traditional dances through watching and repetition. Interestingly, she often felt like she was ‘drowning’ [when learning the material](#), and describes many anecdotal stories that reveal how deeply personal, social and cultural devastation were interlinked. One of these stories comes from her encounter with a fisherman who heard the ground crack beneath his boat at the moment when the earthquake happened. Macfarlane later details how her movement vocabulary was ‘cracked’ open through her experience of visiting Japan and also the loss of her son. The interview combines personal process, artistic creation and social commentary in the characteristic way in which Macfarlane undertakes her work, as individual and community issues are connected to the world of creative expression.

This interview links with several important strands that have been addressed recently in the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*. The topic of dealing with grief appeared in the last open call issue, with Helen Poynor sharing her insights in an article on the process of moving through the loss of three significant people in her life. Poynor (2013: 169) suggests how ‘an embodied expression of mourning might offer an alternative to English culturally acceptable expressions of grief’. Similarly, Macfarlane addresses how the death of her son was continually present in her movement work, as she journeyed through learning Japanese dance, improvising in sites in Tohoku, and developing performances afterwards in the United Kingdom. Notably, both Poynor and Macfarlane reflect on moments of gravitational pull towards the ground in their movement practices following the devastation of loss, with recuperation through attending to the tiredness of the body. Another element that

they both share is the urge to work creatively with the autobiographical material emerging from grief, but also the need for time before this can happen.

Somatic practitioners often engage with autobiographical material in performance, and Macfarlane's work displays how the personal can be interlinked with social and cultural issues in creative practice. Autobiographical performance is sometimes critiqued as 'self-indulgent', inappropriately selling personal stories, or solidifying ideas of a stable 'self' or single perspective on reality. However, this interview with Macfarlane highlights a way in which autobiography can inform an understanding of broader issues. While the Japanese tsunami and Macfarlane's loss are not the same, the interview reveals how her personal journey has influenced her process of working within Japan, in both the preservation of folk dances along with the development of new artistic works. Deidre Heddon (2007: 17) notes that 'devising autobiographical performances, then, provides a means for the critical analysis and questioning of our immediate social environments and their impact on everyday practices'. Macfarlane's work shows, with her extensive experience as a community-based artist, how autobiographical landscapes are linked with social and cultural contexts, suggesting the underlying belief that the individual is impacted by the community and environment that they inhabit.

During the interview Macfarlane charts the relationship between her own cultural background and the experience of working in a Japanese setting. Issues such as ways of teaching in different cultures arise, and while essentializing cultural traits and stereotypes are to be avoided, Macfarlane honestly compares examples such as her

work with children in the United Kingdom and Japan. At times, Macfarlane also finds common modes of communicating and understanding across cultures. The cultural and contextual aspects of somatic practices have also been addressed recently in the journal's special issue entitled 'Transcultural Perspectives on Somatic Practices and Research' (2014). The special issue editors [André](#) Grau and [Sylvie](#) Fortin -note that

...our starting point was that bodies are unequivocally culturally, socially and politically mediated, and therefore they are conceptualized, understood and used differently in different contexts, cultural or other. Yet we also acknowledged that as human beings we belong to a single species and that unless we have at least some shared understandings across cultures, no cross-cultural dialogue and understanding would be possible. (2014: 4)

This fine line between working with cultural difference and also finding a shared dialogue can be traced in the interview, alluding to the 'dynamic tensions between the "culturally inscribed body" and the "lived bodily experience"' (Grau and Fortin 2014: 5).

