

Inspiration Conversation 1 Transcript: Chiltern Ranger John Taylor and  
Choreographer Soobie Whitfield



Video Still from Essence of Time 1: <https://bit.ly/3xAfjEJ> Signdance Collective



Gomms Wood, High Wycombe Photo by Soobie Whitfield

*(Sounds of walking, birdsong, children's voices, laughter, an adult's voice 'yes they are humans!' John and Soobie laugh)*

Soobie: So, John where are we today?

John: We're currently in Gomm's Word in High Wycombe, it's on the east edge of High Wycombe. It's one of the sites we look after. It's urban woodland in the sense that it's bounded, quite a lot by houses and roads for residential areas. It's a wonderful mix of habitats, pockets of ancient woodland, mixed scrub and quite importantly some very species rich chalk grassland.

Soobie: Right. And we're walking up quite a steep slope here *(laughs, breathlessly!)*

John: One of the features of the woods in Wycombe is that there's quite a lot of slopes!.

Soobie: And quite a variety of trees but known I guess for beech trees mainly ?

John: Beech trees, Ash, there's, Cherry, and we were just walking next to a wonderful piece of Hazel coppice.

Soobie: So, I know we've been sort of looking at the Hazel coppice before, once when we came up with it being a possible area of interest. What was it particularly about the Hazel Coppice that you find interesting?

John: I think it's interesting for a couple of reasons. It's a really good woodland management technique of cutting an area of Hazel and then letting it regenerate. It basically involves sort of repetitive felling on a stump, or stall, which then regenerates. We have pockets of Hazel linked through the woodlands. They're cut on rotation, and what that does is it creates this really rich mix of age and height structure in The Woodlands which is brilliant for biodiversity as you cut you let more light into the woodland, and it drives flower fauna, which in turn drives the presence of bees, butterflies and other pollinators. And, in this area it also connects rather wonderfully with the heritage in Wycombe of the furniture industry, because it was a way of generating wood. We think of wood burning stoves, wooden furniture as opposed to timber which you have in houses and ships. So, you know, small wood, poles, rods and so on for the furniture industry...

Soobie : OK

John: ...which also relates again the use of these woodlands in the past as a resource for the local furniture industry. They are natural or semi natural woodlands because you look through them you can discern patterns of where lots of trees were planted quite close together Beech, Ash, parcels of Cherry, which were viewed as a crop, deliberately planted and then harvested. I suppose making can use of occurs naturally. So, it was very much an area of resource. We often think of woodlands as empty spaces or spaces where you might see dog walkers runners cyclists, where it's particularly for Wycombe and its urban woodlands they were a place of function, where they would have been much more heavily populated by people engaged in bodging, which was the term for local makers using pole lanes that can set themselves up in the woods or produce the small bits of the chairs - the spindles, the legs, the arms for use then in the furniture factories in Wycombe. So, these coppice areas have value for biodiversity, and they also link to sort of the lived experience, and the lives of people who were in these woodlands before us.

Soobie: And because bodger is often seen as a term that means, kind of, just putting something together quickly and not actually a skill. But actually that's the opposite of what it perhaps was.

John: Yeah, these people are incredibly skilled craftspeople.

Soobie: Wow, that's really interesting and I think what's interesting for me, is , as you say, walking through here we have very little idea of that industry now, and yet it was a very industrial area and it was very much about that kind of working with the materials around you which I guess, as, as a dancer, as a choreographer I've worked with the materials around me in the space and, and, and the the natural materials in perhaps a different way. We can hear in the background and we heard at the start lots of excited voices and that's coming from the local school, is it?

John: Yeah, that's coming from a school we refer to as Ash Hill school who use a little part of the woodland for Forest School sessions. And as you may be able to hear they seem to be really enjoying themselves!

Soobie: Absolutely and I know you showed me a couple of weeks ago you showed me something, some things within the trees that they've done. Some tree sculptures, they made sculptures in the trees?

