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**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

AFFECTIVE CHOREOGRAPHY IN PERFORMANCE



Applying embodied knowledge relating to touch in developing innovative movement methodologies within performance

Type of output:
Performance.
A collection of
creative and
critical work

by
Liz Pavey

Front cover:
Qualities of touch,
thrusting actions packing
imaginary herring into real
barrels, Phase 1.

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SUMMARY

Affective Choreography in Performance (ACiP) applied embodied knowledge relating to touch in developing innovative movement methodologies within performance. It consisted of a body of choreographic work which Pavey undertook for two productions of Ann Coburn's play *Get Up and Tie Your Fingers*, a 2014 Scottish/English tour and a community adaptation presented in Eyemouth, Scotland in 2016. The play tells the story of the Eyemouth Fishing Disaster of 1881 from the perspective of the herring lassies.

The research investigated how awareness of the qualities of touch can develop performers' aesthetic and somatic sensibilities, and how this can result in newly informed actions solicitous of empathic forms of audience response.

Underpinned by scholarship regarding touch, materiality, perception and affect, and influenced by Eastern perspectives on the liveliness of all matter, the research foregrounded the social and environmental productivity of the embodied experience of touch. It explored how touch can foster the subject's sensitivity to the self, to others and to their surroundings. The project was distinctive in applying its work to two particular and overlapping areas of practice/enquiry: a) music theatre productions and b) heritage studies. These were brought together within innovative storytelling heritage performances by, and for, contemporary coastal communities.

The practice research had two phases: 1) working with community choirs and professional actors; and 2) girls from a community cast. Utilising somatic techniques within rehearsals, including guided sensory discovery, the research developed methodologies for touching the real

and the imaginary. Development involved the use of weighty and light things, and enactments of expressive/mimetic gestures which physicalized text and song words.

The 2014 national tour was funded by Arts Council England and other providers. The Eyemouth community production attracted funding from Creative Scotland and Borders Live Touring Scheme. Research findings were presented at *Touching Past Lives* symposium, London 2018.

INTRODUCTION





Choreography touching real things offered embodied and emplaced opportunities to attend to feelings of being with or at one with things, and through this, remembering resonances of lives lived in relationship to the sea. A spectator could recognise the struggle and sense the change in body tone and quality of touch as the actor shifted from working with the net to clutching its textured mass to her and then feeling the emptiness and sense of loss as it slid from her grasp.



Above: **Touching the real.**

Actor clutches fishing net to her body,
Phase 1 .

TIMELINE

2014	2016	2017	2018
<p>Get Up and Tie Your Fingers (Guild of Lillians/Customs House Production): Musselburgh, Cockburnspath, Berwick-upon-Tweed, South Shields, Kings Lynn, Hartlepool, Hull, Grimsby, Great Yarmouth, Margate, Folkestone, Hastings.</p>   <p>Above top: Map of 2014 tour. Above: Research Phase 1, flyer for the 2014 tour.</p>	<p>Get Up and Tie Your Fingers Eyemouth Three performances in Eyemouth.</p>  <p>Above: Research Phase 2, poster for the 2016 Eyemouth production.</p>	<p>Get Up and Tie Your Fingers Eyemouth Performance at the Netherbow Theatre, Scottish Storytelling Centre Edinburgh - Tradfest international festival.</p>	<p>Research findings presented at Touching Past Lives symposium, Senate House London.</p>  <p>Above: Touching Past Lives symposium, hosted by Brunel University London's Global Lives Research Cluster, Eastern Arc, and the Heritage Lottery. Funded Paston Footprints 600.</p>

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Pavey's choreographic approach sought to explore the affective potential of performers moving in communion with the kinetic qualities and evocative sensory properties of things, both real and imaginary. These objects were specific to, and resonant within, the community history represented by *Get Up and Tie Your Fingers*.

The project asked:

What movement approaches for performers best foster an experience of haptic touch and kinaesthetic empathy within audiences?

How can the performer engender a sense of spectatorial tactility, of handling or contacting the objects touched within performance?

How can affective choreography operate as an activity of remembering shared cultural heritage within the theatrical storytelling of a tragic historical event?



Above: Exploring sentient and kinetic qualities of light silks, rehearsals Phase 2.

CONTEXT

Pavey's research extends knowledge of embodiment from somatics into the domains of music theatre and heritage studies, applying her expertise in touch (cultivated through dance and Shiatsu bodywork practice) to show how it can be understood as an embodied expression of heritage and awaken both performers and audiences to its storytelling capabilities.

