

Inspiration Conversation 2 Transcript: Vertical Dancer
Kate Lawrence and Chiltern Ranger John Taylor



Soobie: Good morning, lovely to see you both via the wonderful world of the zoom room. Welcome to John from Chiltern Rangers who took me on a lovely walk last week, in Gomm Wood and we were discussing that particular area of encapsulated woodland and how that inspires him, and how, as a dancer, I respond to possibly different things within the trees. And welcome as well to Dr. Kate Lawrence who's joining us from North Wales, and is a choreographer, dancer, and particularly interested in aerial and vertical dance.

Kate: Well, we had a little preamble, didn't we? We were talking about fear. I think that's where we started wasn't it? Um, like your response John to what I do as a vertical dancer, which is, an explanation of what that is is it's kind of being suspended from buildings, or trees in this case, and dancing with, on or around a tree. Tied in a harness.

John: Yeah, which to me sounds pretty terrifying for a variety of reasons, and it's sort of thinking it's a very different way of responding to or having a relationship, as it were, with a tree. And err, I was just sort of interested in how you sort of think distinctly from the point of views of a dancer, or as somebody interested in the idea of moving. Particularly, I think, the idea of movement and solidity I find quite interesting, sort of the response called physical performance. Do you, do you get a sense more of the solidity from a tree or sense of movement.

Kate: I think both. The solidity, the current solidity, is, is moving, as well, because when dancing off a building the rigging point that you're attached to doesn't move, at least you hope it doesn't move. On a tree, you know, the tree moves so what you do, and you try to repeat the second time will be different, or slightly different because the trees slightly moved or it's been caught in the wind. So, I think, that sense of solidity, is, is kind of, it's not bogus but you think it's solid and then you realise that actually the trees moving with you. Which, when you realise that, it's quite an amazing sensation because the tree becomes ... the trees like a partner. I mean I feel like that with buildings as well but even more so than trees because they're living, so it's always like a conversation with the tree, and that you want to be respectful and not, not overstretch your boundaries. And then different trees have different attributes. The bark is really different, like beech trees are so smooth. And they sort of encourage you to slip and slide and have bare feet, because they're so smooth and

John: Yeah, yeah

Kate: Whereas we did some dancing on Monterey pine, which had, like, a huge, Monterey Pine that had the most kind of aggressive, it felt like the bark was aggressive, that it was like protecting itself. So it's about being careful. You're wearing gloves, wearing shoes and being trying not to affect the bark because it's also quite easy to, to, to break the bark off. And that was something we didn't want to do. So I think the tree, each tree is so different. But also the trajectory of the trunk. So, if you're attached around the trunk and the trunk is straight, you can do a perfect circle, swinging around the tree. But if it's bent, you get this wonderful ellipsis where you go far away and come back. So yeah, depending on, you know, on the character, the character of the tree will have a massive impact on the movement that you produce. So yeah that, sorry I don't, I guess, digressed a lot from solidity and movement, but I think, I think it's quite a complex relationship really.

John: I find that fascinating because one of the things I was talking to Soobie about was similar, a sort of about reaction. Would you react more to, or with the tree, or the space around the tree? So I was saying with Soobie it's the idea that if as a dancer you came across a lone tree in a field, you know, how would you respond to that? Would you sort of be pulled towards it or would you work in the space around it? Because often, sometimes in woodlands, but particularly in areas where, you know, you get creation of glades or you're coppicing and you create space between trees, that space then you're basically hoping will fill out with flowers. You get more pollinating insects, more, you know, more bees, butterflies and birds so the space between the trees becomes important in the woodland. It's not just about the trees and that got me thinking about the idea of space, as opposed to presence or absence and presence of trees in an area, how do you think you respond differently to different spaces depending on, you know how many, um, how many trees are there? How does that affect your approach to a piece of performance?

