

A String Section project reviews (from promoters)

Jane Greenfield - Home Live Art / Coastal Currents Festival

The Coastal Currents Festival in Hastings has its roots in contemporary visual arts. However in recent years the festival programme has expanded to include performance work, especially for outdoor spaces and the public realm. Hastings audiences are “up for stuff” and open to something a bit different, but historically have had a lack of good quality performance work in the past. So, for many of our audiences, work such as A String Section, is a new experience. Like many outdoor festivals, the work we programme needs to be engaging, accessible but innovative and A String Section ticked all those boxes. It is highly physical and demanding on the performers but this makes them all the more endearing to the crowd – our audience were literally willing them on as they struggled to saw through their chairs legs, cheering every time one of them managed it! The performance also has a humor to it. Its comical to watch a demure group of women in smart black dresses gradually becoming more demonic in their hacking and sawing...but its not slapstick.

Visually, the piece works well in the open air with the crowd either facing, walking past or in the surround – it has the flexibility to be presented in different formats to suit the space and audiences are free to come and go. In Hastings the performance lasted about 45 minutes which was about right for our audiences but in Brighton, it took on more of a durational form which also works well. The company, who have a long history of theatre design expertise, have the flexibility to play with the staging of it – either keeping it simple to several women and several chairs or creating more of a visual spectacle with huge piles of vintage wooden chairs, creating different spatial and visual effects.

I think this is the perfect piece for outdoor arts festivals who are looking to broaden their artistic programme with more contemporary performance / live art but who still require the work to have an immediacy and accessibility without loosing the quality.

Jane Greenfield

Director of Home Live Art and Live Curator for Coastal Currents.

Helen Cole (on original gallery version IBT 2013 & Caravan Brighton)

I like this work very much!

I like the women entering and leaving the space as if in an orchestra. Their formality and seriousness combined with the silliness and simplicity of their task. I like the shapes of the bodies - the differences between them, the way they twist around the chair seeming powerful, weak, sexual, ingenious. I like their tenacity. I connect with them and care that they carry on. I don't care why they are doing it. I respect their commitment, their strength, their perseverance. I root for my favourite. I think one has weird hair. I objectify them then they lock eyes and they stare back at me. I like to see how perfect they are even when they sweat with their hair astray. I like how disheveled they become. I like to see their strong arms. I think about their core balance. Then they falter and over turn or get stuck inside the seat of a chair. When they fall I think about their hands starting to blister and their muscles beginning to burn and the wood chaffing their legs. I think about their perfect but different black dresses and how nice and prim they look. I think about how hard it is to be a woman. I think how strong we are. How much we carry with us. I am proud of them. i am proud of me.

I feel sorry for the beautiful wooden chairs and how old they are and how many people now gone that have sat on them. I ask where are the other chairs that once sat alongside them. I look at the good old wood and I think how lonely they seem (mad i know). This will be their final performance.

This is ok. I like how simple and robust this work is. I more than like. I love this work very much.

Helen Cole IBT Festival

Rob Orchard (on original gallery version Caravan Brighton)

I was dozing a bit in the first day and thought it would be particularly hard to sit through this piece presented by Reckless Sleepers, a movement/performance company. The conceit was simple. Five variously aged actress/dancers (25 to 40) dressed in plain but different black outfits each sat on five different old wooden chairs in absolute silence while making emotionally neutral eye contact with the audience. They then proceed to saw the legs and support mechanisms from each chair (one little bit at a time) - all while sitting on the chair. On occasion, they'd pause as a group, take in the audience, and then get back to work. It was riveting. I kid you not, the audience of 50 was transfixed. Each chair, made and shaped differently, posed individual challenges. The oak chair took the longest and was the hardest. Some of the legs were thicker than others. Each performer "attacked" the task from a different angle at different times and with a range of determination. Their expressions were undifferentiated - cold and determined. No irony, no warmth, just calculated and focused on the task at hand. The chairs were fighting back. You began to "imagine" the life of each chair - where it was made, who sat on it, what it had learned over time from the generations of people it had observed and served. The chairs became the real characters. There was genuine poignance to their methodical destruction. Slowly on the floor piles of saw dust accumulated.

OK, so you think I'm nuts. The magic here is that it opened up an imaginative window with so much creative air and atmosphere.

There must be some obnoxious academic jargon for this kind of performance. Performativity? I've never fully embraced the everything is "performance" world. The rigor of this work kept it alive. As is, it could never be a stand alone project for us. But, in the context of a festival it would work provocatively well. The challenge is finding an audience configuration that allows everyone to see everything unobstructed. I was in the first row and had a vastly different experience than people behind me craning to see. Larger scale and site specific versions are being planned in Europe. I think there could be One Boston potential in the larger context. In this version it took 55 minutes to execute the chairs.

Rob Orchard Executive Director ArtsEmerson: The World On Stage / Office of the Arts