Pavey's development and analysis of her practice research is underpinned by phenomenology of the senses and theories of materiality and of transmission of affect - a multi-sensory "process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect" (Brennan 2004: 3). Drawing upon perspectives concerning the life of artifacts from within museum studies (Ting 2012, Petrov 2012), the research puts into motion scholarship concerning the articulacy of things - as moving and leaky - as distinct from objects considered inert and complete (Ingold 2012, Abram 2010). Pavey's work addresses how embodied, affective, synesthetic processes create understanding of cultural heritage: "...*feeling the past*, through embodied presencing [...] not to *translate* cultural objects, but to acknowledge their power to articulate pasts" (Tolia-Kelly, Waterton & Watson, 2017: 3).

Pavey's approach facilitates performers to experience "a tension, an intention, and an attention" (Nancy 2007: 5) as they feel into encounters with traditional fishing-related things, real or imaginary. The music theatre audience members are pulled into the experience as they observe a performer working with a material moving thing thus firing memories of being in contact with similar things; an intermodal process (across sense modalities) of affect that "compounds boundaries" between body observed and body experienced (Reynolds 2012: 124).

The manifestation of shared heritage - an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction that "needs to be decided at grassroots level by relevant communities" (Apaydin 2020: 15) - is here worked out through embodied interaction with tangible things which, in turn, foster connections with an emergent, intangible heritage.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Pavey's methods included *touching the real* and *touching the imaginary*. Touching the real involved guided sensory discovery and body-scanning to foster music theatre performers' inner and outer awareness of the qualities, textures, momentum and gravity of things. Touching the imaginary involved rehearsal processes which foregrounded gesture as sensation in order to feel the qualities of things not actually there, to strongly connect movement with intent as "memories, thoughts, and imaginings flood through our touch" (Olsen 2002: 63).

The project also facilitated a being *in touch with the living world*. Through sensory techniques working with the resonant, fluid body, ACiP fostered attention to, and awareness of, the environment, including working outdoors on the beach to enable "escape from habitual creative approaches" (Hunter 2015: 307). Here experimentation with silks, woollen shawls and heavy boots - loosely echoing typical clothing of 19th century herring lassies - enabled feeling their physical properties in interaction with a windswept environment. This allowed performers to explore how the objects danced with them, offering the opportunity to develop both heightened awareness of the present and a material connection to past lives.



Above: **Touching the real and the imaginary**, working with silks and gesture, Phase 2.

In **Phase 1** (2014 national tour) Pavey's work with adults focused on tuning into the reciprocal nature of touch – to touch is to be touched - in handling weighty things including cumbersome fishing nets, rough lengths of rope and large barrels. Resulting choreography manifested physical and mental/emotional effort asking a lot of the performers, particularly in the context of a lengthy tour. Here touching the imaginary involved community choir members and actors feeling into representational gestures created to convey a sense of the demanding repetitious work of herring lassies.



Top right: Storm scene Phase 1, bodies rubbing against course rope and burdened by rough nets.

Bottom right: **Touching the real** Phase 1, choreography with heavy barrels for the song The Herrin's Heid.



Right: **Touching the imaginary**, a community choir rehearses gestures representing gutting fish for the song The Herrin's Heid.



For **Phase 2** (2016 Eyemouth production) work with young girls concentrated on sensing the tactile, physical and kinetic qualities of light, silky-soft fabric and creating actions with these which fostered feelings of freedom and exuberant expression in moving through space. Choreography suggested comfort and fragility, e.g. hugging the buddled-up cloth to one's heart, but also strength in how the fabric could create sound and take weight. Through exploration of the hand as an extension of the heart (from Shiatsu practice), gestural material relating to the words of a fisherman's hymn *Ballerma* involved young girls imaginatively pulling and coiling ropes, reaching for loved-ones, and perhaps even catching and holding abstract concepts such as hope.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fptiIK7rUD0&feature=youtu.be>
See particularly, storm scene 19:49, *Ballerma* 26:47



Top right: **Touching the real**
Phase 2, rehearsing creating waves with soft pieces of silk.

Bottom right: **Storm scene**
Phase 2, similar action/dynamic to choreography for Phase 1 but working with soft silks.



Right: **Touching the imaginary**,
expressive gestures for the hymn *Ballerma*.



DISSEMINATION

Choreographic work created in Phase 1 was disseminated through a national tour *Follow the Herring*, a co-production by The Customs House and Guild of Lillians which comprise of performances of *Get Up and Tie Your Fingers* and *The Coat for a Boat!* exhibition. The production was directed by Fiona MacPherson, score by Karen Wimhurst. The project toured to 12 east coast British locations in 2014.