Kate: Well, I was thinking about that question - it's fascinating. So I thought first about the lone tree in the field. And actually, I believe that those the lone trees that you often see in fields are the leftovers of felling of trees, and they left one tree because that was the lever for bringing the trees down. And then there wasn't another tree there so it just got left. I don't know if that's correct, but this is something I've read about why, why there are these lone trees in fields. There is something about that lone tree as a sort of witness and, yeah, I think witnesses is a good word, that would make me want to be close to it, and to see the world from its point of view, but also, of course, to view it from afar. But I don't know there's something very powerful about a tree alone, in many ways. So I think I would... I'd want to do both, I want to watch it, look at it from afar but I want to be with it as well. If possible, get up inside and see the world from its point of view and see what it's like to be there. A lot of my, my dance work is about, what's it like to be in a space that you don't normally get to be in. And what's my... what what do I get from that? And then what does an audience get from seeing somebody inhabit an unusual space, that, that maybe you only inhabit in your dreams. Yeah, the space around a tree is as important as the tree itself. In terms of me as a choreographer it's really important to think about the environment around a tree or set of trees. I mean, I've also done stuff where I've worked with another dancer in another tree, and we've jumped from, from our trees and connected in the space between.



John Taylor

Kate Lawrence

Soobie Whitfield

Kate: Can I ask you a question?

John: Of course.

Kate: So, what do you think the most important things for us as the general public to know about trees and habitats and conservation? How we can help to maintain the these so-called natural spaces, but also enjoy them? Million-dollar question!

John: I think don't be scared is one of the things that we always try and say to people. I mean, a lot of our work is in urban areas, we draw a lot of our volunteering from more urban areas, so sign up for volunteering session. I would say that is one of the best ways of doing it because, you can read lots of stuff online, you can see lots of stuff on the telly but until you actually go out into the environment with people who work in it as their job, it's sometimes difficult to get that picture across of what it is we actually do and why we do it. And when you start working with people, either the sort of people who would work as Rangers, you might get to meet ecologists with various different specialisms whether it be lichen or butterflies, whatever it might be, and then you just start to pick up lots of different information, bits of information and you can start to piece it together with bit of background reading. And you will come across a variety of opinions. I think it's safe to say if you put 12 ecologists on a field or bit of land you'd get 12 different opinions of how that space should be managed depending on what their specialisms are, what their interests are, you know, it's not always one thing or the other, it's often a balancing act between sort of different impulses, what you think should be done or reacting to what is actually happening. And I think the more you go out and experience that, the better you start to, you start to build up a picture of what's going on and why people doing it. And you don't have to sort of think formally involve yourself either I think. The other

approach is to just go out and go for a walk, and just experience it in your own way. If you don't fancy sort of joining in with a more sort of formally structured thing. I think it doesn't matter that you don't know what the trees are called or what all the flowers are called or the what the birds are, it doesn't matter to those things that you don't know what they are. You know it's, it's, it's nice to pick up the little bits of knowledge here and there so you can probably look at a habitat and then say oh that's that flower therefore, chalky soil is probably there. Whereas if it's something else you might be on heathland, you know there's Heather, that sort of thing and you slowly start to build, easily build up your own memory bank because the more that you try and involve yourself, whether that be through formal volunteering or through that sort of informal, going out to the woods. We often find people are scared, literally scared of going in the woods, because we've become, I think, quite disconnected from nature. I feel happier in the woods at night than I do walking around Wycombe on a Friday night. I feel much more comfortable being in the woods in the dark, than I do being in a town or city at night. We also think of barriers to participation, it might be sort of your own background- you're not used to going out in the woods, or, you know, you don't have access due to a lack of transport or it can be a whole range of reasons but I just think there are ways of engaging.

Soobie: It's interesting that the conversation began, at the beginning, about safety and, kind of, trepidation or fears and now you've picked up on that again John in this idea that people maybe are afraid of the woods. And that often comes up in art, doesn't it? You have this idea of the wild woods and the wildness of woodlands, and there's a kind of danger there that's slightly exciting but slightly scary as well. And you mentioned, you know, walking alone in the woods at night and I was thinking, I wonder, you know, we've had these campaigns recently about reclaiming streets for women walking at night and I think a lot of women are sometimes are quite, um, have a bit of trepidation about perhaps exploring woods and woodlands and things on their own and I've wondered if, if you had any thoughts about that and how it may be different artistic things could maybe help people think about that kind of tension between the, between fear of stepping out and going exploring.

