



Student Information

Interview with Former Artistic Director, Maggi Sietsma AM, about *Virtually Richard3* (2000)

How did the initial concept for *Virtually Richard3* come about?

Usually in my work I develop the narrative myself, this time I decided that I would like to do a work based on someone else's narrative throughline, where a script had already been developed. You see a choreographer is also usually a playwright, because they develop the narrative, the script, in fact everything from beginning to end. As this was going to be a large work I thought it might be interesting to take a script that had already been established and create a dance work out of it. So in one sense I have done something that is unusual for me, and that is working from someone else's thematic story line.

Were you always interested in Shakespeare or was it Richard III in particular?

Yes, I've always been interested in Shakespeare's writing and I thought it would be great for me to work with a Shakespearean play and explore his language and the complexity of his writing. I didn't want to do Romeo and Juliet or A Midsummer Night's Dream; they are works that have already been done many times by numerous dance companies. So I thought I would like to tackle something that no other dance company, that I'm aware of has ever tried before, so that's why I chose Richard III.

Did the initial concept change once you started rehearsals?

The concept is always fluid in my work and originally I didn't really want the piece to work in a linear sense at all because I very rarely work that way. However, because the work of Shakespeare is so complex I found that I had to work in a linear way. I had to go from beginning to end just as the structure of the play is decided, rather than moving backwards and forwards.

How did the character of Richard stimulate you in the creation of *Virtually Richard3*?

The character of Richard is what made me decide to do the play. The incredible power of Richard's character is what fascinates me most. I feel almost manipulated or compelled by Shakespeare to admire Richard, even when objectively I know that he is not at all admirable. A classic example of an attractive wicked rogue, Richard in this work has no need of love or pity, he is completely self centered and cares for no one. He lusts after danger, excitement and personal power. Cruel and hypocritical, he chooses to be a villain and revels in his choice.

Richard has traditionally been portrayed as a very ruthless, ugly character, what other characteristics have you explored in the work and why?

Obviously the numerous character traits of Richard have given me a rich emotional palette to work with and they're the characteristics that have driven the play. Other than the ruthless and the ugly, there is his intelligence and humour, his determination and energy, all of which I've tried to push forward.



Have you chosen to emphasise any particular themes and if so for what reason?

I guess in a sense, being a female choreographer, I have looked at the effect or what I would assume would be the effect of Richard's plotting and scheming on the females in the play. For example there is a scene in the play, Act IV, Scene I where the mother of the princes, one of the daughters and the grandmother – Richard's mother – go to the tower to see the princes who have been imprisoned by Richard. In the play its only a very short scene, but I've actually dug into that and made quite a large scene about the frustration, the anxiety, the resignation, the anger and the grief that those women are going through. I've embellished that particular scene because of the effect that it gave me on reading it. Being the mother of a child it made me want to look further into that scene. It's not the play from a female perspective but there are areas in it that I thought touched humanity and I wanted explore that.

Is this because as opposed to his other play's, in Richard III Shakespeare hasn't really written any female roles as such?

In Richard III, the characters are really only sketched apart from that of Richard and some of the more prominent male roles. So I thought I'd like to flesh out the female roles a bit and in fact I've more or less only sketched the other males in the play, so I've twisted it a little that way.

How much has Shakespeare's writing or staging influenced your work?

Obviously the writing has had a real influence on the work. The staging hasn't influenced it at all. His staging hasn't influenced it at all because he wrote a play in the Elizabethan times for a very set audience and a set environment and this is a dance work so I need to use the whole stage and the stage needs to change. I still have to ask, like he does, for the audience at times to make imaginative leaps. For example in the scenes with the campsites, in the Shakespearean staging they had two tents on either side of the stage and the audience were asked to imagine that they were miles apart. I'm asking the audience to make those sort of leaps as well but no, I haven't followed his staging in any way shape or form, but I have followed his structure and I have used parts of his text.

In what ways have you used Shakespeare's text?

It's usually Richard that uses the text. At times I have used just one or two words of the text to show his character development and I'm also using some of the text written and projected on a video screen. I didn't really want to use a lot of Shakespearean language, because I find that it's a very difficult and complex language but the odd word here or there is fine. The text that the dancers all use is Shakespeare's.

You often work collaboratively with Jennifer Flowers. Can you explain the collaborative approach for *Virtually Richard3*?

Jennifer has an enormous understanding of Shakespearean text having worked as both a director and performer in several of his works. So her assistance in the development of my actual scenic structure has been enormous and her work as a dramaturge has been really invaluable. She has been working very closely with the dancers on their dramatic skills to help them with their characterisation as both a vocal coach and director.



What is to be gained most by collaborating on a dance work? Were there any drawbacks or negative aspects?

I think for me, creating a dance work is always a collaborative effort and by collaboration you can get different peoples ideas and visions. But whilst I collaborate enormously it is my vision that drives the work, so I make the final decisions and I'm the final arbiter of what is presented on stage.

The negative things about collaboration can be in terms of time frames. Perhaps if a designer is running behind schedule that can have a very negative impact on the dance because you don't have enough time to develop things further. For example, if I'm going to be using a prop that moves around a space, I need to have it in the rehearsal studio so it can become a seamless part of the work rather than something just added at the end. So it's very complex, but I find working collaboratively a very positive approach.

Do you think that your process has changed in any way during the creation of *Virtually Richard3* and if so, how?

I think every work determines its own process so I don't think my process is set in concrete, it always changes depending on the needs of the work in progress. This work has been driven by different needs. Whilst its still very impressionistic, I have felt more of a need to make sure that the audience can understand what has just happened or is happening. Whereas, very often in dance, you can work with a little more ambiguity, which is usually the way I like to work. That means that something can have two or three different meanings depending on the viewer's interpretation. In this work there is still freedom for that ambiguity but there are times when you can't be ambiguous because you have to tell the story or part of the story.