

Sue Gill and Hannah Fox

Generations

Welfare State International is a celebratory arts company founded thirty years ago in Britain by John Fox and Sue Gill, and others. After decades of international touring, where the company gained a reputation for spectacular one-off events on a very large scale (in Poland, Vancouver, Houston, Australia, etc.), the company moved into long-term community residencies and is now settled in the small Lake District town of Ulverston, Cumbria, England. In April '99, with the help of a large grant from the Lottery, WSI opened its new Ulverston home, the Lanternhouse Centre for Celebratory Arts, which offers studios, workshops and accommodation for artists among its facilities. The company's philosophy has always remained the same. "We are seeking a culture of participation in which more people will find the power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant in their lives." (John Fox)

Lanternhouse and WSI's work are generators for ideas, creativity and imagination in others, as seen in the many projects and new festivals, which include: the annual Ulverston community lantern parade (now in its seventeenth year); a year round education programme; a publishing wing producing handbooks in the celebratory arts (*The Dead Good Guides*); as well as storytelling, touring performances, installations and the creation of ceremonial spaces and structures.

How is all this achieved? Through a network of freelance artists across many disciplines: sculptors, musicians, performers, pyrotechnicians, writers, poets, directors, choreographers, cooks etc. Sue and John are still at the helm as education co-ordinator and artistic director with a team of seven to run Lanternhouse, but most significant, over the last four or five years, is the presence of the second generation of the Fox family. Dan, age thirty, returned to Cumbria as musical director on several important projects which he fits around touring with his band, Salt The Band, now in its third year. Hannah, age twenty-eight, a visual artist, has become a significant project director in WSI. She inputs

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into management and policy decisions across many strands of the company's life and is a principal artist in much of the company's new work.

SUE'S STORY

From the point of view of the "mother" there's a lot of scary information out there. "Human personality... complex and evolving outcome of each individual's interaction with the world... depends crucially upon the emotional vicissitudes of childhood", and, as if that were not enough, "there is a direct link between a child's emotional environment and the later adult's capacity to engage lovingly with life..."¹

Feelings of guilt and inadequacy rush in. Questions abound - did I do the parenting well enough at thirty? Thoughts about how much better I would do it now... All pointless. The die is cast.

From my point of view, thinking about Hannah and me, I feel we support each other a lot, we share a great deal and are really close - although I sense Hannah would wish we could be closer. We see each other most days, which is a fantastic luxury after seven years of distance and meeting up occasionally in international restaurants (well, that's how it sometimes felt!).

Anecdote and stories are the best way to illustrate and illumine who we are, starting with origins and the circumstances surrounding our births and infancy, moving on to projects we have done together.

My birth coincided with the first bombs falling on Hull in the north of England in 1940, and for the new parents that must have been traumatic. The home and little shop they ran were damaged, mother and new baby (covered in soot) were whisked off

to safety, all of twelve kilometres away, to a little wooden seaside shack away from the city, which was all they could afford. A very tranquil, static, all-female upbringing followed for the next five years as all the fathers/husbands were away in the war. I also had periods of total deafness in early childhood that could account for my self-contained nature in later life.

Hannah was born at home in the heart of Leeds, a northern industrial city, in a large freezing cold house - collective home to the Fox family and half a dozen (or more) ex art students who were the first members of WSI. The home help who came in to support me got whisked off to wash costumes for the next show, which were stored in the room below. Hannah was on the road from five weeks, with her two-year-old brother. I drove the big bus that carried the poles for the circus tent on its roof, or the ex-Army truck loaded with the props, towing a trailer in which the family lived.

Hannah was surrounded by people who were creating masks and giant puppets, playing music, planning and rehearsing new shows. Lessons in WSI's own school dealt with the logistics of touring as a way of teaching numbers and reading. Hannah invented the concept of the clipboard for herself when she was four and had to stand on a box to work a simple lighting desk on cue for a performance in a Rotterdam gallery.

She always, always made things. She would gather up debris and be found under the table creating miniature artworks while the adults ate, drank and talked. As a child she was completely self-motivating although she did go to "proper" school at eight - which is three or four years late in England - but never really needed to. School nearly destroyed who she was and she took ten years to re-find herself. On the second morning, waking her to go to

1. From the introduction to *Generations: an anthology of poems between Fathers, Mothers, Daughters, Sons*, edited by Melanie Hart and James Loader, Penguin 1998.

school, she said, "No, it's OK Mum, I've been". She never realised you were supposed to go more than once - been there, done that, have too much else to do.

