

Body Politics Week

- Who am I to have anything to say about body politics?
- Is there anything to talk about with my own body in my work that feels relevant or that I have something new to say?
- Do I even have anything to say?
- How do I feel about what my body represents in the world, in the dance world, in rural Wales?

I said to Jo and Anna on the first day of this week, I've never looked at my own body in my work, in a political way. (I made a conscious choice many years ago not to - I felt there were other people doing it already - white, gay man who grew up in a tough environment.) This doesn't mean I have not been, am not or don't think politically, about the body, I am VERY political - a political bore some would say.

I've been around, in dance, for a long time. Identity and body politics have been too but the two never seemed to have come together for me, personally.

----- I guess for this subject, context is important?

I am a middle aged, cis gendered, white man, a gay man, work in the arts, am middle class now - although I didn't grow up middle class (see, I have to qualify myself), I am from Wales but don't speak much Welsh.

In the UK class is a huge issue - being Welsh in the UK is seen to be lesser.

I grew up in a time of what is called Section 28.

A local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

This meant that schools and public bodies couldn't talk about being gay or queer at all, and whilst being gay or queer wasn't illegal it created an environment that being so was very difficult. I was bullied for being a pansy, a poof.

I left Wales in 1996, I ran away to London, I was driven away by a culture that was hostile to my gayness, my creativity, to my weird, to my dancing, to my coming from the background I came from. I ran away from drugs and poverty.

Dance and being gay had saved me.

(The act wasn't repealed until 2003 and things looked different by then.)

Things had changed a lot in that time. I was able to look away from what I represented. I also found a community that I was able to be me which meant I was, mostly, safe.

As a choreographer, director, maker, I've always felt other stories or ideas were more important to talk about in my work than to talk about me, myself, my own body and what it means in or to society. There is a lot of shame growing up as a gay kid in the 80's and 90's - perhaps my looking away meant I didn't want to address it.

I returned part time to Wales in 2013, I was curious about my Welshness or lack of it (I don't speak much Welsh and there is a perception I am less Welsh for it (Is a national identity important?)). Issues around the refugee crisis, and unpicking history that tells me stories of my cultural identity that I didn't know have instead been at the forefront of my work. So no, my body itself hasn't been the drive for my work.

Arriving at this week's questions about body politics and working with Jo and Anna who both have strong individual identities and whose bodies represent so much, I was gifted the (awkward) challenge to start to think about my own body in relation to body politics. Let's see where this goes...

Brecon is a small rural town about 60 miles or 95km from where I grew up. It is a very similar town in many ways, a bit bigger, but rooted in farming community and culture, a bit Welsh and a bit English - it is on the border.

There was something about questioning my body in this environment now, as a nearly 47 year old, gay man. There were three moments that struck me.

As a kid, in Wales, we had to play rugby and football. Football was everywhere. It was expected that you would play it as a boy and love it as a man. Nothing could make me enjoy it. I felt this from a very early age, I just wasn't interested but I didn't recognise it, that it made me different, I was different. Football is just an anathema to me, its symbol of male community, masculine behaviour, loud man noises that feel threatening and inane running around a field chasing a ball... It was hyper masculine and if you didn't take part or weren't interested you were an outsider. I think I was also a bit gentle, soft, camp perhaps, girly as they would call me, poof, pansy... so football wasn't my thing. A football and rugby field sends shivers down my spine.

I imagined this in a tutu!



The next thing that struck me was when I was filming Jo and Anna dancing outside of Greggs and a load of boys stopped practically in their faces. To watch. Jo was amazing at talking with them, I backed away, hid a little, how can 14 year old boys have that affect on me?

There is something deep in there that speaks to the othering and fear I felt at that age.

The male interpreter had the same reaction.

I feel bad, as at the start of the week, we talked a lot about young men and boys and the terrible state they are in - have you watched the programme Adolescence? You should. You will know what I am talking about. There has been a report that says white working class boys are being left behind in all areas - work, pay, study, relationships. Trump and the right wing are playing on this and these boys a lot. They are blaming feminism and diversity.



The last thing that came up happened the following week. Someone said to me “now you know how it feels”, implying I didn't get a job because I am a white, middle aged man. I don't think this can be the right way to think about or go about it.

I feel a weight of responsibility for these young men in rural, working class Wales but I don't know how to do it but this can't be the way.

I'm still not convinced my own queer history, identity or body will be interesting to anyone but perhaps the body politics that should be in my work is what lies ahead around all of these identities and bodies and how me as an artist can bring people together, not push people apart.