

Welcome to LIVE AND NOW, a new podcast series from the Live Art in Scotland project at the University of Glasgow – led by me, Steve Greer – exploring the histories and possible futures of live art and new performance in Scotland.

In each episode, you'll hear from one of more than 50 artists and practitioners interviewed for the project, as we explore their work, its influences and the circumstances which shaped its development. You'll hear from artists based in Scotland as well as those whose practice has seen them return here again and again over the past thirty years.

Each episode is accompanied by a transcript, context notes and links to the full interview – you can find these on the Live Art in Scotland website – liveartscotland.org

EPISODE INTRO

This episode features a conversation with Robert Softley Gale – a Glasgow based director, performer, campaigner, writer and the artistic director of Birds of Paradise, Scotland's touring theatre company that promotes the work of disabled artists in partnership with non-disabled artists and mainstream theatre venues and companies.

In the following excerpt, you'll hear us talking about the development of Robert's show, *If These Spasms Could Speak..* and the pragmatics of taking this and other shows to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe as the world's largest arts festival.

When we first sat down, we'd begun by talking about Robert's early career: he'd taken a year out of his studies at the University of Glasgow to work for Edinburgh's Theatre Workshop which had launched a new company of disabled actors where – as Robert explained – the work was political with a capital 'P' but not necessarily always about disability.

In thinking about Robert's work in relation to the broader ecology of performance in Scotland, I was interested in asking how he'd come to work with a particular Glasgow institution – a venue called The Arches.

The Arches was a theatre, bar and club venue in central Glasgow, located in the railway arches directly underneath Glasgow central station. The site of the venue had originally been converted to house an exhibition staged as part of Glasgow's year of European City of Culture.

Andy Arnold – who had also worked with Edinburgh Theatre Workshop – approached the city to ask for temporary use of the space, creating a theatre venue which would fund its activities through what would eventually become a world-class nightclub.

In later years, the venue would also become a host for the National Review of Live Art, the United Kingdom's foremost festival of performance, installation and video art.

When Arnold left to become artistic director of the Tron Theatre in 2008, Jackie Wylie – now artistic director of National Theatre of Scotland - was appointed to run the arts programme where the venue's work in nurturing emerging talent would often focus on playwright-performers and performance artists – people who would include Adrian Howells, Nic Green and Rosana Cade.

What's the last thing to say?

This interview – like most of the others in the collection – was recorded on zoom during 2021 when we were adapting to new ways of working from home during the covid-19 pandemic.

As we pick up the conversation, I'd just asked Robert how he'd come to work with the Arches – and with Jackie.

INTERVIEW EXCERPT

RSG: The National Theatre of Scotland, I approached them. That was in 2005, and I approached them when they first opened and I'm quite confident so I said, why don't you make some work about disability? And they went through a few years where they commissioned me to write a piece called *Girl X*, which we did through NTS [National Theatre of Scotland] in 2011, I want to say. Jackie was at The Arches at that point and came along to see my NTS piece and said that's great, I really enjoyed that. That was written with a guy called Pol Hayvaert who is a Belgian director. Again, that sort of influence of European Belgian directors who, they look at a lot of British theatre and go, what the hell are you all doing? [laughs]. Pol was an influence at that point. We made *Girl X* and that was quite a hard-hitting political piece with a strong disability message. Jackie then approached me and said we're doing Behaviour in 2012, would I make something for there? I'd written a little bit of *Girl X* but Pol was really the one pulling it together, I was writing bits of dialogue but obviously not the whole thing. *If These Spasms Could Speak* was the first time that I'd written a show, but again, a lot of this is the bravado in me being a little bit cocky and going, yes I'll give it a go. Writing that show was hell because you're own your own when you're in front of a laptop and you've got a blank page and you don't know if it's good or crap. All of that stuff. Before that, being in rehearsal you could chuck out ideas and go, oh yes that doesn't work or well that does work. Doing it by yourself is a lot harder.

If These Spasms Could Speak ran for three nights in 2012 and I thought that would be it. It's a one-man show. It also came about because of *Girl X* at NTS was me in a choir of seventeen people and that was hell because seventeen people were all trying to talk at the same time. I also realised that to tour a show of that scale is really difficult because it costs a fortune. So, I was like let's make a one-man show where it's all about me, so *Spasms* that came from that inspiration. Then as I say, I thought it would be three nights and that would be it. I applied to Made in Scotland to take it to the fringe in 2013, took it to the fringe, and then it all went a bit bonkers after that.

