

Culture Durham Meet 2018

Eliot Smith – Talk

Thank you for inviting me and it's an honour to be part of today's events.

For those who don't know me let me offer a quick resume.

I was born and raised in Newcastle and began my early dance training at Dance City and Newcastle College, alongside attending local youth dance companies. During this time, my parents moved to Warkworth in Northumberland – where I live now. Northumberland is a place of outstanding natural beauty and so rich in history, as befits a border county. I moved to London when I was 17 to study at Lewisham College and graduated from London Contemporary Dance School in 2012. During that time I became very interested in the Martha Graham Technique, a fascination that led me to study further at The Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York.

Since then, I have returned to the Martha Graham Center as part of the Artists International Development Fund to gather research for my book, "Martha and Me" which charts my early life in dance. The Company recently hosted GRAHAM IN UK in Newcastle in collaboration with The Martha Graham Dance Company. I was nominated as a business ambassador for Northumberland County Council, chosen as an Associate Artist at Dance City and the Company was a 'Performing Artist of the Year' finalist at The Journal Culture Awards this year. I have been shortlisted for "Dance Personality of the Year" at One Dance UK Awards. As a choreographer I have created and performed in 13 works for ESD, commissioned 5 leading choreographers to create new works on ESD, performed by invitation in New York, Paris, and Rome and hence I suspect why I received my invitation. I am currently one of 10 Associate Artists at The Bowes Centre. So what does this mean - It is the culmination of a six-month project which began with an invitation to artists to bid for one of just ten commissions. The successful artists were then challenged to come up with something inspired by the collections, building or immediate environment of The Bowes Museum. It's very much an experimental process. The untitled10 Exhibition is now open at Bowes Museum until early January 2019. It is important to highlight projects like The Bowes Untitled 10 and Durham Creatives offer creative practitioners like me to develop their practice and resulted a step-change for me to recently receiving a Grant from Arts Council England to the further develop my dance work inspired by Bowes.

I always knew the best way for me to communicate was through dance. And, my ambition was always to establish a dance company here in the North East – a place where I knew I could work, be inspired, build an audience and become in some way an ambassador for contemporary dance for the North East. I had to be passionate about what I was doing, and believe me the dream has not been easy to realise. Eliot Smith Dance is now in its 7th year with dancers joining the Company from all over the world.

People have suggested that it would be easier to move to London and become part of the vibrant London dance world. My answer to that suggestion is that The North East is a constant source of inspiration for my work. When I open my bedroom curtains on a morning

the view I see is of Warkworth castle-if that does not stir nothing will. I love our heritage, culture and above all the people. There is a rugged strength and beauty in all three and it pleases me when we take ESD outside this region to other parts of the UK and beyond – so that through dance they can share in the uniqueness and richness of our heritage.

This has become more and more evident in my recent dance works. Previously many of my works had centred on religious themes, influenced as I was by my own catholic faith.

2016 was a turning point, PITMAN – a work inspired by The Ashington Group known also as The Pitmen Painters and suggested to me by the Company chairman, himself the son of a miner was premiered. The paintings bring to life the working and social lives of the mining community which has now alas become extinct. It remains however as a proud part of the industrial heritage of the region and the paintings though often crude in execution capture the pride and dignity of the miner and his family. It brought the Company a valuable new partner in that we got to collaborate with Woodhorn Museum for the first time and the Company now appears each year at the Northumberland Miners Picnic. The question of whether the context would be understood elsewhere had been firmly answered. Lee Hall's play based on the painters proved successful both here, in London, Germany, Austria and even the USA. Audience reactions were both moving and inspiring... and in 2017, PORTRAITS OF COURAGE was premiered, another work firmly wedded in the culture of the region – a dance work inspired by the genius and courage of four great Northerners; William Armstrong, George Stephenson, Grace Darling and Emily Wilding Davison. Far from being restricted by the biographical nature of the subject matter I found a new expressiveness in interpreting their spirit .

In any area of our lives where people want to make a difference they must demonstrate that really do care by having a sense of mission and a passion to succeed, however that manifests itself. All these key ingredients have helped support me and my passion. I believe Dance has the power to transform lives, and dance has the power to communicate our regional heritage and culture through the human body and expression. I believe art and artists bring vitality of the cultural landscape to any community. Just remember the Spennymoor Settlement.

I am also passionate about all those, be they young or older who are new to art and I work tirelessly to open up new vistas for them by offering opportunities to experience the performing arts. I am reassured when I see people coming to halls and theatres, sharing a common experience and leaving as part of a community, affected by seeing themselves reflected in the humanity and the generosity of the dancers.

I think that even with the uncertainty of today's politics and with cuts within the art, it is imperative that we are guided by the principle of service. That service is determined by the skills we have. My skills have been represented in my life as a dancer, choreographer and as artistic director but is also there in the talent of every dancer that has danced in Eliot Smith Dance and in the integrity of their performances.

In Eliot Smith Dance I believe we know how important it is to serve the communities in which we live. When creating works I use our local heritage and culture to inspire my works,

to help stay connected to communities that we serve, whether in Northumberland, increasingly in Durham or beyond

On Tuesday Eliot Smith Dance will premiere three new dance works at the Sage Gateshead and on 19 January Eliot Smith Dance will perform at The Bowes Museum with my new work IN PLAIN MOVEMENT. The work is my response to the historic collections of the Bowes Museum, its buildings and immediate environment, created in collaboration with The Bowes Centre.

This work has provided fresh inspiration for my choreography, through working in the new environment of this renowned museum, allowing me to explore further how dance can illuminate heritage. This has led me to explore the links between arts in all its diverse forms and to exult in the Bowes internationally renowned collections of European fine and decorative arts (spanning five centuries). Through the medium of dance visitors to museums can experience at close hand the vitality and excitement of actual performance against the backcloth of that which inspired the works.

This may sound as if it has been all about me. It is important to recognise the immense support ESD and many independent arts organisations receive from philanthropic, public funding like Arts Council England, local funding and businesses, friends, family and most importantly the general public. Without all those named ESD would not be able to champion our past, interpret the present and anticipate the future.

I hope my few words have given you an insight into the living, breathing world of contemporary dance which is being created here in the North East and which is inspired by our rich heritage and culture. That inspiration is all around us and if we remain passionate about it we can draw others in to explore a world they may think they know but in fact may not. Dance is just another way to open people's eyes and minds to their world.

Thank you.

Eliot Smith, Artistic Director of Eliot Smith Dance

www.eliotsmithdance.com