

## A Man of the Theatre: Kevin Finnan – from COVID to corvids

By Donald Hutera

Kevin Finnan, artistic director of the British dance-circus company Motionhouse, is nothing if not a man of the theatre. In Finnan's case, however, theatre is a pretty broad church embracing a range of dynamic movement, live and digital imagery, and spectacle always underpinned by core thematic ideas. 'I usually have my ideas and the images in my head,' he says, as if it were this warm but ruminative fellow's natural state.

Finnan could well be compared to a master chef whose aim is to concoct captivating theatrical meals. 'You prepare a meal so that it has nourishment,' he says, 'but you also put in all of the flavours that make people want to eat it.'

Audiences have been eating up his work for nearly three and a half decades now. Finnan and the company's dynamic co-founder and executive director, Louise Richards, formed Motionhouse in 1988. Their goal was to combine theatre and athletic, circus-style movement. 'Motion says movement,' Finnan neatly explains the company's moniker. The word 'house,' meanwhile, was derived from the prevalence of house parties and rave culture at the time.

From pretty humble beginnings Motionhouse has grown into a popular and highly successful creative entity with an international reach, and one that is as adept at devising visually dazzling, full-length indoor touring productions as it is at designing bold, large-scale outdoor entertainment.

Speaking of the latter, it's plain that Finnan has become expert at what it takes to grab and hold the attention of an audience on the street. 'You're striking a deal with people,' he says, 'or making a bargain.' The main aim of this unspoken contract, he explains, is 'to create something so interesting and charged – with moments of great entertainment, skill, cool and emotion – that you make somebody stop and watch for 20 or 30 minutes, or more.'

Motionhouse has toured the world, often drawing huge crowds. But Finnan is likewise dedicated to his home turf: 'We want to reach everybody – kids, grandparents, and everyone in-between, and whether we're performing at The Peacock Theatre in London, Birmingham Hippodrome or in Scunthorpe.' He adds, with a still-amazed pride, that the company recently had on four different shows, in four different cities and in four different countries, and all on the same day.

Motionhouse was founded and is still located in Leamington Spa. The base of operations since 2006 is a converted school building not far from the train station. Until not so long ago the company created and rehearsed productions in a bona fide industrial warehouse and then had a space in a furniture maker's building. It has since shifted to Leamington Town Hall. This venerable high-street structure, with an appealing, slightly faded Victorian grandeur, is conveniently just a short stroll from company headquarters. The vision is, even more significantly, to gradually turn it into an arts hub (the creative industries are big business in Leamington Spa and the wider Warwick District) with Motionhouse as the linchpin organisation.

What does Finnan seek in a prospective company performer? 'People who have a good grasp of technical dancing, are engaging performers, brave and bold, and who want to go beyond the contemporary canon.' He deems the catch-all term contemporary dance as 'basically a phrase for a cannibal form,' citing the oft-expressed notion that 'any movement is a dance.'

For those who have tracked Motionhouse's creative trajectory it was becoming increasingly apparent that both the company and Finnan, with his eclectic aesthetic background and sensibility, were literally moving beyond the boundaries of what might commonly be considered dance. As he succinctly puts it, 'With every show we've been absorbing more and more from the world of circus.'

The result is that Motionhouse now fully claims the hybrid identity of a dance-circus company. 'It's about extending what the human body can do,' says Finnan, 'opening that up and taking it to another level. But it took courage to make that leap.' The risk was attempted – and achieved – by providing the right environment for disciplined play and discovery. 'None of our performers is circus-trained, but there are skills we've absorbed from circus people. We're the company that can do that, and dance.'

'Tricks are great,' Finnan continues, 'but if there's no context then that's all there is. How do you make the trick part of the physical language? How do you make it flow in and out?' Finnan himself supplies the answer. 'You always try to find a rationale behind it. You can say, "Circus - wow! Beautiful..." But you also have to look at how you arrive at each moment. It's what poets do with words. The language is always moving, so you have to hold to your intention. We're not just taking the stock approach of conventional circus that "First there's this act, and then the next". For us it's more of a narrative event.'

The narrative drive behind Motionhouse's latest theatre production 'Nobody' is typically ambitious and complex, and it arose from difficult circumstances. A new Motionhouse show was already being worked on with dancers and designers alike prior to COVID-19. After the pandemic hit, however, Finnan knew he had to take it back to the drawing board (and this was only after he, Richards and their core staff took what steps they needed to take to ensure the company's future in precarious times).

During the initial lockdown Finnan was aware of what he calls 'the voice in my head and my relationship to it.' He began reading and thinking about subjects like psychosis and fake news, cravings and empathy, and asking himself, 'What's important about our life, and ourselves? We want human connection. It's one of the fundamentals of our humanity.' But how, he wondered, to represent the voices in our heads?

For Finnan the choice was crows. Played by the seven-strong cast of 'Nobody,' these avian alter egos embody a range of different meanings. 'The crows in the show are questioners, both positive and negative, and challenging.' The dancers also portray so-called 'ordinary people' like you and me, conducting their busy lives as if everything was hunky-dory until something tips them over the edge and into disorientation and despair.

This technically economical yet ingenious performance is in two acts totalling 90 minutes plus interval. 'I've never had an interval in a show before,' Finnan declares, adding, 'and at first it felt so uncomfortable.' Nevertheless, the break allowed him to conjure two different stage worlds: one a stylised and often highly cinematic version of our own urban existence (albeit one overseen by corvids), and the other set in a far more abstract, stripped-back and internalised place where the acrobatic cast realises its full dance-circus physicality as a septet of troubled souls who gradually understand the importance of being together.

'This is not a pandemic show,' Finnan cautions. For him 'Nobody' is instead a reminder of the value of 'being with each other, and how that can put the voice in our heads into a context where we can be friends again. It's about our relationship to who we think we are, and how important it is to take time to stop and assess. Ultimately, it's about all of us and none of us. But I want it to speak to everybody.'

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