Finally, I would also like to place the interview in context. Having moved to the United Kingdom ~~in-recently-times~~, I wanted to get to know the local dance scene and local practitioners' work. Sarah Whatley, editor of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, initially introduced me by e-mail to Macfarlane, and I then went to attend a Japanese Noh theatre lecture demonstration (mentioned at the end of the interview) that took place at the Nissan Institute of Japanese Studies in Oxford University in

November 2013. The event explored not only the traditional form of Noh theatre but also comparisons with contemporary dance forms, so Cecilia Macfarlane and Sarah Whatley were invited as local contemporary dancers to perform in response to a traditional Noh intonation of text. Following this experience of the meeting of Japanese traditional theatre forms with the improvised contemporary dance at Oxford, I was intrigued to find out more about the intercultural, intergenerational and community work that forms a large part of Macfarlane's practice. Soon after, I met with Macfarlane at Coventry University to record the interview, which resulted in a much longer discussion than can be included here. My own ~~research is interests~~ in somatic practices in performance, ~~and but I have also have an interest~~ in Japanese theatre, ~~and meant that~~ I was particularly curious about how ~~this current project entailing~~ the learning of traditional forms of Japanese dance ~~was~~ mingled with Macfarlane's somatic approach.

What I am left with is a rich account of Macfarlane's methods as she appears ~~to be able~~ to amalgamate vast and varied experiences into her creative practice. Her extensive background in community practice ~~as well as her formative years in formal dance training~~ seems to have allowed her the flexibility to learn traditional Japanese dance forms through repetition but also to deepen her experience of them through her ongoing personal movement practice. The term 'integration' comes into mind as key in my understanding of her process, as everyday life, social and cultural issues, and arts practices are brought together in her work. Interviewing Macfarlane has also brought to life for me again the importance of autobiography and cultural context as a part of somatic practices. Macfarlane comments that 'the tsunami that happened was

with no warning; was complete devastation; complete emptiness; the landscape completely flattened. And so many of those words describe the grief and survival that I've been in these five years'. Readers will see how this informs Macfarlane's passage through her experience in Japan and also becomes part of her ongoing, shifting, integrative dance practice.

In the interview, Emma Meehan is identified as EM, and Cecilia Macfarlane is identified as CM.

EM: *Do you want to start then by telling us about the background to the project?*

CM: Yes, I've been to Japan eight times since 2009. For seven out of eight trips, I've been employed by the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN) to do projects. And the projects are normally site specific, and with all ages and all abilities. I've worked in six different cities and they're slowly establishing community dance. The term community dance wasn't really evident ten years ago ~~even~~.

The idea of inclusive dance or even dance being something that can be creative, which is my work and style of dance, was new to them.

Obviously, they could have had a dancer from England who went and just taught ballet – but the idea that I was going out to do something which was creative and facilitating was a very different journey. It is hard to translate the word facilitate into Japanese.

And it was a big shock to them, and to me really, the first time I was there that I was presented with people sitting in exactly the same position as I sat in. As I was the teacher, they had huge respect for me and were copying my every move. So, I had to learn to be very still so that nobody copied me. My facilitation is only as good as the translation because I don't speak Japanese. So, my work is often through imagery. That was an issue: what if the imagery doesn't translate correctly? So, I'd often use a prop or an object that would help illustrate and help people research into themselves.

Having worked there so much, I think it is safe to say that within Japanese culture people aren't expected to be expressing themselves personally. They either have the Zen approach which is just to go with what's happening but don't dwell on it; or they learn from a master who knows far more than them, and they will eventually hopefully get as good as that person and possibly get better. So, the idea of something being playful and creative and personal is really unique to them.

And yet I think they really liked how I worked and got it and understood it. I really liked the idea that the work that I've been doing for so long in the community, which I take for granted within the particular community in Oxford where I work, that suddenly there were people hungry for it on the other side of the world. And it just widened my horizons that the work I do is particularly precious somewhere else.

So, the seventh time I went, I was there for the longest time I've ever been, which was a month from October to November in 2013. For the first time, they were asking me to come, not to teach, devise, choreograph or direct, but actually to go and learn – which was a fabulous invitation.

Quite early on after the tsunami in 2011, I said to the director of Japanese Contemporary Dance Network: 'I would love to go and do some work in the north'. I'd only worked in the Ssouth. He obviously remembered that. And then when he was devising this new project he asked me if I'd like to go.

