

Book review: *It's all allowed: the performances of Adrian Howells*, edited by Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson

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It's all allowed: the performances of Adrian Howells, edited by Deirdre Heddon and Dominic Johnson. London: Live Art Development Agency and Bristol: Intellect, 2016; ISBN: 9781783205899 (£20.00)

Adrian Howells is internationally renowned as a key figure in the field of one-to-one and intimate performance. 'It's all allowed' was one of his frequently cited mantras, used to inspire, include, encourage and push boundaries, and it is a fitting title for the first book dedicated to his work and memory. Formed of 22 short essays from contributors including close friends, collaborators and fellow practitioners, this book provides a detailed, intimate look at Howells's life, work, and practice, enhanced by extensive photo documentation that appears throughout.

Alongside multiple-perspective, in-depth descriptions of Howells's works, subjects discussed within this text include performer / participant vulnerability, ethics, duty of care, consent, boundaries and authenticity, all of which are key components to be considered in the field of intimate performance practice. What is an 'intimate public'? What are the challenges faced by the performer and also by the participant? Can any one intimate performance be truly authentic if it is repeated many times over the course of a day or longer, and how can the artist remain fully present?

Speaking of his first notions on the subject of one-to-one work, Howells stated that he wanted to create 'an interaction that might be emotionally and psychologically beneficial, both for me and for an audience participant' (p.102). This was the seed from which the rest of his nurturing, cathartic and holistic practice would grow, first as *Adrienne*, focusing on confessional, conversational processes in works including *Adrienne's Living Room* (2001) and *Adrienne's Dirty Laundry Experience* (2003), before later exploring a more contemplative, reflective and, at times, silent practice. In this sense it is difficult not to conjure up thoughts of Buddhist philosophies regarding the notion of simply being and being present. Speaking of his work *Held* (2006), Howells stated he had unexpectedly discovered that 'confessional information can be communicated non-verbally. Two bodies in close, physical and touching proximity have the potential to engage in an often self-revelatory, but silent, conversation' (p.188). Whether spoken or unspoken, the desire to connect and communicate in the form of 'accelerated friendship' remained an important concept in his work throughout this shifting, self-reflective process.

One of the main points which struck me throughout this text was the attention to detail in his performance and the duty of care Howells had for his audience participants and the lengths to which he would go to ensure that conditions were exactly as he needed them to be. In her chapter, 'Duty of care: producing Adrian Howells', Jackie Wylie (former Artistic Director of The Arches, Glasgow) described Howells as 'a perfectionist when it came to the aesthetics of each work' (p.256) before mentioning sourcing towels that had just the right level of softness for *The Pleasure of Being: Washing/Feeding/Holding*, or a particular colour of balloon required for *Won't Somebody Dance With Me?* This could easily be seen as overly pedantic or demanding, but in the greater context of this book it is clear that it was for the benefit of Howells's audience-participants more than

anything else. Everything was carefully considered and had its place and purpose.

In his essay 'The Pedagogy of Adrian Howells', Robert Walton discusses the workshops Howells gave where he continued to explore the ethical implications of intimate, one-to-one practice. He states that

by 2011, [the workshops] always included discussion of:

1. Ethical considerations with one-to-one and intimate work
2. Empowering audience-participants
3. The idea of pre and post performance care
4. Questions of how much/what information is given in pre-performance publicity materials (p.225).

These points prompt discussion which is beneficial not only in intimate theatre, but in all forms of artistic practice and they are further discussed in many of the book's chapters. However, what I find most interesting is the third point. As many other contributors to this text point out, the pre- and post-performance care sadly may not have extended to Howells himself. In Dominic Johnson's chapter, 'Held: an interview with Adrian Howells', Howells admits that some performances, in particular *May I Have the Pleasure...?* (2011), had a psychologically detrimental effect on him. Later, Helen Iball's chapter 'Towards an ethics of intimate audiences' acknowledges this lack of provision for self-care:

...there is not equivalency in terms of support for Howells as there is for professionals in one-to-one occupations such as therapy or counselling, particularly in terms of strategies of closure, self-support, professionally accredited supervision and support mechanisms that could be called upon if needed (p.193).

Although Iball mentions this in relation to Howells, it feels relevant for all artists working in this way and is a topic that affords much greater attention. It would be interesting to know how many practitioners do actively develop a support mechanism / network to ensure their own health and wellbeing are tended to.

My one small criticism of the book is the structure and repetition of some details. On a number of occasions I realised that I had previously read the same information, without understanding why the details had been reproduced again. Had I not read the book from beginning to end perhaps the repetition would not have been a problem, but I'm sad to say that it did prove somewhat frustrating. In all other aspects, however, I could find no faults.

It is evident that Howells cared deeply about people. He had the ability to profoundly affect those he came into contact with and his work led the way for a new generation of artists inspired by his practice. In an age where our communication and interaction is so deeply influenced by social media and technology, we can learn a lot from Howells's approach in order to truly engage with other people on a physical, emotional and human level. I approached this text as a practitioner wishing to explore and enhance my knowledge of one-to-one intimate work, and in this sense I found it very inspiring. I would highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in this area of performance, but it is similarly suitable for more experienced practitioners wishing to gain new insights into

Howells's work. *It's All Allowed* is for everyone.

About the review author

SHONA MACKAY is a Glasgow-based composer and mixed-media artist, currently undertaking a PhD at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Her practice-based research explores her own use of autobiographical material in composition, including themes of connection, communication and identity. She is interested in the use of music alongside visual and performative elements and has recently been exploring work involving installation and interactive formats.