John: There's, there's a small sculpture trail that runs through these woods, mainly made by local children, just popped up in branches and on stumps of trees, and it's just something quite nice to come across as you're having a walk and we explain to people they are all made by local kids, who, who really do, I think, treasure being able to come into quite a large woodland? It's about 20 acres in size Gomm's Woods and it is, it is literally in some cases on their doorsteps.

Soobie: Yes, so some of them will just be living in the houses at the bottom of that valley there. And I remember one of those sculptures struck me particularly which was one that looked like a face looking out from the trunk of the tree and it reminded me of sprites and spirits and those sorts of things and I thought, you know, that's often a very, well quite a popular, interpretation of the life within trees that's presented in literature and art and visual arts and those sorts of things really.

John: Yes, yeah it's very interesting to see how children, young children respond to place. I often work with kids who in their lives don't have much access to outdoor space. They might not have a garden, and they come into the woods and just sometimes they just stop and stand, and it's just a very, very different sensory experience.

Soobie: Yeah.

John: And how they respond to living things. Yes, the insects, the birds, sometimes the small mammals we see in the woods, sometimes larger ones like deer but particularly the trees. And in many ways for the younger ones they do in a sense seem to come alive, but not in the way that an ecologist or botanist might suggest that they're alive, but they do seem to have this sort of living presence. And it's wonderful watching children from the local area come into these woods, and just engaging with them and listening to their experiences, you know, seeing how they respond to various things that we perhaps in our job working outside, that we perhaps, I wouldn't say take for granted, but it's much more usual for me to be in the woods, than for some of the some of the young people I work with. That's a very rewarding part of the job coming out and engaging the other people from High Wycombe with their local natural environment.

Soobie: So, when you look at tree, an individual tree like maybe that one straight ahead here, we've just got one in right in the middle of the path, that's kind of reaching up to the sky. What's your reaction to that, what do you see when you look at an individual tree like that?

John: I think it very much depends, sort of, on its location. So, you'd be looking at, for example, one of the things we have to take into account in urban woodlands, is housing, houses, paths, roads that sort of thing so you can look at it very much in terms of structure, form and function. You know, and you're looking at maybe things even like rootplate, you know. Then the trunk. Is it a good form, is it in the shade, is it crowded? You're looking, particularly if it's an Ash tree at the moment, very sadly we're quite badly affected by Ash Die Back and that's causing huge problems in our woodlands. You know if it's a boundary tree we're looking at sort of whether it's, dead, dying or dangerous. It's obviously more of a consideration in urban areas, as opposed to it being sort of very isolated out in the countryside. So, there's practical considerations of looking at a tree. And we also do very much have an aesthetic response to it. It is a living thing, a beautiful thing, it exists as a tree in its own right and it still exists as a tree if I wasn't here. So, my response to it is simply on a practical level, and then sort of aesthetic and I guess it's kind of an emotional thing as well. You do look at trees, particularly very old trees, there's quite a lot of old trees in his wood, quite a lot of young trees as well, but you look at it, and I don't know, it's almost like, it's fixed in its location but not fixed in time. It has grown

physically and grown through time. So, it does trigger all these different responses I think. And yes, we do fell trees as part of woodland management, which is quite an emotive subject, but it's something that's been going on for hundreds of thousands of years. It creates structural diversity in the woodland where trees were planted up in the past for harvesting as part of the furniture industry, and planted up quite densely, which will encourage vertical growth in confined spaces. Sometimes it is better to thin those trees out and you allow more light in.

Soobie: So, it's the space around the tree that is as important as the..

John: It can be yeah. That's an interesting way of looking at it, a sort of spatial idea and also it gives the tree space to form as well, so there are lots of considerations when we look at trees.

Soobie: Yes, I found it very interesting over this, you know whole lockdown period, when we've been creating a lot more work online, as dancers and choreographers, and how that's affected our spatial... Um ..the way we use space I suppose, because your space is much more limited. Or if you're trying to do it within a particular screen frame, it can it can push you to be more creative, but there is something very different about being outdoors, and movement in an outdoor space.