If you've been a victim of a tsunami or a disaster obviously there are people who are involved in rescue and give you blankets, food and drink. Then there are a raft of people who come and dance or sing for you – so it's all about giving to the victim, to the survivors. And they certainly needed it. But two and a half years later it was emerging that they needed to say: 'we've got something to give too'. Even though their land is devastated, they've lost many people in their families, they've lost their jobs, they've lost their clothes, their possessions, their houses; out of huge loss you still need to empower those who have lost so much. And I was fascinated by this.

So, they decided that the traditional Japanese folk dances that exist all over Japan, but particularly in the north-eastern region, they wanted them to be taught, to be transferred, because they had this realization of

how easily nearly everything got lost. So, for example some dancers were lost; some studios were lost; and some possessions and props were lost. There's ~~one-a~~ story ~~of the~~ ~~about a~~ swords from one of the dances being found stabbed into the ground where the tsunami would have left ~~them~~ it, ready to be pulled out of the ground again.

Some of the masks were lost and had to be remade – and these things in the traditional Japanese folk dances are so ancient, passed down from the thirteenth century onwards, and they're so precious. The fascinating thing was that I think I might have been the first westerner in that area to be allowed to learn their dances. Normally they're passed down from father to son, to grandson. Women weren't even included in that lineage. And then more recently there was a grandfather I met who passed it down to his younger granddaughter – so it has gone into women learning. But it's about passing it down. Most of the dances aren't written down; it's mainly passed on by word of mouth.

I think that JCDN was really interested in recording this heritage which was almost on the brink of being lost. So, in a way the tsunami highlighted the importance of it becoming more public. Some of the dances are incredibly private. I learnt five or six dances a tiny bit, but I had the privilege of wearing some of these masks, putting on the kimonos, wearing the shoes and the huge head dresses, and putting the drum between my legs and dancing with it.

I learnt them from father and son and grandson; I learnt them from granddaughter; I learnt them from little 5-year-old children in a primary school who'd been watching the dances since they were 3. I had a dance taught to me by women who were 82. I learnt from so many different people in so many different ways.

But the thing that was fascinating for me as a dancer was that it has been many years since I learnt to do dances verbatim. When I was at the Royal Academy of Dancing where I studied ballet and how to teach ballet, I learnt every step that was given to me in the syllabus. I also studied English folk dances which were on the syllabus then. But then as I've grown as a dancer and I have gotten older and begun to study other dance, particularly release-based technique and work with imagery, I mostly had left behind the copying of dance.

I do occasionally teach technique which involves some sequence that I might have made up, which then a group might copy as material which then provides information for making up their own dances. Most of my classes I could teach without demonstrating a thing because it's about the somatic practice. And it really works with the people in whatever setting, whether it's universities, in the community, in hospitals, in prisons, in projects. I really enjoy it and I know it's something I can do forever. So, it was a real challenge for me to be in a foreign country in a devastated landscape, not with a common language, being taught mainly by men to do men's dance and trying to do it as a woman, as an

older woman; it wouldn't usually have been a 65-year-old woman who was doing it. I was really grateful because they were clearly honoured to have me doing this, and filmed it all, and afterwards there were endless meetings about it.

One of the most moving times was when I learned the first dance, which was the Shishi-Odori up in the mountains, in the land outside the teacher's house where he's been carrying this dance and passing it down to his son and grandson. At the end of the project, we were interviewed and filmed, and I wanted to ask him what should I take back; because I was really worried he thought I might try and teach it after learning it for such a short time, and there's no way I was going to teach that dance. I had a list of what I thought I was going to take back: I knew I was going to take back the energy; the inspiration; how they could use props so amazingly; how the costumes moved them; how the feet were sounding boards; how they could play the drum and breathe through the mask and sing. I learnt all that and admired and respected it. And the thing he said to me, 'You take back your energy and your enthusiasm and your heart'. We held hands and I said thank you to him because I realized that I can do that; that's transferable. That's not about taking back the side step five times to the right and five times to the left. It was everything for me that was somatic about my practice I suppose, and is indescribable, and translated very well from English to Japanese and Japanese to English.

