

Pam Woods

Falling among the Nettles

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Half way through working towards a PhD in Performance Practice at the University of Exeter, England, a serious accident resulted in a thrice-fractured right ankle joint, which had to be reconstructed through emergency surgery. Over two years later I still have barely any flexion at the joint, which is severely arthritic, and I am facing the prospect of joint fusion in the not too distant future. The accident was traumatic. I suffered extreme shock, and to some extent the after-shock continues. It was a catastrophe for me as a dancer; a devastating blow, like a personal earthquake. My first thought when I woke up from the anaesthetic was that I might never dance again. My spirit felt crushed. Motivation was gone. I felt multiple fractures not only in the bones of my ankle but throughout my whole system, in my heart, mind and cells. I felt disconnected.

I am only just beginning to feel a connection again with my foot. I know I have to befriend this stranger but it is taking time. I am still trying to come to terms with the fact that I can no longer run, jump, spring, leap - physically fly as I used to love to do. But at least I can walk, albeit with pain. In the immediate aftermath of the accident I became self-absorbed and sorry for myself, but as I began to emerge from shock I was able to consider the position of colleagues, confined to wheelchairs, who continue their careers as performers. I had at various times in my career, particularly when working in community contexts, been aware of issues surrounding "disability" in the arts, and indeed have been involved in several integrative projects, but it was another matter to be confronted by my own newly imposed disability. At a crucial point in the slow process of recovery I resolved to work with my restrictions and continue my PhD, remaining in the role of solo performer/creator. This meant that I worked in relative isolation from other artists in my field who have a disability, apart from a collaborative project with colleague Jerri Daboo, referred to later in this article.

In performance I have to compensate, the left leg taking most of the weight, which often results in a distinctive lame

duck style. It is strange how "gifts" arrive out of the blue. In a discussion with my consultant about restricted social activities, I complained that I could no longer dance salsa and at a barn dance had to sit out for almost the duration. Somehow salsa, perhaps making sense only as tomato sauce, must have got translated into flamenco, for a letter arrived referring to the fact that "unfortunately Ms Woods can no longer dance flamingo". As a strong bird theme was emerging during the creative process for *Falling among the Nettles*, the last of a series of performance projects towards my PhD, I decided to explore a "limping flamingo, trying to dance flamenco". It was an important light touch in a process that put me in contact with a range of emotions. Thus a major motif was born out of a secretarial error.

Falling among the Nettles used "memory as site" as the starting point. In previous projects I had explored different aspects of "site", my research being an investigation into "Site as Source and Resource for Sounding Dance Improvisation".

Approaching fifty years of age, I decided to take each of the five decades of my life, and to explore significant memories and events, attempting to find an essence, which would provide the starting point for an improvisation. From these improvisations, bird themes kept emerging: my budgerigar with his repertoire of spoken phrases, the flamingo in various guises, an eagle associated with the solo dance *Zeibekiko*,¹ and motifs to do with flying - not being able to fly, trying to fly, bird with clipped wings, trapped, trying to escape... The upper body became more urgently engaged in the range

of expression. How had the accident had an impact on my movement style?

Before the accident I had been exploring the use of voice in performance. I was interested in the different relationships between movement and voice, in particular trying to find moments of true integration. Practitioners such as Yoshi Oida, Patricia Bardi, Michelle George and the polyphonic music training *Taketina*,² were all part of my investigation and in different ways influential. After the accident I experienced a body/mind fracture. I did not feel whole. I did not want to "give voice". My new direction as a dancer coming to voice had been an attempt to use the whole body as my means of expression. Here I felt fragmented. I was desolate. I was silenced.

After eight weeks in plaster and many months on crutches and in great pain, it was still taking me a day to get through a day. I was unable to read as I had lost all concentration, and motivation was zero. But there was an inner struggle going on. I was desperate to perform again. Prompted and re-inspired by a workshop with Geraldine Stephenson on Rudolf Laban's work, I did a series of explorations from sitting called *Chairs*. For me, the workshop was fundamentally a re-encounter with Laban's *Effort*³ actions (I had studied Laban principles as part of modern educational dance for my B. Ed degree in dance). I was reminded of the range of qualities available within the eight basic actions from the subtle, barely stated movement to the most exaggerated.

I challenged myself to work through the eight *Effort* actions in an improvisation sitting on a chair. I performed in silence. Later I explored the *Effort* actions through

1. *Zeibekiko* is a Greek solo dance form, which is improvised and traditionally performed by men.

2. *Taketina*, developed by Reinhard Flatischler, develops rhythmical competence and co-ordination. It is a musical group process that has the potential to gradually dissolve the behaviour patterns inhibiting our life and relationships.

3. *Effort* actions illustrate major qualitative differences in movement, defined by Weight, Space, Time and variables.



Falling among the Nettles
Photo: Chris Mearing

the voice too. Thus began a series of performances, in which my sitting bones became my new feet. Combining voice with movement, working with the aspects of weight, space, time and flow offered me a way back to integration, but I also incorporated the feelings of fragmentation I was left with after the accident through deconstructing text. I broke down the words into single sound components and improvised with them, at times reconstructing them to reveal the actual text. The struggle to come to terms with the accident had begun. I was, at last, able to find something creative inside devastation.