John: So, from a dancer's point of view do you get a sense of solidity from a tree or, you know, literal rootedness, or derive a sense of movement.

Soobie: That's a really interesting question, I think, I think, I mean I'm sure every dancer would respond differently to that question. For me, I'm always drawn upwards, I think, upwards towards the sky with the tree. I will sort of look up and it will be, at the beginning it will be, the canopy and the branches and the, the shape of the branches, particularly in some of these older trees where they're very twisted and they've got those interesting shapes. That would be one of the things I would definitely be responding to, but also that sense of reach and breadth and scope. Also, the texture. The texture of the tree, the bark and the patterns, definitely very much the patterns on it. But what were you saying about the rootedness and the groundedness of the tree as well I think there is that sense that the trees move in the wind, very much, they're, you know, they're very flexible and fluid in their movement and I think that's very appealing but there is always this point at which they are very grounded and solid as well so you have this movement almost around a solid base or a rooted base there.

John: I was wondering, you know, in response to the tree, or the space around the tree. Which of those is, is a bigger draw I mean if you were to come across a lone tree in an open space, would you be pulled towards it, or would you react at a distance?

Soobie: Yes, yes. I see what you mean. It's very interesting because I think initially I would be pulled towards the tree.

John: Yeah.

Soobie: But I do think the space around the tree is very important as well so ... and I'm sure if you speak to Kate she might have a very different answer because being an aerial artist, I would imagine, she'd be looking very much at the space around it. Whereas for me I think it's a very kinesthetic sense that I get when I'm moving, when I'm dancing. And so, exploring the space around it might be to do with things like exploring the leaf litter or the, the ecosystem around the tree, but it would be in a very tactile sense that would be very much about the patterns that I see in the tree and copying, emulating those patterns and how that then feels within my body. So, if it's the idea of swaying in the wind, for example, it's about how that feels in the body then taking that further and expanding it further. The work I did with Signdance this year, which was a filmed piece of work in the urban woodland I think you can see that, that, most of the movements that are used within that piece, things like the fluttering of the leaves, reflected in fluttering of fingers or hands. And the shapes, yes the different shapes. But also some of the shapes of the animals and the birds so, particularly in this part of the world we get the kites a lot, the red kites and so the shape of the kite that is often swooping around overhead.

John: Yeah. There's obviously tension in the tree because if it goes over too far it's going to go, it's going to fall so there's this enormous tension, power, you know, in the tree as it's trying to maintain a sense of balance.

Soobie: Yeah

John: Yet over a long period of time there's a sense of movement. So you have that sort of balance and movement going on within the form of that coppiced Hazel. It's is trying to move up to the light but can't quite do it one way so it's heading off in another direction.

Soobie: It's interesting you saying about that tension I think we use that a lot in, certainly in contemporary dance, that counter tension, you know where you have got that kind of pulling the movement putting in one way but then you've got either the rootedness or the movement pulling another way in order to, in order to create that tension that counterbalance. I love, I love what you said about the tree, living because it's still living and it's still growing and it still moves, there's movement within the tree, even though we don't see it.

So do you think it's a benefit to get to engage people in the woodlands in different ways? Do you think there's a benefit to..?

John: ..Yeah I do. Obviously, a lot of our work is very practical woodland management. We have a lot of volunteers who come to help us with that. We have a really strong ethos of community and conservation. And I think it's, it can be very important in urban areas where people still have a sense of maybe wariness about going into the woods and just engaging them in different, different ways, either through practical conservation, guided walks where you'll point out various aspects of the wood. It doesn't matter whether people know what the trees are called, what species they are, what all the flowers and grasses are called. Yes, it's important, but, you know, just trying to get people out, it's, it's, it's sort of well recorded it's benefits are sort of mental health and physical wellbeing. And

just getting them, sometimes just to come out and experience a different space, you know, literally, as well as perhaps psychologically. You don't have to be an expert, you can just come out in the woods and it's, it's quite different I think from a lot areas around here that we do have urban woodlands. You know, they're either completely surrounded or partly surrounded by the town for a lot of people their experience of urban trees might be in parkland or street trees, which are obviously extremely important and really valid but we have an opportunity here to invite people to come into this space, who live in an urban area. There aren't that many places that have got pockets of ancient woodland you know, there has been woodland here since around 1600, in the middle of a town. Wycombe has sort of grown round and through..