One of the things which was really hard in the copying was using props, because the work I've done more recently means that if I am using something that's going to be held or in the space then I embody it and I research it. And in Japan, I've been given a fan in one hand and a sword in the other and I've got a headdress on and now I'm meant to dance. Whereas they've embodied it over years. It's got an amazing historical heritage of animal spirits; it was done originally for the gods and still is done to mourn death. It's a very religious thing. It was almost like it was too precious to handle.

EM: *It's really fascinating because you were talking about the cultural aspect, like the difference from your community practice and that it wasn't something that was done in Japan. Then I am also interested in the idea that the victims of the tsunami had something to give back, and through that they had learnt that they wanted to record their heritage. Then, there are other interesting things you mentioned such as the fact that you were learning from different generations. It's still inclusive in a way if you're learning from lots of different people.*

CM: It certainly is inter-generational, which is an important part of my practice and something I am known for in the UK.

EM: *And then the contrast between the demonstrating/copying dance and your somatic practice.*

CM: The word coming up is 'drowning', which of course is what happened in the tsunami, but there were times when I felt quite drowning in it. The

times I think I felt least drowning in it was when I was taught by the children because they were so delightful and so innocent. They did it so unquestioningly, and I thought I could copy them without worrying about getting it right or wrong.

And also working with the 82-year-olds because I felt so much respect for them having done this male dance, the Dance of Seven Deities, and they turned it into a female dance because they wanted something to do while their partners, husbands were out at sea. And they got on and did it and have been performing now for 40 or 50 years. There was a woman bent over double, as they are often in Japan from the work they do – and she was completely upright in her dancing and only went back to being doubled over when she finished the dance.

EM: *What was the experience like of learning in that way? Did you find yourself going back to experiences of when you were younger learning in that way or did it feel quite different?*

CM: That's a really good question because it was really so different because I was in another country across the other side of the world, and much older – 40 or 45 years different from when I was doing that kind of learning. I haven't done folk dances and traditional national dances, as they were called, since I was 21 or 22. I started them when I was a kid but I probably stopped them when I was 22 or something like that. So, a huge gap.

I think I did feel that this was ridiculous, because I've done so much between now and then, and it's almost like a completely different body but also a different mind. I didn't feel as skilled as somebody who normally does that kind of thing, and yet I had in the past been quite skilled at that. So, I felt quite rusty but also physically quite challenged. It was on the spot so I had to do things – I was dancing with a drum between my legs and it hit my thigh every time I jumped. I said, 'This hurts' and they said, 'Oh, that's part of it. If you get a bruise then you're actually a proper Shishi-Odori dancer'. It's like I've gone back to pointe shoes: if you've got corns and blisters then you're actually doing well as a pointe shoe dancer. So, there was quite a lot I wasn't comfortable with but I did my best to do the job.

I wasn't the only dancer; there were always other dancers with me, Japanese dancers who'd joined the project for that week or for that day. So, that was helpful; it wasn't just me.

When I went out I knew I was going for a month, and that I was going to learn traditional Japanese folk dance; but I also knew that I didn't want to forget my practice, the dancer I am now and have become. I was nervous that all I'd do was learn from other people and try to carry it in some way. I didn't know what I was going to do with it; I didn't even really know what I was going to learn. But I made a resolution before I left. I knew I wanted to spend some time, each day if it was possible, dwelling on my movement and what was happening to my

movement in this particularly extreme context. The first three nights I was there, there were three earthquakes, one of which was really quite strong. And I'd never been in an earthquake before and I was on my own in the room at night in a strange hotel. It was huge new experience.

To begin with we stayed up in the hills, which were out of the tsunami area, but then for two weeks, I was down on the bay where the tsunami had come over, in the only house that had been rebuilt or that had managed to survive, with an escape route. So, it was just like I went from being frightened by earthquakes to being in the tsunami zone. Then I was meeting everybody who had been victims of the disaster.

One of the things I'd like to share is that five years ago my son died and he died suddenly in the prime of his life; no warning, totally unexpected. I only started going to Japan after he had died. He knew I was going to go and I started the first trip in May 2009; he died in March 2009. What I realized was that I found myself describing it, to myself and a few people it was relevant to, that his death for me was like a personal tsunami: it had the violence of a tsunami; it wasn't forecast; you couldn't do anything to stop it and once it was done there was total devastation. So, then I was able to relate, in a way that maybe I could never have related had this not happened, to everybody's tsunami, to the tsunami which had happened. Because the tsunami that happened was with no warning; was complete devastation; complete

emptiness; the landscape was completely flattened. And so many of those words describe the grief and survival that I've been in these five years.

