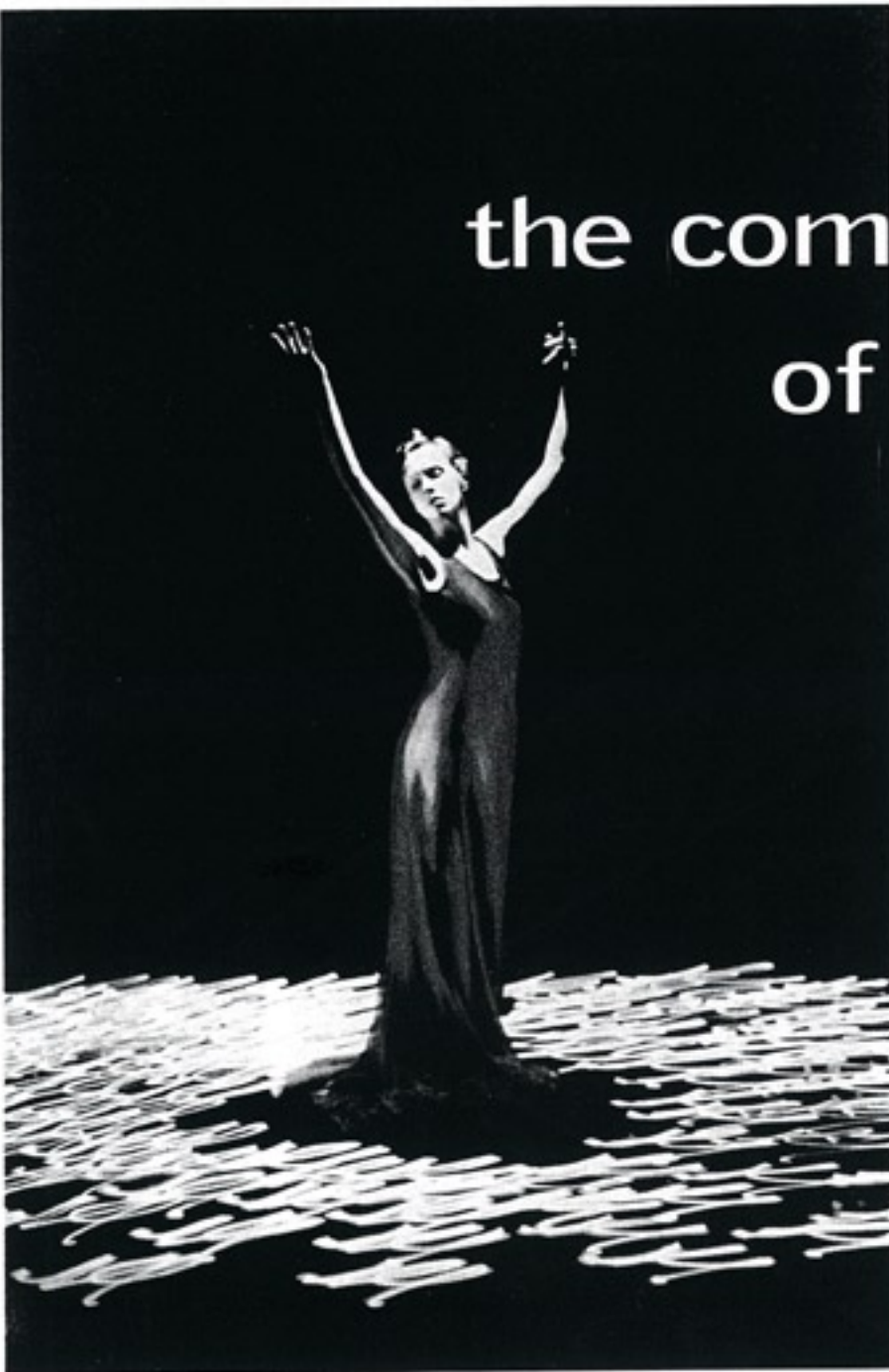


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# the complexity of simplicity



Charged. Rosemary Lee. Photo: Tim Simmonds

*When the angels of the Bible spoke to human beings, did they speak in words? I don't think so. I think the angels said nothing, but they were heard in the purest silence of the human spirit and were understood beyond words.*<sup>1</sup>

The first performance I saw by Rosemary Lee was her solo *Tenderhooks* (1989): a single shaft of light, a circle of white feathers piled high, and a woman in a flowing dress. For fifteen minutes of silence, the dancer moved carefully along the path of the feathers, white wisps floating in the breeze caused by her swirling dress.