But the foot still did not feel part of me. It was an appendage with which I had no real connection. Craniosacral osteopathy helped me to reconnect, but it was to take time, and as I write this, I still sense my foot so differently from before. When I stand I

feel strange pullings, twistings, counterforces, and compensations at work. I am askew, the alignment is all out of balance. It is a miracle that my back, hips and knees are not suffering more. (I touch wood and salute the single magpie as it flies by.) As I walk I limp badly and my right foot does a strange loop before each step. "Take time, slow down," my inner voice says, "move through the action..."

Last year the desire to perform outside the parameters of my research, to perform for the love of performing, led to a collaboration with colleague Jerri Daboo, disabled with early onset osteo-arthritis. For *On the Edge* we created two solos each and a duet. Inevitably the accident and its aftermath featured in my work. I had used the experience of the accident to write performative texts since I could not move much myself. These became the basis of one solo. A ballet

tutu and pointe shoes from my childhood and teenage years respectively came my way, in a box which had been stored in my sister's attic since our mother died. These were to feature in the second solo. The process drew me to memory as the source for material. Thus was the inception of the project exploring "memory as site" resulting in *Falling among the Nettles*.

Struggle - what does this mean artistically, physically, emotionally? As I worked through each decade of my life I discovered metaphors to express the recurrent themes. The first vivid memory to come to mind, the inspiration for the project title, was of my falling into a bed of nettles whilst picking bluebells in a wood. Then tumbled out a series of connected memories. My dog almost bit off my thumb as I was picking a long-stem daisy, which happened to be growing near the bone he was chewing. A bee stung the sole of my bare foot as I was playing in the garden - stung and pierced. A haemorrhage following an operation led to my arm being pierced for a blood transfusion. My mother and father divorced -

pierced and stung. And all this happened in the first decade: struggle in childhood; life's struggle; life.

Falling among the Nettles comprised six performances performed over five consecutive days in different sites in and around Exeter: a bluebell wood, a church hall (used for dance classes), a boat, a Greek taverna and the drama department. The sites were chosen for their association with specific memories or events relating to each of the five decades of my life. I performed an improvisation (with progressive degrees of structure) in each of the five sites, a dialogue between the past and the present. For the sixth performance I created a piece for the drama studio, a conscious interweaving of themes that emerged during the whole process.

As I tracked through the narrative of my life, albeit fragmentary, through memory, another strong theme declared itself: bereavement. Loss on many levels: death, lost love, physical loss, hopes and dreams dashed - the performance unfolded. One day in rehearsal I placed a vase of bluebells on



Falling among the Nettles
Photo: Chris Mearing

the floor, further into the performance space. There was already a folded shawl my mother had given me before she died, and a tiny music box. The juxtaposition of the objects reminded me of a shrine. It became my mother's shrine. I had been exploring "transformation of object" and "object as site" and now as I worked with the shawl, it took on new meaning. As I held it out to the side (having used it in many ways including wearing it as a towel/turban) and let it spiral slowly down towards the floor, wrapping my foot, it all at once became my mother soothing, protecting my injured foot and symbolic of her fading (death).

At physiotherapy today, I was signed off. "There is no more we can do". I have to strike a balance between maintaining what little movement there is in my right ankle joint and not exacerbating the progressive deterioration in the joint. The prospect of arthrodesis (joint fixation) looms. It will be a struggle with pain. I shall try to avoid joint fixation at all costs. How will the continuing struggle impact on my creative work? I am already severely restricted as a dancer. What more freedom can I find in restriction? As I continue to adapt and try to come to terms with the physical impact of the injury, I am still struggling with the psychological and emotional impact. I still experience a sense of loss: loss of what I had; loss of who I am. I struggle with the relationship with my foot.

Is the struggle a question of how to incorporate a changed body into performance, how to develop a style that embraces disability, or how to accept a new identity and then, as the having-come-to-terms-with-myself-me, continue to perform? I take inspiration from dancers such as Merce Cunningham, who despite being crippled with arthritis in his feet continued into his seventies to perform short, but stunningly expressive solos using his upper torso. Despite, or perhaps because of, the injury, I

have found new ways to continue. I am developing a personal style on the borders of dance and drama, singing and movement. Betwixt and between, it is my realm of Sounding Dance Improvisation. It is taking me a long time to get over the trauma of the accident and injury but I have begun to play again. Play, such a fundamental component of improvisation, involves the joy of discovery. "Remember to laugh!"

My struggle has not been to do with time or money. Although living on a shoe-string, it is a strong one. I am in a privileged position as a mature student with a bursary. I have had time to research my practice. The accident held me back a year, but also gave me new challenges from which to work. A most unfortunate accident took place in a fortunate context. But this is soon to end. I shall soon be stepping out (limpingly) into the real world again and the struggle will continue on a number of levels, some the same, some different. But then that's what it is all about isn't it? Struggle; life. May we always find ways for our voices to be heard.

PAM WOODS (Britain) is a professional dancer, choreographer and teacher with extensive experience in her field. She is in her final year researching towards a PhD in Performance Practice at the University of Exeter. She continues to teach part-time in universities and colleges and recently led an eight-day international seminar in Latvia based on her current research: *Site as Source and Resource for Sounding Dance Improvisation*.