My dance has obviously been affected in these five years by that. Three years ago I performed a solo called *I'll Leave You to Yourself Then...*, and that was about surviving grief. So, I felt quite qualified in this place, although obviously at no point was I directly working personally with people about their grief. Although in a way I was because I had some young dancers who had actually experienced tsunami and we were working together in the sites of the flattened land, and obviously I held some of that quite strongly.

Figure 5: Cecilia Macfarlane in *I'll Leave You to Yourself Then...*, Credit: David Fisher.

But I wanted as a dancer to continue my dance practice after my son's death and I wondered: could I still dance; could I still move; what could I do? So the dance emerged into this solo that I'd researched, created, performed and then toured a year later, and it became a really, really important autobiographical solo. And I did a workshop for students with a lot of autobiographical work around the performance of it. And making it okay to dance autobiographically, because I think a lot of the time when I was younger it was seen as self-indulgent to do that kind of thing. I see it as essential: that's why I'm here; that's why I'm healthy; that's why I'm well.

So, for me to be dancing their dances in this place, knowing how important it was, was something really helpful for them and for me – a sort of exchange.

So, coming to my personal journey, I knew I didn't want to stop dancing myself in the month, because I dance regularly and research and put my teaching in place, but I also research as a dancer. I've always got something that I'm performing.

There is something about keeping alive the red in the blood in you, that keeps you going. That is what I saw in the people who survived the tsunami: something about our life, our living goes on.

It was difficult to dance because there weren't many places. There was the hotel room or guest house. But I actually was drawn to dancing outside. I danced with two other dancers in a completely derelict two-storey metal building – in England you wouldn't have been allowed in the site. There was nothing around it, nothing there; it was just what had remained when all the other buildings had been washed away. And we danced in there and I found that very powerful and really strong.

So, three other days I danced on the harbour really close to the sea, the harbour walls are all at angles; they're all tipped like cards at different angles. I didn't dance on the angles much but I danced near them. Just that idea of complete devastation, complete brokenness, and what you do with your dance – which is personal and public, and its coming from a huge depth of feeling both of looking at a completely damaged

landscape and then knowing that my landscape was damaged but also is not wrecked and can be rebuilt and is being rebuilt.

I have studied a lot with Helen Poyner in the landscape –and I one day I said, ‘I have to go to the land. I have to go into the landscape’. I was on a bit of a lead because they were taking me everywhere and I was shown where to sleep and what to eat. So, I felt quite trapped and I knew I needed some space. There was another dancer there, a Japanese dancer, a guy who had never done work in the landscape, so we went out to some rocks right on the sea. We chose sites and I went a completely separate place to him and I spent probably three hours in the sun on this flat land by the sea, with the water very close, really just accepting my body into the land and accepting the sea. Everybody is so nervous about the sea and they talk about it as being hot because of radiation – the seals have left because of this. I didn’t get into the sea of course but I was able to lie beside it, I was able to talk to it, move with it, I was able to follow its tide, I was able to use the cliffs, I was able to use my voice – I really embodied this foreign and yet not foreign land. Because I do that in England; but it was really special in such damaged land.

And then the final piece of work that I did was in Kesenuma, which is one of the most badly damaged cities. If you’ve seen any images of the tsunami you might have seen an image of boats which were up on houses and flattened lands, and that’s where we were. Streets with no

houses, just endless streets but nothing there to mark the streets. I had a week there in a studio with other dancers who came to join me and join the project. And one thing I felt very strongly was that at this point of the project, I wasn't going to teach. I didn't want to be leading; I didn't want them to be copying or following me. It was really important how I ended this very powerful project and they'd given me the studio and the time. So, I set up, and facilitated but joined in wholeheartedly, in a project of site reading: making scores; going out into the site; and then having a sharing where everybody had chosen a site to dance. And I chose a site to dance which was a building, foundations of which were still there and I could dance in the foundations, and it was safe.

