Interview with Richard Alston, 2004

You have been quoted as saying that in creating work you are stimulated by the people you make the piece for. Could you describe how you create work with your dancers?

I choose them quite carefully for each piece that I make. I can’t give you necessarily a logical explanation, I just know.

In creating work with the dancers I just get in the room with them and try things. With Martin [Lawrance], for example, things move very quickly because we’ve worked together a lot and I find him a huge inspiration because he’s so musical and elegant. I’ve realised that one of things that I love about Martin’s dancing is he’s very fluid and he does things which are inventive and I can see very quickly where to take them.

What do you look for when selecting your dancers?

I think very often what attracts me to a dancer is if they’ve got a very strong energy of some kind, or a particular quality. There are different kinds of dancers that I find inspiring in different ways. The dancers have also got to be musical.

What process do the dancers go through for an audition?

They take class with the Company, and then will learn sections from the repertoire. It's been a couple of years since I held a formal audition which are quite long and can be over several days. Once I shortlist I ask those selected to work with the Company and see how they get on and fit in, once they've met the dancers.

It has been well documented that music is a source of inspiration for your work and you’ve described how your dancers also inspire you. What else inspires your work?

I know it sounds odd but just movement really inspires me. I love dancers and I love music but I also love dance. It's an extraordinary process when you're making dance, guessing what might happen next. The concern with movement itself is a huge inspiration and that's why I still do it. I love dance.

Certainly using space is an inspiration for me, and so space is sometimes something I get excited about. I also get excited about buildings, but I can't pretend that I stand there and think that I'm going to put this in my new piece. I just get excited about things, just like you'd go and see a really good movie and really enjoy it. I don't necessarily put it into a piece of work.

What interests me is to keep on trying again with a new piece of music. So it's music and dance, that's quite enough for me, then anything else becomes part of that process. For example, when I did Fever (2001), I don't want to sound pretentious but, the dancers and I spoke a lot and I showed them pictures of some of the minor figures around the edge of the Sistine Chapel. The fact that Michelangelo showed all these people twisting and touching and writhing … there was all this sort of energy and sexuality. But I wouldn't say that the piece is about the Sistine Chapel, or inspired by the Sistine Chapel really.

In [the DVD] Essential Alston I mention the sculpture by Henry Moore that I love, his interlocking piece. I went back a few months ago to see it and it was a fantastically sunny day so the sculpture was gleaming in all the light. I didn’t stand there and think ‘how could this inspire me for dance?’ I just know when I feel happy about a piece of work and I drink it in and just allow myself to be stimulated, or excited, or whatever it is I feel about the work. I digest inspiration. I know that the kind of interlocking and folding and extraordinary three-dimensional richness of that sculpture by Henry Moore is part and parcel of the way that I often think of duets, but I don’t make a duet about it.
You have said in interviews that you don’t see yourself as an abstract artist and that you would describe yourself more as a formalist. Could you explain this?

Yes, I don’t see myself as an abstract artist. I love architecture and rhythmic patterns in space and sharp, exciting, clean angles. I really like that, the way you’re carving into space. In that sense it’s very sculptural, you’re making marks. All of this is the sort of ‘stuff’ of dance but actually the life of it, for me, is the relationship to the music, and fundamentally, dance is a human activity and I think I’m much too humane to be an abstract artist. I think if I was an abstract artist people would think I was a bit dodgy, I’m not very pure!

I have a very strong sense of structure and I try to subvert that by making things lively. I’m not interested in something which is like a lecture demonstration of structure. I always try to set something up but then not stick to it and make mistakes.

I also love looking at folk art as it has all these funny little imperfections, and that’s human. To me dance is basically an activity about humans, it tells you something about human beings and the state of being alive, at least that’s what it says to me. I love things that tumble and just sort of half happen and I’m quite interested in just how expressive dance can be without adding anything to it, without actually putting faces on, or mime. In that sense I think I probably have been described as a formalist. I am interested in form, I love structure, it’s a fantastic human invention, the fact that we actually make structures in buildings or in music. The need for order is a very strong human craving.

You have recently been described as ‘a founding father of British contemporary dance, but with choreography as fresh and exciting as a new kid on the block’. How do you keep your work fresh and exciting?

That’s really hard to answer because if there was a formula it wouldn’t be fresh and exciting. I guess the answer is that I take risks. I’m always trying to do something new for me. There’s a whole catalogue of music that I would like to apply what I know about dance, to Chopin, to Ravel, to Bach. So what I try to do is to not do what I’ve done before. When I’m in the studio I think, I can’t give the same steps to these people.

Is it difficult to be constantly searching for a new vocabulary?

Well I don’t think I do that, I don’t really try and do that. Sometimes each piece of music seems to evoke a certain kind of movement language. Sometimes I see things that I like and I think: oh that’s quite similar to such and such but different, and I think that’s interesting that that’s turned up again because it’s clearly something in movement that I really like. I suppose the only truthful answer is that I go into the studio and I look at the dancer either like Martin who has been there for ten years and we work together to try and do something new, or I’ve got a new dancer, who I haven’t worked with before, and that’s an instant stimulation. So if it feels fresh and exciting in the studio, there’s a chance that might be reflected on stage.

During an interview in 1986 you said that your work "is all to do with falling". To what extent is this true of your work today?

I think I would slightly adjust that and say that it’s to do with flowing. It’s true I’ve always liked things being off centre… I love being off balance and it taking you somewhere else.