All along, WSI had both a public and a private side to the work. Dan's summer outdoor naming ceremony in 1969 was created with the help of artists and colleagues. Hannah's, a couple of years later, with the fledgling WSI company involved, was indoors in the winter. Hannah describes her response to her naming ceremony in our recently published *Dead Good Guide to Namings and Baby Welcoming Ceremonies*. She tactfully negotiated with us before publication, but pulls no punches in what she writes:

What I feel about having had a Naming Ceremony

I've sort of been in the middle of two. The first was entirely mine, and it was then, as a baby, that I received my name. The second, maybe five or six years later, was a ceremonial day to name several other children, but I was able to take part in the activities. I mention both because they each meant and mean such different things to me.

The first ceremony was in 1971. Secular namings were unusual things at this time. There was little to compare anything to, to share ideas with or to borrow a structure from. The "organisers" (the babies' parents and their friends) performed a brave thing. It was radical and on the edge. They went for it, took it seriously, and meant what they did, but also knew it was sufficiently weird to make a powerful, political impression on those gathered. I understand that a real live goat, a mock priest, a greasepaint jester and a baby were involved. I was the baby. It was a performance with a public audience, not a private ceremony with gathered friends. On this occasion it was the friends as a clan creating an artwork on life as a statement to those on the

outside. It served a function - to give me a name, and was a rite of passage for those creators who felt the need to perform these life markers with incredible originality and personal meaning. They were learning and pushing and receiving something new and fresh, just as I was. But I think in many ways it had little to do with that baby, with me, my being or the life that lay ahead. We say this now of regular christenings, how odd! My naming was alternative but how personal was it? Was it an experiment and a statement or a genuine gift to the child?

The second naming ceremony I remember more clearly, and I think it served several child-centred functions very well. The children involved were older, they were participants not just helpless targets of goodwill (or in my case anarchy!) and were able to partially make decisions. Each child shared a secret name with its parents, sent a tiny lantern boat bobbing away down a cavernous underground stream and released a pigeon into the sky. Although feeling a bit left out of the "receiving a name" part, I was thrilled to be able to release a pigeon from my own hands. This sort of involvement from the child gives them a role, makes them feel important and a necessary member of the gathering. It is wonderful to give a child a day focussed entirely on them and their lives, with hopes for the future and the undeniable bond created with all those gathered around them.

(Hannah Fox)

Hannah is the ritual maker in the Fox family and from time to time takes on a subtle parenting role when John and I are particularly dysfunctional. It is a rare privilege to work with someone as gifted as Hannah, who never fails to astonish. It is gratifying and reassuring to look at the roots of her work and what informs it - notions of what is home. She is obsessed with gardens and with her partner has an award-winning organic vegetable garden in addition to everything else.

Similarities? Very few, as far as our

temperament and natures go; share a love of laughing, lamb kebabs and occasional shopping binges. Differences? Hannah does yoga and drinks wine. I just drink wine. I make high speed instant decisions. Hannah takes much longer to get inside and grasp an issue. Hannah is much more perceptive about people and recognises their potential. I am constantly amazed by my daughter's wisdom, and am constantly learning from her.

HANNAH'S STORY

Family: what it is, what it means, and how it manifests itself are the basis of everything I have ever known, and everything I am now busy with.

My private family is small: a mother, Sue; a father, John; a brother, Daniel; and a cat, Tanzy Pooper. We are few, but strong, very close and able to find endless meaning in why we stick together. We orbit around, a tiny tribe rooted to not a lot, connected to no place in particular, needing to be no-where, but held together in a simple nest of commitment, ideas, inspiration and love. We sort of wobble through the universe, holding hands.

As I start to write this, my family are all abroad in various global corners, so to connect with them I have come back to sit on the tatty old family sofa with Tanzy Pooper. In terms of generations I can only speak of two: no great depths of history to be revealed here. Rather than evolving with tiny steps connecting one generation seamlessly to the last, my parents made a leap. The lives they have created are so radically in contrast to their parents and grandparents that I feel my spiritual history only really begins with them. There are, of course, ancient family themes - granddad's nose or great grandma's tenacity - but my creativity, my dreams and my ideology begin with Sue and John. Family is all encompassing to me; it gives me my

meaning; my parents' meaning has come out of having a family.

Sue and John were born as working-class kids in the north east of England. Sue, the daughter of a tripe (cow's stomach) dresser, and John, the son of a sailor. Meeting each other, travelling, learning and working, brought them to found the company, Welfare State International, in 1968, about fifteen years after they had met. This was the same year, Daniel, my brother, was born. I was born in 1971, not now into a northern working-class family, but to radical, arty, educated middle-class parents.

