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*Photo: Jassy Earl Photography.*

Start up suddenly, jump, rotate the arms, run, stop, lean into the wind, reach for the sky, collapse, roll, bounce. Aby Watson's *-ish* is a dance performance and part of her research programme *Choreographing Clumsy: Dyspraxia and Choreographic Practice*<sup>1</sup>. Watson is a dancer with dyspraxia, a neurodiverse condition affecting coordination and cognitive processing. Her project seeks to find a practice that creates space for 'clumsy' behaviours in dance and to generate a model which does not treat dyspraxic movement as a deficit, but as a source of creative inspiration and energy.

I saw *-ish* on Tuesday 20 October 2018, the second of two performances at Tramway's *Unlimited* festival in Glasgow. It was exhilarating and exhausting to watch. Watson has a knack of taking her audience with her and allowing them to feel as she feels. Using simple props such as a fan, helium balloons, and a space hopper (which was pumped up by an audience member during the performance), she explored the space in the studio in what appeared to be free and liberating improvised short dance sequences. They were never chaotic, however, and I suspect that the freedom was generated by a tightly conceived scheme allowing small elements to contribute to the creation of a larger preconceived narrative. The performance was punctuated by moments of stillness, such as a period of collapse onto the ground when Watson showed us how it felt to have used up every resource.

The dance sequences were prefaced by word pairings (projected onto the wall behind the performance space): *rising / falling, silent / loud, able / unable, mind / body, steady / wobbly, order / chaos*. These gave the audience a handle on what was to follow. They represented the contradictions in the freedom and structure of each sequence, and also the contradiction inherent in the concept of a choreography for a dyspraxic performer. I was particularly intrigued by the performance of gymnastic forward rolls over the space hopper as creative expression. As the sequence developed I found myself drawn into the patterns created in my memory as Watson found every possible way and direction for such a simple

gymnastic form. The unspoken statement was 'this is what I can do' and 'this is how creative I can be', despite the risks of random exit from each roll to an unexpected place on the floor. Recalling my own experiences on the mat when I attempted British Amateur Gymnastic Awards as a teenager, I felt somehow proud of Watson for transforming something I had considered a humiliation into such a moving performance. She has the ability to transform the struggle for gymnastic elegance into something that speaks to those who have tried.

Another truly innovative sequence was her progress through the space on the space hopper, usually a fairly ungainly activity but one that Watson turned into a journey which filled her audience with anticipation. She carried us with her as she bounced around the space, turning and turning again each time she reached the perimeter, showing us the strength of persistence and an unexpected poise in the unflattering wobbliness of the activity.

The role of the British Sign Language interpreter was an important part of the overall performance. Rather than standing to the side and providing a 'translation', the interpreter Amy Cheskin formed an integral part of the performance and, as a hearing member of the audience, I found her engagement a hugely enjoyable part of the whole. In particular, her renditions of the music into gesture and rhythm through movement gave everyone in the audience an enhanced sense of belonging in the events that were unfolding. Watson also responded to the accompanying music in a variety of ways and not just through movement in time. She mimed words, breathed feelings, and her facial expressions captured the character of the sounds even in moments of stillness. I was struck by Watson's use of all aspects of the self to express possible meanings in the music.

The reception was very enthusiastic. I saw audience members in tears at the end of the performance. Watson's work speaks to a range of abilities and emotional states in

a powerful and liberating way. It has a simplicity and a complexity that is hard to describe, but which is rooted in the experiences of those people who are *not* perfect and who are *not* always in control, which is most of us, whether we are neurodiverse or neurotypical.

I similarly enjoyed Watson's *There's no point crying over spilt milk* (2015)<sup>2</sup>, an intriguing performance about childhood and the harsher world we grow up into. *-ish* is another show which questions deeply, and explores the simple and the complex with power and beauty.

## Notes

1. More information about Watson's research can be found at <<https://www.abywatson.co.uk/choreographing-clumsy-dyspraxia-and-choreographic-practice/>>. <sup>[↑]</sup>
2. You can still see the trailer for *There's no point crying over spilt milk* at <<https://www.abywatson.co.uk/work#/theres-no-point-crying-over-spilt-milk/>>. <sup>[↑]</sup>

## About the review author

LUCY HOLLINGWORTH is a composer, musicologist and writer currently studying for a PhD at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has a Master's degree in Composition from Edinburgh University. Her research area is autoethnography and women composers and she is preparing a creative portfolio and a dissertation. Recent performances include, *I Lay Down By the Riverside And Dreamed* performed by Glasgow New Music Expedition, *Out of the Snowstorm, an Owl* performed by the Brodick Quartet, *What The Living Do* performed by Sinae Lee, and a music theatre piece, *The Poetess*, premiered by students at RCS in 2016. She previously worked as an IT lecturer and web designer and is the Web Editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance*.