Interview with Richard Alston, 2000

What initially made you want to take up dance at London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS)?

I went to see performances and got very excited by what I saw in London. I was an art student at the time and I think I went to see Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham in the early 60s, when they came to London. That made me go along to take classes and it was so exciting I just got involved.

How different was the training you received at LCDS to the courses that dancers study there now?

Well, there wasn't such a thing as a degree course in those days. I guess there was much more emphasis on straightforward physical activity because we certainly didn't have to write dissertations or do dance analysis or anything like that.

Because contemporary dance was so new in this country it was all very flexible, no one quite knew how to set things up. It was a very exciting time.

During the years that you were heavily involved with Strider did you have a list of goals and objectives or was it more an organic process?

It was very much an organic process. We started off just as a small group of four of us. Although the funding was given to me as the director of the company, we tried to make group decisions - not always easily but we did. We just let it evolve, we experimented, tried to do things in a way that was different and each situation led us on to where we thought we wanted to go next.

You met Mary Fulkerson at Dartington College. Has release technique developed your choreographic style?

I guess I've always, right from the very beginning, been attracted to a very flowing style of movement. The first time I really came across that was in T'ai Chi Chu' an, which was part of our course at The Place in 1969.

And then meeting Mary Fulkerson and finding out that there was this whole body of work which started from inside: the joints, the bones and anatomical imagery - that kind of flow and knowledge of the inside of the body is something that really, really interests me.

Although I work with a language that people think of as technical I'm never interested in going from one shape to another shape, it's always the flow that's going on inside or the flow of movement through the space that really gets me interested and excited.

What are your other main sources of influence and inspiration?

My work now is primarily about the relationship between movement and music and the relationship of the phrasing is very, very exact and so for that I need a very exact language. The language that has evolved is a flowing fluid form, I guess the clearest influence on the physical vocabulary, certainly in the class work, is Cunningham. And that's because his movement language was so objective. It wasn't stylised it was very simple and straightforward. But I certainly wouldn't describe myself as a post-Cunningham choreographer - the work is very, very different.

Throughout your career both yourself and Siobhan Davis have been closely linked - are your successes due to your early training or a meeting of minds?

I think we were very lucky, both of us, to be around at a certain time when we were given loads of opportunities quite early on in our career.
In many ways Britain was a very different country in the late 60s and early 70s, so there were opportunities and a sense of growth and development. In that period we were able to work without being under constant pressure.

Also, to have the opportunity to work, because it's very hard for young people to work now, not just in dance but across society really, and because jobs are so few and far between the stress is enormous and the sense that every piece that you do will or won't lead to your next opportunity. Instead of being able to get on and develop and find your feet a bit more slowly and then say 'okay, now I think I know what I want to do', I think that's very, very hard now.

For you, what is the formula for a good piece of choreography? What's the key to your choreography?

Oh, that's hard. The truth is that when the magic ingredient happens that makes all the things I've spoken about suddenly come together - so that you're not just sitting there thinking 'oh, this is a particularly musical piece' or 'this is a very fluid sort of piece' but actually something comes across that is greater than all those things. When that happens then that's a piece which I feel is going to take on its own kind of life.