We lived in a caravan, a beautiful wooden wagon, as we toured the country and into Europe doing shows. Music and fire happenings, food events, sculptural land-art installations, winter stories in a marquee, experimental street theatre and carnival were our work. The caravan was not a hippy statement but a means to stay together as a happy close family, sleeping in our own beds, playing with our own toys, as we travelled to the next project along the road. Other families in other caravans were part of this tribe. We were not a flabby commune, but a healthy community. We were secure, confident children, seeing the world, helping in the work and being taught by adults we respected. We had our own school of ten children.

This collective lifestyle, busy with adults intermingling, was extremely stimulating. Being surrounded and supported by motivated creators taught me a lot, I think, about responsibility, reliability, commitment and the art of work, but conversely this "busyness" has also provoked me into being a rather private person, aware of borders, of protecting my domestic sanctity.

Daniel and I were often part of the shows. "Child image" was our main role. What visual gags can you do with small people? Little girl in paper dress, little boy in



"... I was thrilled to be able to release a pigeon from my own hands." Hannah Fox, 1976.
Photo: Daniel Meadows

burning fire suit, big monster puppet eats little girl, little girl in big boots and false teeth becomes horrible old lady, little boy with goose wings on horseback becomes angel. And I forget the amount of times Daniel and I have "married" each other, to woo an audience! These early years of image making were most formative to me in shaping my personal visual style. I can recognise the origins of what I now create in the greasepaint and straw-smelling days of my childhood.

This was my growing up and I, of course,

knew nothing different. My parents were my Mum and Dad, but also people I helped, watched, admired, discussed ideas with and often worried about! They were not quite my colleagues yet, but definitely my mentors, friends and teachers. As teenagers, we continued to travel the world with WSI but this time Daniel and I started to form our own artistic voices; then came the point to leave home. I went to art school in Glasgow, Scotland. In a way, these were my wilderness years, heading out from my supportive artistic community to meet the "real world"

head on - the world of other types of artists, with other ideas about what function art has and what art should say. I was an idealist, but a terrier in this new, confrontational but exciting, slick cityscape. Questions were thrown at me and my own voice really started to coalesce. During these years Sue and John were distant friends and confidantes. I worked with them very little, but needed and trusted their advice. I was not rebelling - there didn't seem any point. I remember John once saying to me, "There are far more important things to rebel against than your parents", and then encouraging me to write graffiti on the toilet walls about lecherous lecturers. Ironically, my final degree show was a political yet beautiful suicide from the art school. Just, it seems, as John's was in 1960 something.

Dogtroep - a fantastic surreal visual theatre company - was my next home. I worked with them in Amsterdam for three years after art school, now really in a professional context, exploring my artistic identity. These were vital years: outpouring from me were themes and images based entirely around the subjects of home, family, gardens, nomads and anchoring. Now, a few years later, my artistic expression is still obsessed with these same threads. Dogtroep was actually another family, set up in an "all-on" structure of life and work similar to WSI. Bizarrely Warner van Wely founded Dogtroep twenty-five years previously, after turning up on a WSI gig and getting involved. His work has become entirely his own but the extended fingers of the artistic family seem to tickle us all.

The biggest danger of merging with parents in art and life is that you have nothing of your own to say. Daniel and I have actively pushed other edges to discover and acquire skills, styles and aesthetics of our own making. It's not about "following on" in the family footsteps, because with our

work that can lead you to a state of regurgitation. In terms of WSI, a steady evolution continues in the work, partly influenced by the unique contributions Daniel and I can make. With Dogtroep I learned to be a better performer and to recognise my own vocabulary of images. I now bring this experience home. Likewise Daniel has gone on to be a fantastic musician and musical director, running his own bands, making drums, performing in festivals...

Until this point Sue and I had not shared such a strong artistic dialogue as John and I had, but in recent years we have done much together. Firstly we went on an expedition to Nepal: a holiday really, but a great rite of passage for mother and daughter to meet each other again as two adult women. No guides, no porters, but lots of tea stops! We then created a two-woman show, Pegasus, as a mystery trip theatrical journey on a train. Very silly!

Although my visual work tends to resonate more with John, Sue and I are developing a whole new thread together. We have both trained as celebrants and officiants to lead secular weddings, namings and funerals. Actually this is not new work, but the inevitable outcome of many years of WSI asking questions about where life meets art and where art and celebration can facilitate transitions in the lives of those who have become a bit disconnected. Sue and I have arranged many ceremonies together. Sue is brilliant as the writer, negotiator and celebrant and I tend to orchestrate the atmosphere, environment and occasion of it all. We teach together the subject of rites of passage, as well as many other courses and workshops. It is a great family based subject to approach as mother and daughter. Those we work with respond warmly to our span of generations, Hannah being the youngest celebrant in England and Sue the most imaginative!