Figure 6: Landscape in Kesenuma, Tohoku. Credit: Cecilia Macfarlane.

Interestingly there was one young Japanese man, he didn't live there but he had been involved with the tsunami, and the sharing that he did was just running incredibly fast up the street, down the next one, back along the next one, and we just turned, because there were no buildings in the way, to watch him running really fast. And when we did some feedback later I said to him, 'I imagine that might be you practising running for the next tsunami' because that's what people didn't do: they didn't run; they'd forgotten that they needed to run; a lot of people were just stuck on the spot. And he said he hadn't thought of that; but he did know that the only thing he could do at the moment was run.

And two and a half years later he can still only run; he couldn't do anything else in his dance vocabulary.

I remember after my son's death I could only lie on the floor. I couldn't get up; I couldn't move – or if I did I fell down again. So, I could understand that.

I knew I was going to come back to England and make some work with this. I am working on a piece that is called *woman once dead, crawl back*. It is going to be a trio with two other women who have also worked with me in Japan and it'll be influenced by my experience in Tohoku. I was beginning to research it, because I stood on beaches with the wind taking my movement; I lay on beaches with the water lapping close. So, the piece will contain nature and elements reflecting the tsunami and the piece may move in time from a theatre to outdoor space.

So, that is where my journeying is going. One thing I really wanted to share with you is that I met a fisherman in the only remaining house that I stayed in at the bay, and he was at sea when the tsunami happened. I asked him what it was like being at sea, and he said he heard what he thought was the propeller shaft of his fishing boat crack and thought his engine had broken. Then he realized it was an earthquake and he realized that what he'd heard was the earth cracking – which is just an amazing thing. And what he did was take his boat

further out to sea rather than taking it in, while other people took them in and of course they were lost. But he survived.

When I came back to the UK, I did a short improvised solo for a community in Oxford where I work as an event just to say I was back. I had made a film that I took to Japan with children and parents from the community in Oxford all doing solos; so in a way they all had been part of my journey. When I returned, I said, 'I've got this dance which is inside me'. I felt that I needed a new movement and word vocabulary to describe the devastation and the courage that I'd witnessed in Japan. What I felt that night when I began to move for the community – what I said to them was, 'I think I feel like my dance is beginning to crack open'. Interestingly, the solo that I did called *I'll Leave You to Yourself Then...* in 2011 opens with a huge eggshell in metal and wire that contains me, and the dance starts with it cracking open like it's been dropped and broken. I hadn't made that connection, and somebody else connected it, but it's really nice that there's another egg to break, there's another cracking open to do.

EM: *That's a really moving account of how you're linking personal devastation and loss with greater world political and geological events. In a way it's like something very personal has much wider-reaching impact. The sites you describe, the derelict sites or the road with no buildings, the idea of what is devastated, all really links then back to your personal*

story, and you were able to understand them because of what you'd gone through.

Are there any moments from the movement you did in the building or the harbour at sea that you particularly can recall or describe?

CM: Well, the building was fascinating because I wouldn't have gone in there on my own. In fact, when the other two dancers left that area, I didn't go back in there. I couldn't go back in there on my own. It must have been some kind of factory or something. There were metal girders and a really rickety staircase which was broken but was stable.

The landscape was natural, it gets damaged by every wave that comes in, but it has beauty too – it hasn't been manmade. The thing about the building was that it was manmade and like all these houses, they were in a tsunami area, in a flood plain, and yet people go back and build because they always do. And more, they build more, and extend out. And what happens: there's another tsunami. But it's because there's no room and they want more room.

But there was something about being in the building that mankind had made that building, and as a first dance in the site I felt comparatively safe. I suppose I was framed by the floor and by the girders that made it, and there was a window as well. It was quite theatrical. There were no walls at all, so it was a big open space like a proscenium stage as it were, that looked out to the whole inland bay which was flattened, so I had no audience except for a car that might pass by.

