

HOME - Performing Lines WA blog 2017 - by Daisy Sanders

On a warm night in February 2016 I entered the Studio Underground at the State Theatre Centre of WA to find it filled to the brim with... boxes. Brown cardboard boxes. Boxes stacked throughout the room, boxes lining the walls and piled high to the ceiling. Boxes stuffed full of...stuff. Objects. As one of many curious, slightly tentative audience members, I wandered amongst the boxes, and, as permission seemed to have been granted, we all began to comb through the objects, perusing an abundance of random treasures. What transpired over the next two hours became my PIAF 2016 Festival highlight, my all time most memorable PIAF event and one of the best works of art I had, as yet, experienced. The immersive masterpiece that unfurled that night entirely from within the piles and piles of cardboard boxes was *The Object Lesson*, created and performed by the brilliant Geoff Sobelle with infectious warmth and a robust, nuanced physicality. During the work a number of blissfully unprepared audience members found themselves becoming an integral part of the activity. None more so than myself: plucked from amidst the boxes to answer a telephone call...an hour later I had enjoyed and ended what seemed to be a decade long relationship with Sobelle. When asked at a Festival Q & A how he selects his 'date' - a female cast member new and unique to the show each night - Sobelle explained he "believes in love at first sight". His completely unplanned choice is made in that precise moment, partly chance, and partly just a feeling that someone he spots in the crowd could be 'game'.

I was game. Hop, skip and jump forward to October 2017 and the other side of the world. Sobelle's newest work has just premiered to sold out houses and nightly standing ovations in both Philadelphia and Boston. I have been working as a part of the incredible team, helping to bring to life the madness, the mastery and the magic that is *HOME*.

Working on *HOME* was made possible when I received a 2017 Young People and the Arts (YPA) Fellowship through Culture and the Arts WA, a division of the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries. *The Object Lesson* was the catalyst for me to initiate a conversation with Sobelle, not only about how it had felt to become a part of the fun that fateful night, but also to express my fascination and thrill with his work and explain some of my interests as an emerging artist. In

The Object Lesson I had encountered such a unique combination of movement, text, poetry and play, all combined by Sobelle to interrupt the traditional theatre space and ignite a truly alive conversation with his audience, that this was art I simply had to be a part of and learn more about. Following my natural curiosity and instinct made the exchange easy, and, with Sobelle's written support, six weeks working with him in the USA became a key element of my 2017 YPA Fellowship program.

Firstly, I spent three weeks at MANA contemporary in Jersey City. I was warmly welcomed by Geoff and all the members of his large, vivacious team including performer/creators (dance and physical theatre trained), mastermind set designer Steven Dufala and an indefatigable production crew. I arrived in the creative development process at the moment of first meeting between the set (a life size, two-story house) and the burgeoning choreography and imagination of the four performer/creators. It was a pleasure and privilege to be included with these artists - Geoff Sobelle, Justin Rose, Jennifer Kidwell and Sophie Bortolussi - in a playful dance of improvisation, observation, feedback, discussion and side-splitting hilarity. We 'sold' the house to each other as weirdly poetic real estate agents, we grooved and snoozed in every corner of the house, making it our shared creative home, we learned secrets of appearance and disappearance with the guidance of illusionist Steve Cuiffo. At the end of the three weeks I performed with the artists in two development showings. This included the early stages of inviting audience into the action and absorbing their initial feedback and response. Performing in the showings concluded what had been a rare and invaluable experience, in which I had not only witnessed the early creation stage of *HOME*, but also become an integral part of forging its spirit. Being invited daily to offer my reflections and to dance my physical contribution to the work instigated new and exciting embodied learning for me and also deepened my sense of belonging to the team. Sobelle has a unique way of building an ecology of connection: he is utterly welcoming and open hearted and his use of humour to celebrate the poetic madness of life generates a truly inclusive atmosphere. The positive way that I (and the entire team) experienced this ecology was undoubtedly heightened by the US election and inauguration, which raged outside as we worked and played together.

When I returned to *HOME* in September, the production premiere loomed. By this time the show had largely been structured, designed, constructed and choreographed, but there was still a huge amount to achieve in a short

time. As an aspiring creator of immersive, physical performance, I gained invaluable insight into the vast array of expertise (also the sheer amount of communication, patience and superhuman effort) that it takes to present a large scale, ambitious and complex work. I soaked up all that I could learn and found many ways to make my contribution. I supported director Lee Sunday Evans and choreographer David Neumann as an extra dramaturgical/choreographic eye. Backstage, I supported the crew to manage a particularly challenging and fast sequence of delivering furniture to the stage. (The unseen dance of *HOME* is as speedy and intricate as the one happening on stage. Directing crew to weave around each other really felt like an opportunity to flex my choreographic muscles!) I offered assistance to the wardrobe and prop departments, labeling and organising the many costumes to be ready for international tour, and generating 'auto-theatre' objects. These are prop items that conceal written instructions: an audience member can interact with the object (eg. a bag of groceries, a photo album, a stack of plates) and follow the instructions independently. This means that, without any direction from a performer, the audience member can participate as part of the show for a length of time. I am not sure if I should give away any more secrets, but these 'auto-theatre' objects are just one element of a hugely complex system of audience interaction. *HOME* is presented in a traditional proscenium theatre space, there are six performers and a live musician but at the height of the work there are almost 50 people on stage. The vast majority of these people take their seats each night to 'watch' the show, completely unaware of the fact that they will soon host and attend a house party, join together in celebrating birth, birthdays, graduation, marriage and death. Some offer amplified memories of their own childhood homes or inhabit the house as new residents, but all become essential members of the show and ultimately create a spontaneous, vibrant community.

It is this quality of community, this drawing together of many people to laugh, lament and reflect, which makes *HOME* a unique and moving experience. The show has a timeless quality, it is filled with the use of illusion and magic, finely tuned movement and stirring music, combined with numerous stunning visual images. Thematically the work hints at topics including gentrification, migration, homelessness, the creation and loss of a house or a home and the transient impermanence of both our structures and our presence as humans on earth. But, simply put, *HOME* offers these painful reflections via an intensely joyful celebration. There is So. Much. Joy. In the house. It was an absolute pleasure to experience *HOME* working its magic to build a new community each and every night.

One of the most devastating hurricanes in history razed homes and homelands throughout USA and the Atlantic during *HOME*'s premiere seasons. The largest mass migration of displaced people in seventy years is currently taking place. Many, many families have fled their homelands seeking refuge in ours, only to be held homeless for indefinite periods. Gently nudging at these deeply concerning realities while offering the very antithesis - a spirit of sharing, acceptance and connection - is, to me, the pertinence, brilliance and beauty of *HOME*.

Now resting back home in Australia, I am left with a renewed, inspired desire to make a contribution to local and global conversations through my own artistic work. How will I ignite ecologies that can become the very essence of my work? How might my dance/physical theatre making evolve toward creating immersive, moving spaces, whole universes which audience experience and contribute to rather than just witness? Where will I find new conversations with artists, experts, scientists, thinkers, feelers, movers, human beings...and how will these shape my work? How will I enable my work to be spacious yet urgent, to speak to the immediate moment and to the universal?

Partly chance, partly being game. Partly a super human effort and an abundance of joy. Working on *HOME* as part of my 2017 YPA Fellowship has been an absolute privilege, an incredible opportunity to learn and to connect. It has deepened, enriched and consolidated my understanding of what it takes to make a magnificent work of art and how very, very important it is to do so.