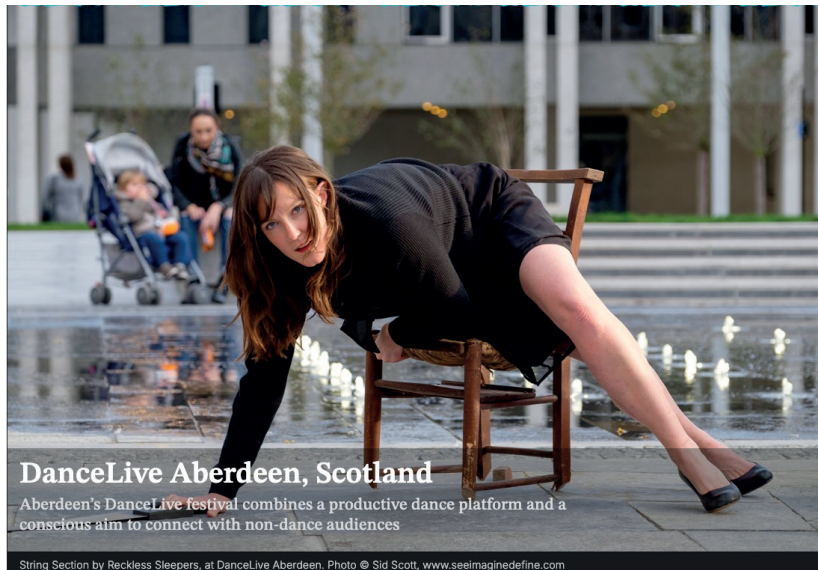




As winter itches to get going, Aberdeen sees a festival solely dedicated to contemporary dance take over its granite landscape. Spanning three weekends in October, DanceLive organised by Citymoves, the regional dance agency for North East Scotland, is now in its thirteenth year.

In terms of audience, DanceLive wants to 'take pieces that might push people out of their comfort zone but also pieces that they might like... so it pushes them out comfortably,' she explains.

An excellent example is Reckless Sleepers' A String Section, an outdoor performance in the newly developed Marischal Square (surrounded by mostly empty office blocks and sheltered by a transparent ceiling in the likely event of rain). Five vacant chairs wait, before five female performers march ceremoniously in, each holding a saw. They appraise their audience as they sit, allowing the tension of expectation and incongruity of setting to play out.

Eventually, they start sawing their chairs. Their resigned and determined expressions, and frequent, silent questioning glances to each other and the audience means the sawing seems enforced, not voluntary. The performers appear trapped together, but disconnected.

Visually and temporally, the piece suits a space that people pass through casually. Audiences are momentarily pulled in, emphasising the odd inevitability of the piece: yes, they are sawing until only stumps remain. For Spence, 'I think it's really important to make sure the pieces you are putting outside for people to engage with that aren't always engaged with dance are appropriate. Reckless Sleepers are perfect... because they're not dancing all the time. They are dancers, and they end up in wonderful positions... but there's something unusual, which means people's attention is grabbed.'

The closing party takes place at the Anatomy Rooms, a building previously used by the university and recently acquired by Citymoves. 'It was lying derelict, but... it's a listed building, so they've had to look after it and make sure the temperature is correct, which is perfect for us,' enthuses Spence. She hopes the Anatomy Rooms will increase the opportunities that Citymoves can offer, and attract a new audience.

It's a glowing final evening, with many of the weekend's pieces performed again and adapted to the space. A String Section appears oddly faster, as if the officialdom of the performance space exacts a different impetus from its performers. As the dancers fall still, one audience member claps but her declaration is not taken up. She laughs, nervously. A few happily strained minutes later, the dancers unchanged, the audience finds the collective courage to applaud. It's a closing moment that embodies a festival of testing, openness, and a willingness to share.

Róisín O'Brien
3 January 2019