There was something about the framework and also the group-ness, the fact that there were three of us. There were two Japanese dancers and me: one was quite young, one was in her mid-40s, and myself. We were inhabiting this manmade house that the sea, which was close by, had destroyed.

I went next to the harbour as I said, and there was something about getting closer to the sea but still on a manmade object: the harbour.

These harbours were being moved from one side, the wreckage of them was being moved by a boat crane from one bay, round to the other side of the bay to make a barrier, a new barrier. There was like this circle going around: mankind's concrete is being moved, as everything had been moved.

So, in a way it was not foretold but I went from a structure which was a manmade object, to the sea with a broken manmade object, to when I then chose to work in the rocks in the land with absolutely nothing manmade there at all. Absolutely nothing of man; I was in the elements with the sun. The sun was reflecting my image so I had a huge shadow which was wonderful. So, I danced with myself for a bit, a giant me, and that was quite empowering. So, that was quite a nice journey.

And then the last one in the street just brought me back to hard reality. You walk into a little room that you know would have been – it was a bank I was in – the bank's kitchen and the counters. It was ridiculous. But it had a story attached to it that was manmade.

EM: *What was interesting as well was your reflection on grief in the body and questions of: can I still move? What movements can I do? And then observing the Japanese dancer and all he can do is run – different impacts of grief on the body.*

Then what you were saying earlier was that the victims kept receiving things; but they also had something they wanted to give back that was recording their heritage. I guess you also had something to give back in your movement, despite all your grief, you had something you needed to share as well. But then it didn't seem to be a recording of your heritage; it was more like breaking apart everything – this cracking of the egg. Rather than trying to hold onto something, it was more like finding something new. But then in a way the people in Tohoku are opening onto something new by passing on a heritage to other people, especially from outside of Japan. Because grief is a reflecting on the past but moving forward, isn't it?

CM: Absolutely. There's no end. There are unhelpful things that people say about grief about moving on or going on to the next chapter or closing the door – everybody's grief is different but I think for me, we do imagine that our parents or our grandparents will die, but we don't imagine that our children will die before us. We don't think about it because it's just too frightening. So, I think that's the shock of it. The idea that I might close a door or move on for me is just like 'no!'. But I learn to live with it.

EM: *There are really interesting things you said in terms of what it is like to move from a somatic approach to a more codified approach. Then on the other hand there is your interest in working in the tsunami area and how that linked in to your own personal journey.*

CM: It's weird because for me they're both parallel. I think it's why I came back so very exhausted because even without my personal narrative, it would have been a huge journey just witnessing the devastation.

150,000 people are still displaced. We went into places where people live in blocks. So, football pitches, rice fields, all school playgrounds have got row upon row upon row of these individual housings which hold the whole family. They're temporary; but they've been there for two and a half years. Actually they might stay there forever because there's nowhere to go. Some of the fishermen said, 'We're going to build. Tsunamis come, houses get knocked down and we build again'. If you're in a landscape which is mountainous and you've only got a little bit of bay you're going to build. They were far more inhabited than any of our bays in England.

Interestingly, I hate that expression: out of something bad comes something good, when I would so much rather my son was alive than any of the good that may have come out, whatever that is – and I don't really know what that is. But I think we find we've got more strength than we will ever know.

In Japan, I met a lot of inspired young people particularly. I think the older people feel really bad to be alive when their families have gone, and I think they feel if anyone was to go it should have been them. And there are pictures of adults carrying their elderly parents on their backs to escape the floods.

But the young people, I met some really charismatic young men, who had come from all over Japan to help with the clearance every weekend. And now the clearance work has been done they've continued to work, they are proud of the community they're in, and when people come to the station they take them round the area. I think what they've found is a community side to their lives that they didn't know before. So, they've made themselves into groups with names and they meet regularly and they do good work. And that is quite unusual I think because it's such a work ethos society where there isn't necessarily time for all that.

In fact what's interesting is in the projects I did previously in Japan, I only realize now how lucky I was to work with exceptional people. Because the people who came and did the community dance projects were people who signed up because they knew the organization. They were quite charismatic rebels if you like.