Soobie: Yes it's almost grown through it hasn't it? It's got that wonderful sort of flow along the valleys and, and the, you still get the, the woodlands coming right down quite close to the town centre.

John: Yes, very close to people's houses in some cases. We have a lot of houses that bound the woods quite closely. That might be quite different experience to say somebody, growing up in a big city whereas I say their experience might just be a street tree, or a tree in park or something, maybe they have one in the school grounds as opposed to these lovely examples of mixed species woodland that surround High Wycombe.

Soobie: Yeah, because when you're standing here, even though we're only, well , not that far at all, it's probably a few hundred yards from some of the nearest houses, you can't really necessarily see them, so you're quite immersed aren't you? It's a very immersive experience.

John: Mmmm, you're sort of taken away from yourself. Now, we have just walked, a few, a few yards, and we're now, looking over Micklefield, the housing estate and further in the distance is the town.

Soobie: So we've just walked up some steps and we've come out into this wonderful sort of, almost like a drive I suppose I might describe. It's a long, narrow, almost like a trail, track, a trail of some sort. Chalky underneath with some grass. And I was just saying, suddenly coming out of the trees into this open space. I immediately feel I could see this as a space for dancing in but it would be very different sort of dance, maybe something kind of linear, because it's kind of bounded on both sides by the banks, but also, that kind of undulation that you get here as well is quite inspiring. And so, it would inspire a different type of movement here but also this is an area that you say is cultivated specifically for wildlife?

John: It's managed for butterflies. It's, it's a ride which is essentially, as you described - a cleared track through a woodland - and we have short grass on each side followed by longer grass and then scrub and then trees. Which is the ideal 3d mosaic habitat. The shorter grass areas heat up, the longer grasses are where most of our wildflowers and it is looked after in this way for the benefit of butterflies mainly. So if you come up here in spring and summer it's absolutely full of butterflies. The

form of the woodland, how it presents itself to us, particularly in these smaller pockets, it is as it is because of centuries, if not 1000s of years of human interaction with that space and in this area you're back to the idea of it being planted up for furniture. Certain trees would have been left because of their form - maybe a slightly twisted or turned Cherry trunk which is a good thing to look for for woodworking and so on. So might get areas where you'd expect Beech or Ash and you might get greater density in certain areas so yes they might look wild, in many ways, but it's often as a result of human interaction with the natural space.

Soobie: Yeah, which actually links in very much, I suppose, when you see, when you look at a lot of contemporary dance, perhaps it might look wilder than classical ballet, which is very obviously cultivated and cultured, in lots of ways but in fact there's just as much curation of the form, and as much care that has gone into a piece that maybe looks quite abandoned and quite free often as there is in a more obviously cultivated piece of dance, if you want to call it that. And I think that's what interests me quite often in looking at and taking inspiration from the natural world is, that it often evokes an emotion in me, but it started purely from perhaps copying the movement of a tree. So I'm copying the movement but then as you're sort of moving and begins to evoke some kind of emotional or some sort of evocative response within you, or empathy.

John: I think sometimes I would respond differently perhaps if we're working in the woods. We might have a task to do removing some of the trees if they're dead, dying or dangerous or if we are creating glades, coppicing. It's a job of work. We just happen to be very lucky that it's out in the woods. But I do walk through these woods in my own time and you do respond I think in a slightly different way you have a slightly different way of reacting to your space, I think you're just essentially being in the woods as opposed to working the woods.

Soobie: Coming back to the question you asked me earlier about the space around a tree and thinking about what you've just said, I think that's quite, that is a very interesting question because I was thinking if I was in a building, I've choreographed some pieces in response to, sort of archways, or within a church building or something like that, in the space, and there I'd very much be reacting to the space of the building. And yes, the shape as well of the arch ways, but it's not a kind of living, it is not a living, organic being.