Venues and performance dates:

The Brunton Theatre, Musselburgh, 8-9 May

Cockburnspath Village Hall, 13 May

The Maltings Theatre, Berwick-upon-Tweed, 16 May

The Customs House, South Shields, 21-24 May

Kings Lynn Arts Centre, 30-31 May

Town Hall Theatre, Hartlepool, 5-7 June

Hull Truck Theatre, 18-21 June

Grimsbey Minster, 26-28 June

St. George's Theatre, Great Yarmouth, 2-5 July

Theatre Royal, Margate, 17-19 July

Quarterhouse, Folkestone, 25-26 July

The Stades, Hastings 31 July-1 August

<https://www.facebook.com/followtheherring/>

Funding: £379,560 (£218,000 from Arts Council England; £197,000 from local authorities and other sources).

12 local choirs, 300 participants approx.

Audiences attendance: 5,398.

The 2014 production won the Best Regional Revival Award from The British Theatre Guide and was reviewed in:

The Journal: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140526015906/http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/arts-culture-news/review-up-tie-your-fingers-7168574>

British Theatre Guide: <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/get-up-and-tie-customs-house-10164>

Libby Purves- Theatre Cat:

<https://theatre.cat.com/2014/07/07/get-up-and-tie-your-fingers-touring/>

Choreography created in Phase 2 was disseminated through a new production *Get Up and Tie Your Fingers Eyemouth*, a collaboration between MacPherson, Wimhurst, musical director Eleanor Logan and choreographer Liz Pavey, involving 60 local people of all ages. Ann Coburn condensed her play into a shorter storytelling delivered by ten local people taking the role of narrators with no professional actors involved:

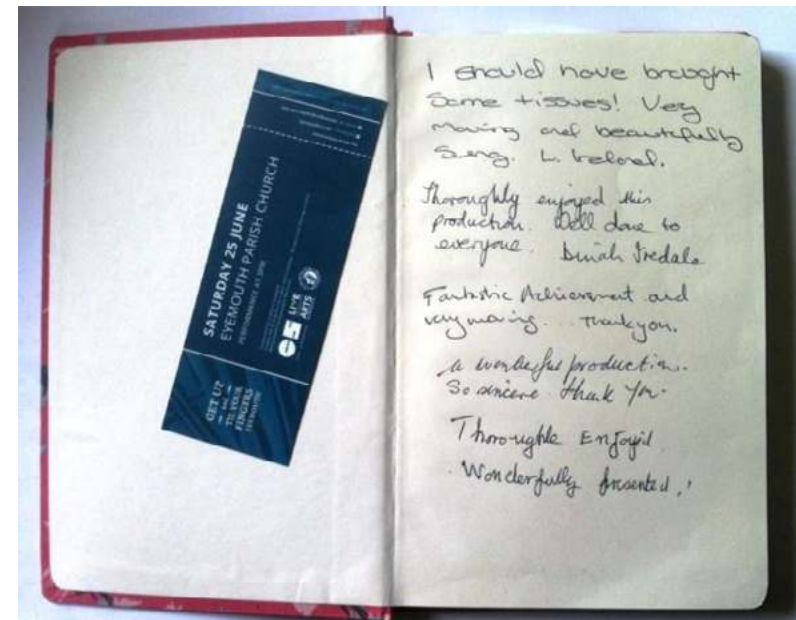
- 3 performances in Eyemouth June 2016
- Performance at the Netherbow Theatre, Scottish Storytelling Centre Edinburgh as part of Tradfest international festival, April 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fptIK7rUD0&feature=youtu.be> (Tradfest 2017 summary film includes footage from *Get Up and Tie Your Fingers Eyemouth*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtL2JxLnB1I>)
- Elements of the production included in the 135 year anniversary commemoration of the fishing disaster, October 2016 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWTvhn4rWe0&feature=youtu.be>

Funded by: Creative Scotland, Borders Live Touring Scheme, TradFest – CSS

Partners included:

- The Eyemouth Museum
- The Eyemouth Drama Group
- Eyemouth Parish Church
- Eyemouth High School
- Eyemouth and District Chamber of Trade

<https://www.facebook.com/GUTFEyemouth>



Above top: Tradfest, 2017, brochure.

Above: 2016 Eyemouth performance book of audience responses.

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disciplinary Dialogic Discourses with a Post-Fishing Community'
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Olsen (2002).

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