I was struck by the simplicity of the movement – Laban-esque reaching, diving; feeling shoulder blades, wild flurries of long arms – and by the meditative, transparent quality of the perfor-

mance. But more than that, I was moved by the spirituality of the work. This was a piece about lost grace, a fallen angel, wingless, unable to move from a particular path – struck, stranded.

A few years later this image was expanded dramatically as a Ballroom Blitz commission. Nine circles of feathers, silent, absorbed the sounds in the foyer of the Festival Hall. Now there were nine fallen angels in strange distorted crinolines (by Caroline Broadhead), a group of children running wild among the slowly moving, intensely concentrated dancers, a wild fanfare-like score by Arvo Pärt and Jon Lever. This version won Lee the 1991 *Time Out* Dance and Performance Award. Still, the spirituality was present, but this version seemed in part to be about women and their relationship with children. Now the

work was called *Stranded* (1991).

Rosemary Lee has created a substantial body of work over the past ten years, and in many ways these two performances encapsulate the predominant themes and influences of this period: the spirituality (still not fashionable)... an alternation between intensely concentrated solos and site-specific work, often involving large numbers of children or other untrained performers; an oblique political comment arising from these two concepts - spirituality and community; and motherhood and childhood as featured subjects. But 1997, a prolific year, has marked certain shifts in her thematic and choreographic concerns.

*Stranded* was staged at the time of Lee's first pregnancy and, undeniably, the births of her two children, Isaac and Matilda, have influenced her work, thematically and in terms of her movement vocabulary. After *Stranded*, for example, came three duets based on chromosomal division and *Heart Home*, all made in residence at Chisenhale in 1993, and the latter revived at the Union Chapel, London (1996). An extended solo to music by Hildegard of Bingen and Jon Lever, based on the paintings of Piero della Francesca (designs by Louise Belson), *Heart Home* is a meditation on the prescience of birth (and death). A portrait of a girl on the brink of womanhood, its dominant image is a rapid raising and lowering of the hand to the top of the head, like patting a child or like the pulse in a baby's soft fontanel. Again the spirituality is present, since in a sense *Heart Home* is an annunciation.

More complex is the way motherhood is expressed in her solo *Exhale* (performed first in 1994 at the Norfolk and Norwich Music Festival and then as part of a recent work, *Charged*). Consciously building on the long tradition of solo laments by women for female dancers, *Exhale* was made shortly after the death of Lee's father. Minimal but evocative, it is built around five movements associated with her father's illness, performed on the spot in a long series of rolls up and down the spine. At the time, Lee was heavily pregnant with Matilda, and the limitations and freedoms offered by her physical condition created the boundaries of the work. *Exhale* is performed to Mother, by Alexander Balanescu, based on a field recording from Eastern Europe of a lamenting woman. The title of the work contains birth and death: the breathing associated with birth, the final breath of the dying.

The short film *boy* (MTNN Productions for Arts Council of England/BBC2) is a solo for an eight-year-old boy. Filmed on the coast of Norfolk, it explores the imaginary, magical world of the protagonist, who conjures up his imaginary twin. Rippling with animal imagery and shamanistic conjuring, it is about the boy's perception of the world and his realisation of his own place in the universe. Lee is now planning a companion piece about a girl, *Infanta*.

Since her video of *Egg Dances* (ACE, 1990), she has become increasingly attracted to the medium. It allows her to capture

the possibilities of one of her constant sources of inspiration: 'Site, wanting to work outside theatre and work in a site that inspires me'. Her gradual mastery of the medium and her fruitful collaboration with Peter Anderson have led to her most complex work, *greenman* (1997, MJW Productions for ACE/BBC2), performed by dancer and artist Simon Whitehead. But if her films have allowed her to explore her love of dance in non-theatrical spaces, they have also enabled her to expand her work beyond the physical limitations of dance.