SG: Maybe we can talk about the experience of touring it and the experience of the Fringe. I'm interested in you talking about that experience of writing for yourself and knowing that the show involves the stories and experiences of a whole range of other people. Did the impulse to interview other people come out of being faced with the blank page or was that always part of the process?

RSG: It came out of starting to tell my story on stage, then that kind of Scottish west coast thing where we all go, oh no I can't talk about myself because that's far too egotistical so let me get other people involved and that way, I can disguise the fact that I'm talking about myself. I sent a questionnaire to disabled organisations and charities and got disabled people to tell me how they feel about their bodies and that was the starting point of building multiple perspectives. I had a recurring dread of a sense of how disabled people view their bodies because that's how the public see us most of the time, so I thought it was an important thing to look at. That's where getting other people involved became quite core to it. I also think the idea that, because the photographs that were projected were people who were interviewed, so there was an almost direct connection to the

individual. I thought of this great idea that at the end of the show, there would be naked disabled people all over the screen, it would be some kind of revolutionary act but then I found out that most people are not like me, most people are a little bit more reserved [laughs] so I had to pull that back a bit and say well actually, we can just be very revealing in the stories that we tell. That was interesting path to go down, the framing of me and my bum all over Edinburgh. In the show I get undressed down to my underwear. The whole thing was about being seen and giving permission to be seen felt important to the show.

SG: Yes. I remember seeing it at the Fringe and there's a moment or a sequence where you ask someone to, I can't remember if they unbutton your shirt or button your shirt, I can't remember which way round it is. I guess there's something interesting, and maybe we'll talk about this in relation to your other work, and maybe this is where it sits or could sit within the framework of live art, is this interest in the live body, the explicit body, and the vulnerable body, just the body. The present body.

RSG: That little bit in the show almost came from nowhere. Everyone thinks it's my story, but it's not my story. It was actually my brother-in-law who went to the hospital and they started looking at his brother. It was based on a real story, but it wasn't mine. But yes, I got the audience to come up and undo a button, which for me, I've had people helping me undo buttons my whole life so there's nothing remarkable about that, it's perfectly ordinary. The minute you put it on stage and in a show, it becomes this thing. Interestingly, it was very different as I took it around the world. In Brazil people were going, I'll come and help you undress! That's great. In India or Estonia, it's much harder to get people to come up. It taught me a lot about audience performer contracts. The audience are ultimately going, what are you going to ask next? Am I agreeing to getting into bed with you or something? No, you're just unbuttoning a shirt. There are a lot of layers to that. People still talk to me about it. It always gives me something to ignite, the medical aspect of it, the vulnerability of it because needing that help is a genuine thing, I wasn't making it up. Quite often we've asked someone to come up and the first person would either say no or come up and sit back down because they felt nervous. So I was having to play the audience off each other and it was interesting. Every single night I always thought at least one person could do it eventually but sometimes it took a lot longer.

SG: Okay. It's so interesting, how the dynamic of that is playing with the audience's anxieties or sense of agency. They're the one that becomes anxious or vulnerable. How do I engage with a person with a physical disability, even though they've explicitly asked me to do something for them?

RSG: And also, how do I not assist them because they've asked me, they need the help. There are all sorts of things that go on in their eyes that I quite enjoy. That's the thing for me, that I always get with *Spasms*, everyone called it a one-hander, it wasn't, it was a two-hander. It was me and the audience every night and it was about taking them through that journey of their own stuff and seeing where that went.

SG: We might be jumping around in a timeline here, but I'm just thinking that *Purposeless Movements* would've been quite a few years later than that. Was that Edinburgh International Festival? Was that made for that?

RSG: No, we first did *Purposeless* in 2016 at Tramway. It was about three years after. We went from a big cast and me going 'I hate big casts', then did *Spasms* which was a one-man show and me going

'I hate a one-man show', and then did *Purposeless* with four guys and I get to sit at the back and not have to do the work anymore. It was quite a queer journey through all of that. But yes, we first did that in 2016 at Tramway and then we brought it back for 2019 at the International Festival.