And then when I went into the nursery school in Tohoku, I tried to do improvisations and games with the children, but they didn't know what

to do. In the end, I worked in a way that was much more taught for five-year-olds than I ever would have done elsewhere.

EM: *It's a very interesting context to be doing somatic work in.*

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CM: Absolutely. I've had two lovely experiences since I've come back. Obviously I'm going on with making but in a very quiet way. I had one which was the solo improvisation I just did to my community where I experienced the cracking. But when I came back I'd also been booked to work with Japanese Noh Theatre actors. I don't know anything about Noh Theatre because I've not done training in that though I've read a bit about it. A colleague and friend had asked me if I would be part of a lecture demonstration. They were demonstrating codified practice to the extreme minutiae. Yet in one magic moment, there I was, doing an improvisation with Sarah Whatley. The most powerful improvisation was when the Noh actors both sang, and we both improvised. And all the audience in unison agreed it was a magical moment. I think somebody said it in the feedback, 'I don't think it's ever happened in the world'.

It's completely another subject really, but when the Noh singers sang about the mountain crone, I'd been that mountain crone learning the Shishi-Odori.

EM: *I also like the fact that for you and Sarah, there's this deep heritage with your somatic practice, like the Noh actors have a deep heritage with their practice.*

CM: That's right. And also funnily enough both Sarah and I have the same background: we both went to dance school as kids learning tap, national, modern and that same stuff. Because at that point there was no other way of learning dance.

Acknowledgements

Cecilia Macfarlane's performance *woman once dead, crawl back* will take place at Pegasus Theatre Oxford on the 27th and 28th of February 2015, as part of a programme called Moving with the Times, and as the opening event for the Dancin' Oxford annual festival.

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Images

Figure 1: ‘We’re Gonna Go Learn in Tohoku’, Japanese Contemporary Dance Network Project. Credit: Nori Sato.

Figure 2: ‘We’re Gonna Go Learn in Tohoku’, Japanese Contemporary Dance Network Project. Credit: Norikazu Sato.

Figure 3: ‘We’re Gonna Go Learn in Tohoku’, Japanese Contemporary Dance Network Project. Credit: Norikazu Sato.

Figure 4: ‘We’re Gonna Go Learn in Tohoku’, Japanese Contemporary Dance Network Project. Credit: Norikazu Sato.

Figure 5: ‘We’re Gonna Go Learn in Tohoku’, Japanese Contemporary Dance Network Project. Credit: Norikazu Sato.

Figure 6: Landscape in Kesenuma, Tohoku. Credit: Cecilia Macfarlane.

Figure 7: Cecilia Macfarlane in *I’ll Leave You to Yourself Then...*, Credit: David Fisher.

Contributor details

Cecilia Macfarlane trained as a teacher at the Royal Academy of Dance and as a dancer at the London School of Contemporary Dance. She is an Oxford-based independent dance artist with a national and international reputation for her work in the community. She is the founding director of Oxford Youth Dance, DugOut Adult Community Dance and Crossover Intergenerational Dance Company and co-founding director of Oxford Youth Dance Company. She was a Senior Lecturer in Arts in the Community at Coventry University for nine years. Her work is based on her

passionate belief that dance is for everyone; she celebrates the uniqueness and individuality of each dancer. As a performer, Cecilia is continually curious about expression, how movement can communicate so powerfully to others without the need for words. Her work is very influenced by her studies with Joan Skinner, Helen Poynor, Deborah Hay and most recently Anna Halprin.

Emma Meehan is a research assistant at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University. She received her B.A. and Ph.D. from the Drama Department, Trinity College, Dublin. Her doctoral research focused on the somatic-based performance work of Irish choreographer Joan Davis. She is also a co-convenor of the Performance as Research working group at the International Federation for Theatre Research and editorial assistant for the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*. She is currently co-editing a book on performance and technology with Matthew Causey and Néill O'Dwyer (Palgrave, forthcoming), and undertaking [a project an Arts Council of Ireland bursary award](#) to revisit the archives of Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre (1979-1989).

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