Lee has always created total experiences - her involvement with particular sites, and her collaborations with designer Louise Belson, have often resulted in elements of installation and intervention. Her work has sometimes involved episodes glimpsed in passing, or relics left behind such as the circles of feathers in *Stranded*. I have the feeling that Lee is more than a choreographer in the narrow sense, more of an artist in the wider sense. She is attracted to the work of particular artists, such as the sculptors Gormley and Goldsworthy, the painter Rothko, the poet Rilke, the composer Arvo Part, the writer Ben Okri, as well as choreographers like Trisha Brown and Doris Humphrey. It is no surprise to me, then, that she does not simply film existing works; she creates films that are works in their own right, that could not be staged in a theatre. This is not only because they are often filmed in specific locations, or made around them, but also because her method of assembly does not allow it. Occasionally her films use the same piece of footage repeatedly, perhaps reversed or slowed down, or they may feature untrained dancers who, able to improvise complex movement passages, may not be able to repeat them accurately in the context of repeated theatre performances.

All artists have their personal symbolic vocabulary, and hers includes constant images of birds and flight (and, by implication, angels). Unlike many choreographers, Lee continually revives and restages her work, sometimes in different forms, as if unconsciously mulling over them. But she now feels she is entering a new phase:

*I feel I have reached a culmination. I may be wrong, and maybe certain images will keep reappearing, but the Ricochet piece [Treading the Night Plain, 1997] had so many references from Egg Dances [in it], I actually consciously thought, 'I'm going to bring back images, hands, heads, and work with them' So in a way it felt like a finale of some of those images, but I am not quite sure what the next step is. I think we need more of the wordless in our lives. We need more stillness, more of a sense of wonder, a feeling for the mystery of life. We need more love, more silence, more deep listening, more deep giving.*

The spirituality will no doubt remain. It is central to Lee's definition of her role as an artist and to the vision she has of dance's relationship to society. Asked what she believes her work does, rather than is, she replies:

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*Moves people, I hope. Stirs something, shifts something, opens something I don't know why I want to do that but I want people to connect with something in them.... I think it's very good to listen inside. To listen and think. I want there to be a link. If I didn't believe somehow that universally there is a connection between us, as races, not just as individuals, I'd be very - very depressed*

Lee comes from a long line of Quakers, members of the Religious Society of Friends, which began in England about 350 years ago. The Friends are held together not by conformity of thought, but by love. Their espousal of the governing principles of the simplicity of life, equality of both sexes and people. active concern for the liberation of the oppressed, a sense of faith expressed in action, and the cultivation of non-violence have all placed them in a radical stream of Christian thought and sometimes in opposition to the wider society. They have no rituals, no priests, no programmed forms of worship; worship is conducted 'on the basis of silence', on the basis of listening to the self.

Lee is careful to make the point that she has never been a member of the Society (she is mildly critical - 'I don't think that they are radical enough, by any means') but is equally clear that this tradition has influenced her, that it in some way expresses itself in her work and that it has shaped her view of dance and her own place in it. On graduating from the Laban Centre, she was clear that she wanted to choreograph and how she wanted to work: 'I didn't want to be part of a dance elite.... I wanted to reach the people'.

Although the community dance company Cycles offered her a place, its funding was cut, and instead Lee went to America in 1982. There she performed in large site-specific community works and her belief in the fundamental community of people was reinforced by exposure to an interface between art and politics:

*I'm fascinated by it, art and politics, and the combination.... When I went to New York I found that it happened much more there. There was a whole dance consortium making anti-nuclear pieces, doing benefits and attending meetings. I worked with Bread and Puppet Theatre Company and marched with them. I do believe in the politics of theatre, that strand of politics where feelings and politics meet.*

On her return to England, Lee began a series of large-scale community dance pieces: *Memoirs of a Cast of Thousands* (1988, with Sally Sykes of Cycles); *Haughmond Dances* (1990), with a cast of 250 (and a horse) in the ruins of Haughmond Abbey; *Pensthorpe Performance Trail* (1991) in a bird sanctuary in Norfolk; *Ascending Fields* (1992) in the deserted Dunlop Depot outside Birmingham. These pieces in some ways remained hidden from the mainstream dance audience, to Lee's chagrin. Although the function of the work is related to its place in the

community, if the forging of links between people, she has been disappointed at the critics' tendency to dismiss these pieces as 'social work' and as unworthy, therefore, of a serious response. She is clear that these are works of art rather than an accident of funding or a desire to 'do good'. They are political too, in the sense of their community function, and in their use of untrained dancers, who, through youth or age, are well out of the age range employed by most choreographers. What Lee seeks in performers is a certain transparency, a common humanity despite clear individuality - a certain inner simplicity.