SG: Okay. Maybe we talk a little bit about that show. I'm interested in how these shows are moving through a few different traditions or styles of performance. *If These Spasms Could Speak* is working with autobiographical performance in one way and then with *Purposeless Movements*, it's engaging with dance theatre as another very broad genre. Maybe we could talk about that, the development of that show. That was a Birds of Paradise production?

RSG: Yes, it was Birds of Paradise. Quite often things come about because of very boring practical reasons or very simple ideas that I have. So from *Spasms* I go, this is a bit ridiculous because you've got a guy with a speech impediment onstage for an hour talking quite a dense text to the audience and the show played with the idea that you wouldn't understand anything I said, but equally yes, quite hard work to do that every night. I think we did one hundred and four performances of *Spasms*. So then we go, okay how do we tell stories and talk a little bit less? [Laughs]. It really was like that. Also with *Spasms*, the whole moving around on the chair became a thing that I didn't think it would be but allowing people to watch me get onto stage and move about the stage and see how I moved. So I was like, okay, we've got a moving piece where you've got much more indication to look at how disabled people move. Then you go okay, what's the connection? They're all men, they've all got CP [cerebral palsy], things like that sort of come off. Then from quite simple questions, a lot of things fall on and there is a knock-on effect. I'm not going to put four guys on stage to tell my story, I want them to tell their stories. That's much more authentic. Also for me, is what the audience believes to be true, even through telling other people's stories, people quite often assume I'm talking about myself. Well, I know why, I think part of that is because you're a disabled person and so surely you're talking about yourself. Is that acting or is it not acting? I don't know. Quite often I'd get asked about my daughter. I know Mary Brennan wrote about my muscular dystrophy. If I had that I wouldn't be alive right now. Quite a lot with the truth and the perceived truth. I also think that we're crap at making things up, all I ever really do is retell stories in different ways. I can point at every single thing I've written and say actually that happened; I'm just telling it in a slightly more theatrical way. So that's how from *Spasms* to *Purposeless* came about, telling their stories and putting their stories on the stage and working with them as performers. We were messing about with the truth. The performer who doesn't have cerebral palsy, all of the stories he tells are his stories, they did happen to him, but because you're viewing him as a man with CP, you're imagining that happened because of the CP. It's not, it happened because we all get told to fuck off.

SG: It's so interesting thinking about the game that's being played there with audience expectation and with the performance quote unquote of disability and how it registers when you look at it, and then thinking about what's at stake in *My Left / Right Foot*, which takes that and makes it an even more explicit thing with the audience, and also you just saying there that everything that you work on you can see it's connected to something that's happened to you. Is this you revisiting an am-dram childhood?

RSG: Yes, completely. None of it is made up. The start of it is someone painting a radiator. I painted radiators at the am-dram club. A recurring joke with Mairi who is the producer is, can we not get another story of about a guy with cerebral palsy please? We're all fed up [laughs]. My whole career is filled with crap that we all went through.

SG: [laughs] I'm conscious that that's another show that was at the Fringe. So I suppose I'm partly just thinking about the landscape of Scotland. What's your experience been of the Fringe as a space for making new work? Because I think the fringe has always tried to sell itself as the space for risk and for experimentation. It's a lovely line, but I don't know how true it is!

RSG: I mean, now my perspective of the Fringe is if you've got quite a bit of money and you want to tour internationally, go to the Fringe. *Spasms* was the ideal thing for the Fringe. Neil Webb at the British Council came to the second show, recommended it to all his colleagues and contacts, brought literally hundreds of international delegates and that's why it all went worldwide for years afterwards. If you tour a show internationally the Fringe is ideal, if you want to make money out of something then forget it [laughs] because it costs you a fortune. Experimentation, yes, but you can only play to five people. *My Left / Right Foot* was the least experimental thing I've ever done. It's a musical comedy which was designed from the get-go to reach the most people, but it's not experimental. People are now paying fifteen to twenty pounds and they want a guaranteed good night out. *My Left / Right Foot* had to give them a big musical comedy to make them laugh. If we could also get a little bit of disability politics in there, then great.

OUTRO

This episode was produced by me, Steve Greer, as part of the Live Art in Scotland project supported by the University of Glasgow and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

You can find more episodes of this series with links to the full interview archive – along with the project's other free resources - on our website, Live Art Scotland dot org.