We now live in the same town. We sing

together in an A Cappella group of seven women (not WSI!), and play sax and bass drum in the community samba band. We laugh a lot together, play and feast. This brings me to the slightly uncomfortable area of "where the boundaries lie". After living abroad I came back to live in Ulverston, the town where Sue and John have their home and WSI is based. Why? I think because for me the basic meaning in my life remains family. I have no other place I particularly want to be - family is my magnet. But I live in my own house with my partner Duncan, a furniture maker, and Daniel lives with his drummer girlfriend, nearby. When life and work boundaries are as blurred as they are with our family it is important to establish what is public and what is private. Welfare State operates from here, our little market town, and it attracts visitors, audiences and fellow artists alike.

The extended family of WSI is the big group of freelance artists who regularly (and some for many years) work with the company, but the Fox family is still a small nest within the tree. We have family celebrations that are private and need to be so. The work of the company is often about domestic celebration but there has to be the opportunity for non-public, non-witnessed expression of this for us. I had a difficult encounter recently when John was turning sixty. I found it hard to amalgamate a semi-public celebration of his life surrounded by many friends, who of course, are nearly all colleagues, with the selfish thought that it was my Dad's sixtieth, and I wanted a family party - *just us!* Not another gig. Which is why I say A Cappella singing is *not* WSI! It comes back to the issue of identity. Who am I and who are we as a family, without the mother ship of WSI?

In New Zealand, in April 1999, I made a presentation at the Magdalena Festival Forum about the work of the company. I

deliberately talked about WSI, not about the artist Hannah Fox, as I felt it would have more of a draw, be more revered than a talk about me, yet another young female artist out there doing her thing. But many of the projects and images I showed actually contain much of me. Lately with WSI I have made performances and installations, directed fire shows and community events, all of which become the main work of the company, because that is how we evolve. Artists, be it me or one of many others, arrive with their vision and their passion, and lead the company in that direction for a while. Sue and John are the artistic directors of the work, and so again we are back to family. These visiting freelance artists have a lot of scope within the company because only like-minded souls who feel right and exchange trust end up being here. They are like family members and they feel valued and free within the context of the company. Many people talk about WSI as one big happy family, corny but true!

Sometimes other people are intrigued and bring up the issue of "how interesting, working with your parents". It is, of course, all Daniel and I have known, even if it is seen as a bit remarkable and odd. And what about the question of the "dynasty"? Well, this makes my stomach turn. We do the work now, we do what seems right next, and to talk of dynasty is to apply an externally constructed concept to how we do things. Who knows? Let's just see what's right next for all of us. I do find it very interesting that after thirty years of work the true core members of WSI can be seen as John, Sue, Daniel and Hannah - the Fox family - in some forward and backward symbiotic exchange of experience, years, advice, mentoring, ideas, questions and values. We are loosely the ensemble company.

I feel incredibly lucky to have had the upbringing I have had, but it is complex. It

has made me into the person that I am, which begs questions of my own artistic identity. I haven't had to struggle to break out, as my parents had to do, which raises questions of meaning and direction and motivation for my life. I can't make a major leap or significant step as they did in their generation, and how can I follow their lead? How can I ever provide as varied and as rich an upbringing in the next century as I was given in the seventies? Big questions, exciting times, lots to do.

Sand is the next project WSI is creating: a total poetic work, with gatherings, installations, music and feasting, over four months, to navigate the transition from this century to the next. It will be based in Lanternhouse, WSI's magnificent new home, and will bring together ticky-tacky junk making, poetry, digital music technology and raw clowning. When discussing the best team to do the job, it transpires that, as well as Gilly Adams (director) and Jamie Proud (clown), the four other most suitable artists to pull WSI over the threshold into 2000 and beyond, are: poet and maker, John Fox; celebrant and cook, Sue Gill; inventor and musician, Daniel Fox; and artist and performer Hannah Fox - a rare gift to be able to work together.

Happy Families!

SUE GILL (Britain) is a performer, maker, cook and celebrant. She is a founder director of Welfare State International and now takes responsibility for the company's education and training programme. Her work focuses particularly on ceremonies and rites of passage.

HANNAH FOX (Britain) is an artist and performer. She worked for three years with the Amsterdam based Dogtroep and currently works most frequently as a project director for Welfare State International. She is also a trained celebrant and sings and gardens for pleasure.