John: So your response is different to the fact that it's organic and living as opposed to

Soobie: Yes, I think, I think it is I don't know that I've, I've, consciously thought that, but now reflecting back, I think what we were talking about, about the fact that the trees are still growing, but they are living and although, yes, I'll still be responding to the shapes of the trees. There's a movement in them, there's a tension, that tension we were talking about within them that... And I think, hopefully, I think, I have a certain respect for another living being and respond to it as a living being, I..



John: I think the sense of time as well, you know we talk about the time that trees exist. The woodland that we're in may have changed shape. The mixture of trees species, the assemblage of flowers that we get may have altered slightly over time but sometimes there is a sense that, you know the wood, the woodland, as opposed to the trees that make up the woodland is left alone, and not destroyed or built over or so on, but it is that has a sense of permanence and time sort of revolves around it. You know in this this has been here for hundreds of years as a known named woodland and back through time before that. Hopefully it will carry on through time, through that, and I'm lucky enough to have my moment in time, being able to work in this woodland, that is a sort of a 20 minute walk from where I live and a 30 second walk for where lots of our volunteers live in Wycombe. The cyclical approach is interesting, because I work in, one, one of the sort of , er, occupations where it is still seasonal. We're still very much governed by the seasons in terms of, you know, we're now in nesting season so we don't do work in the woodlands that will affect nesting habitat. We work on other things but when it comes to the autumn again we start the woodland work. So now we're looking at managing the infrastructure of the woods, as we go through the summer it's short grassland it's working in the rivers, and then you know the year comes around again we're back in the woods. Very much is the turn of the seasons and ebb and flow of the weather and so on. It's nice to have class connection.

Soobie: Talking of connection I think one of the things that I, I've become increasingly interested in is that, you know, all these recent discoveries of the connection and the communication between trees. I'm just looking down there at that branch that's broken off and the funghi, there's some fungi on the tree there? Yeah, just looking at it and thinking about the way that trees communicate to one another, and I don't really understand - you might be able to explain it a little bit better than me.

*(John shakes his head and Soobie laughs)* No! He says no don't ask me.

John: The science is extraordinary. The ways that sort of trees are connected through, you know the mycelium and web of fungi underground that transmit chemical signals within, within, within the mycelium itself, and then on to the trees. That's, that's absolutely fascinating that idea that they do actually communicate with each other, I think someone coined the phrase the wood wide web.

Soobie: Yes, yes,

John: to describe it which I think is beautiful. It's just a type of existence that is perhaps scientifically explainable but just beyond all sort of comprehension of ourselves, is a very different way of being.

Soobie: Yeah. And I think for me I find that communication quite exciting that idea of the community that is built around the woodland and the trees and the ecosystem, it's very important that sense of community.

John: It is, everything's connected to everything else.

Soobie: I noticed that you use your hands a lot when you are talking as well, as I do. (*Laughs*)

John: Yeah, I think is, it's just, for me it's just a natural way of just responding to what's around, is to use your hands to draw attention, to convey shape or movement, that sort of thing. It's very difficult I think to get that idea across just on audio.

Soobie: Yes

John: But it's interesting that both of us were doing that.

Soobie: Yes, yes. So when I was talking about reaching I was physically, I'm still doing it now, physically reaching out to the sky, and yes, and then realising that nobody could see that so I really needed to describe what I was doing. Absolutely. And there's a cockerel right on cue. So thank you very much for bringing me through for Gomm Woods today.

John: You're very welcome.

Soobie: And I look forward to hearing your conversation with Kate, as well.

John: Look forward to that.



John Taylor, Chiltern Rangers

This conversation was transcribed by Soobie Whitfield and produced and supported by:



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

For further information:

Chiltern Rangers <https://chilternrangers.co.uk/>

Signdance Collective <https://www.signdancecollectiveinternational.com/>



Gomm's Wood from the Cinema Field in Autumn.

Credit: Chiltern Rangers.