

‘MAKING WORK ABOUT OTHERS’

BY CAITLIN DAVEY

Emerging contemporary dance artist Caitlin Davey is a graduate of the Unitec Performing and Screen Arts programme who has worked with a number of New Zealand’s established artists. The outcome of two development residencies, her performance work *About Others* invites the audience, gently and with respect, to walk in the shoes of others.

I have been working on my show *About Others* for a year now. The central theme of the work is that we think about other people in less complex ways than we think of ourselves. How we simplify those with different experiences to our own, and how this has caused, or affected, some recent world events. In particular; the refugee crisis, the rising global prison population and how they are treated, Trump’s border wall, and more recently, the Christchurch and Sri Lanka terrorist attacks.

People cannot be sorted into neat categories. They are, and always will be, more nuanced than that; yet this is what we see more and more of every day all around the world. Intolerance of ambiguity has always existed, but I wonder if the rise of this is the mark of our times. This separation, or ‘Othering’ as it is often referred to,

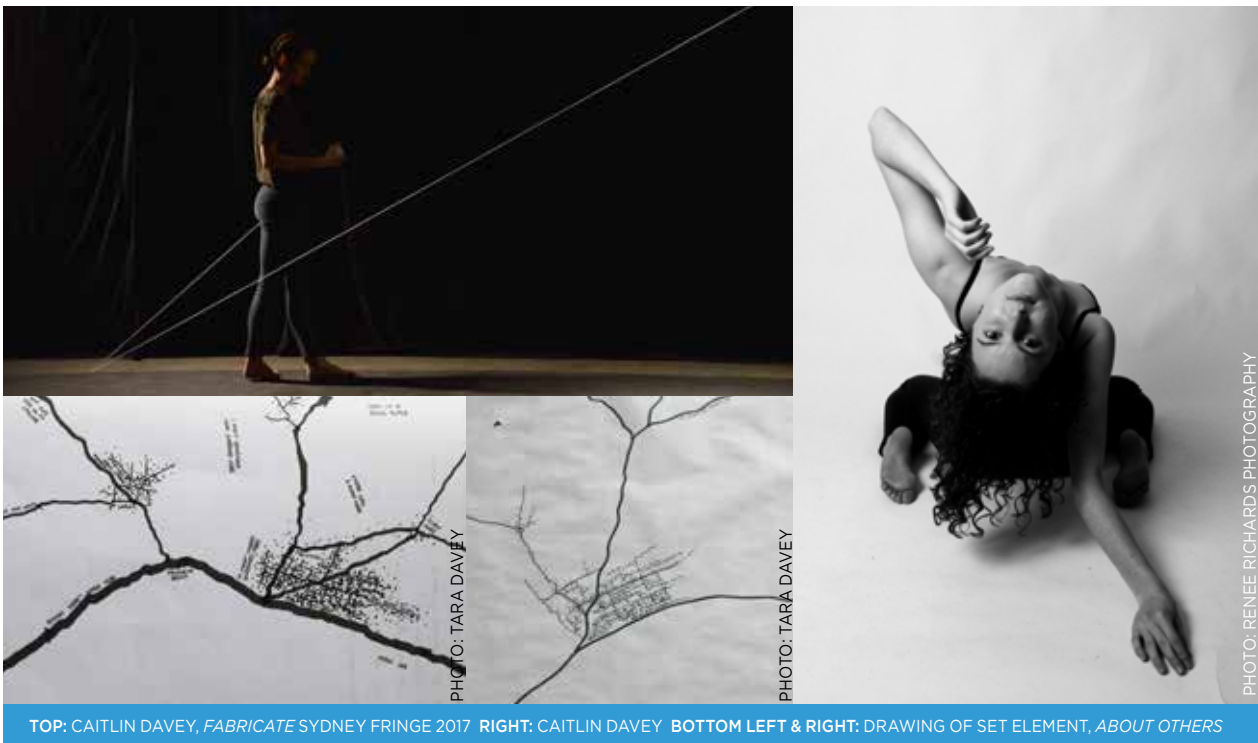
and the anger that often accompanies it is rooted in fear. “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear. And the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”¹ Listening to other groups of people, especially those who are most different from us, and especially when they are in pain, has never been more important. It is the only solution. This work is a call to arms to think about and do just that.