*We should return to pure contemplation, to sweet meditation, to the peace of silent loving, the serenity of deep faith, to the stillness of deep waters. We should sit still in our deep selves and dream good new things for humanity. We should try and make those dreams real. We should keep trying to raise the higher conditions and possibilities of this world.*<sup>3</sup>

There is a submerged stream of radicalism in her pieces that relates to the spiritual content of her work. Her late grandfather, a prominent Quaker, led a number of projects reclaiming slag heaps in the North, involving local children in planting trees on them. Lee closely identifies with this action and has made this connection explicit in her most recent film.

*greenman* is set near her grandfather's home, in a region filled with magical memories for Lee, and includes an image of Simon Whitehead skipping across a slagheap, wildly casting acorns into the air. The work speaks of our displacement in an industrial landscape, of our rural origins. In a powerful moment at the climax of the work Whitehead empties a desk drawerful of leaves onto his head to a sudden skirl of Northumbrian pipes (the music is by Graeme Miller). The title is an unintentional pun of sorts - the Green Man of English legend, the politics of the Green movement.

I suspect that, through its references to her grandfather-, *greenman* is also a farewell to the largely community-based pieces. She is clear that although the rewards of these large works are great, so is the toll on her and on her domestic life. Additionally she feels that the larger works are somehow diffused, 'broader brush strokes' as she puts it, and she is drawn to focus increasingly on the solo form, to 'concentrate on the essential'.

Although Lee's work is, in her own analysis, female in its concerns, its structure, and hitherto its subject matter; *greenman* is also the first flowering of a new theme in her work, one that initially appeared in *boy*: the exploration of masculinity from a female perspective. Her working relationship with Whitehead, which began with the three untitled duets developed in residency at Chisenhale in 1993, has extended through *greenman* and into *Silver*, the solo made for Whitehead as part of *Charged* (1997).

*Silver* is perhaps the most epic of her solos and in some ways the most overt statement of the political theme in her work. Constructed from equine movement and athletic images that

recall Whitehead's family background (he trained as a PE teacher before becoming a dancer, and his father, a former Olympic medalist, is a prominent coach), the work is about the indestructibility of the human spirit. Set to a new composition by Alexander Balanescu, the piece uses the quartet members, in particular Balanescu himself, as hunters or tamers of Whitehead; these artists paradoxically use their instruments and their music as weapons. Cruel, and intensely muscular in its vocabulary, the work provides a view of society (and of masculinity itself) as the enforcer of a kind of spiritual oppression.

*Silver* is epic not only in terms of its virtuosic length (thirty minutes) and the physical demands it places on the dancer, but also in its focus. It is as if Lee is beginning to deal directly with larger thematic statements of universality through an increasingly concentrated form.

The robustness and simplicity of Rosemary Lee's work has sometimes been masked by her sense of humour and a certain lyricism of conception, of visual style, which initially obscures the fact that her personal movement vocabulary is jagged and raw, her subject matter (increasingly) darker than it at first appears. Lee's world has been one of velvet dresses, angels, eggs and fathers, of English fairy-tales about princesses, but that should not blind her ever-growing audience to the direct, clear starkness that is emerging. The princess has grown up to become a mother, mourning for the world. •

#### **Gary Carter is a performance artist and television executive.**

1. Okri, Ben. *A way of being free*. London Phoenix House, 1997: 90.

2. *Ibid*: 90.

3. *Ibid*: 94.

All other quotes are from the author's interview with Rosemary Lee, September 20 1997.

Rosemary Lee's new work for Transitions, *Three Studies in Courtship*, can be seen on tour in Japan, Europe and the UK (including London's Bloomsbury Theatre May 5-7) in 1998. *greenman*, commissioned by the Arts Council and BBC2, will be shown during February's *Dance for the Camera Four* series.

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