The process for this work has been influenced by many things, but a point I keep coming back to is the first line in the NT Ghent manifesto: “It is not about just portraying the world anymore. It is about changing it”². To create this change, my aim for the work is to get the audience to think about others more complexly. This is a big ask, and won’t be achieved with every single audience member. If I can get even just one person to



CAITLIN DAVEY, *FABRICATE* 2016

PHOTO: LYDIA CONNOLLY-HIATT



TOP: CAITLIN DAVEY, *FABRICATE* SYDNEY FRINGE 2017 RIGHT: CAITLIN DAVEY BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT: DRAWING OF SET ELEMENT, *ABOUT OTHERS*

shift their world view to a more generous perspective, I will be grateful.

Once I realised my aim, I knew having the audience sit still in their seats while they watched a performance for an hour wouldn't work. I think it's hard to change minds and hearts unless you really invite people in and involve them. So, during *About Others* the audience move through the space, sometimes with the performers. They have moments of becoming 'the other', perhaps a glimpse into life in someone else's shoes. With instruction they also help create the set for the work, meaning it is always different.

I was lucky enough to be the recipient of a 6-month research residency for this work called *Ideas in Residence* at The Basement, Auckland. An abundance of time, and support from Dramaturg Nisha Madhan, allowed me to have a deep understanding of the working material. When aiming to create social change it is vital you tread carefully until you have a thorough understanding of your material. It is so easy to be led astray by a lack of understanding. After the six months of the residency, I was grateful to receive a further development residency through the DANZ Dance Residency at Saint Kentigern College. This allowed me time to develop the method of making the work, tying it in with my practice and the creative team for this show. Again, I was gifted the support of a mentor, val smith, who helped me push my practice and methods.

I believe the philosophy of the work must line up with the methods used to create the work. "The performance must already do what it claims".³ The rehearsal space for this work seeks to imagine all who enter it as complex, messy, and beautiful humans. My team are powerful creators who come to the space with this same generosity I have tried to provide them with. We aim to practise what we preach. Laughter, questions and breaks are encouraged. It is also important for me that a work about difference is comprised of a diverse creative team, and I have endeavoured to create one here.

My main thought currently on creating change with art is that the audience must be invited to ask questions, separate from what they already understand, in order for change to happen. You can't tell people what to think, they must arrive there of their own choice. I want to provoke ideas in the audience, not represent ideas at them. To do that we aim to invite vulnerability, but in a safe space, and we listen to you just as much as you listen to us. *About Others* therefore does not yell at you, but invites you, quietly, and with respect, to join us.

I will leave you with a quote from my journal for *About Others* from 16 March, the day after the Christchurch attack:

"IN THIS MOMENT, DON'T YELL, CRY. AND WHEN YOU'VE FINISHED CRYING, LISTEN. LISTEN TO EVERYONE, NOT JUST THOSE YOU AGREE WITH. LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO UNDERSTAND, NOT WITH THE INTENT TO CHANGE. ONLY BY UNDERSTANDING AND TRULY LISTENING CAN WE EXPECT OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. THEN MAYBE CHANGE WILL HAPPEN." ■

¹ Lovecraft, H. P. 1973. *Supernatural horror in literature*. New York: Dover Publications.

² NTGent Theatre (Nederlands Toneel Gent). "Ghent Manifesto". <https://www.ntgent.be/en/manifest> (accessed May 6, 2019)

³ Krōt Jurak. "Krōt Jurak on Performance Making." *Everybody's Toolbox*. http://everybodystoolbox.net/index.php?title=19.01.09_Kr%C3%B5t_Juurak_on_performance-making (accessed May 24, 2019)