Kate: I did do a project last year, in between lockdowns, with a different choreographer, and it was a research and development project in woods and that was a very dense woodland. And we played with all sorts of ideas and things we did some of the stuff at night, and we were playing with those kinds of fairy tale type images that do make you feel a bit scared, or could, you know, present woods as a scary place to be. So, I think there is a kind of tradition I suppose in storytelling of the woods being possibly a magical place, but also potentially a place where things might go wrong. You might get lost, I mean Hansel and Gretel got lost. But most of those stories are about overcoming danger, and that's a rite of passage in a way. And I think there's a potential to create performance work that takes an audience through that kind of rite of passage, or just takes people into the woods at night in groups. There could also be a Reclaim the Woods March, on mass, and the fear of walking through the woods at night is probably stronger for women than it is for men. And it's probably effected by lots of stories, both fairy tales and also, stories that are in the news and things that happened down dark lanes and, in the woods, you know, it creates a whole narrative around a place but that isn't necessarily that doesn't need to be true.

I have got quite another question. It's a slightly odd question but, John, do you have a favourite tree and what is it?

John: Well ... so for me it's orchard trees. Around here (High Wycombe) there was a heritage of cherries, but particularly where I think of as back home, it's apples and pears. So cider and perry, basically. And I love perry pear trees. I'm a bit of a fan as well of Perry as a drink. But I just love the fact that you, you have these trees, simply associated with the three counties Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. They don't really grow very well anywhere else, though they do occur in other places, so they're quite specific to a locality, and they have a heritage that can be traced back to Saxon or Norman times. You know the coat of arms of Worcestershire is three black pears, you know, which goes back to the 14th or 15th century. You know there is this idea that certain trees will only grow in certain parishes and only in certain bits of most parishes, in a specific part of a field or something. And I just love that link with heritage, with history, with localism, and most of all I think that's really, really important. So, I suppose a notable one would be a variety called Moorcroft which originated in a farm in a village, down from where I grew, I grew up in. It's also known as Chunk Pear or Malvern Hills, and it has got another name which might be more familiar to people Stinking Bishop.

Soobie: Yeah. I've heard of that one.

John: So, I just, I just love all the names of these old varieties of apples and pears and you think how many 100s if not 1000s of them we had. I think that sort of thing about orchards - it's a combination of the human in the natural. I do find it quite powerful that, that link between people and place, and the present and the past. And I don't understand it but there are times when, when those boundaries, I wouldn't really know how to express it, but the boundaries seem to dissolve a little bit. And it's not like you sort of imagining yourself back in the 15th Century or something but you do have that connection and I think, I think it's lovely that it's through living things. Those living things being trees. Those trees, thinking of them as I am now, sort of always transport me back to a place. So I'd say, yeah, so for me it would have to be, my favourite trees would have to be apple trees and pear trees, because they're just lovely.

Kate: I agree. I've got quite a large garden in Snowdonia and I when I first got here about 10 years ago I planted an apple, a damson, or two apples and a damson, and they're quite mature now. They've been through goat nibbling, we've got wild goats that hopefully we'll never get into my garden again, but did get in, ate all the bark and the poor trees, have now recovered but it took some time. But I've just recently planted ..and those earlier trees I planted, not really knowing... I just wanted I wanted apples, and I had room, and I just went to B & Q, and bought some trees. But now, last year, I researched for local trees and there's a lot of Snowdonia, North Wales trees like Snowdon Pear, Denbigh Pear and Bardsey Apple. So I've now planted some new trees, and they're just whips, they're just at the moment. And so they came in the autumn and I planted them, and they just producing leaves now and I'm so excited I think it's every new orchard little tiny orchard, and I am not sure that I will be here to, to see it in its full glory but hopefully, you know, I will get to eat some of the produce.

John: They always said you know that you plant pears for your heirs. They're not for you. That's something that that happens a lot in in my job, I won't live to see the benefits.

Kate: Yeah, I think there's something about the longevity, isn't there? You want to know what it's experienced, what happened here? What has it seen? If a tree had eyes, perhaps it does! What has a tree lived through in that long time that we will never experience. And trees as places where people

meet, you know I'm thinking about my Mum who lives in India, and there's a Banyan in the village, and it's a place where everyone gathers, and it's the meeting place, we all meet by the Banyan and I don't know how long it's been there, for a very long time I imagine. And that, I think that, that intersection with humans and our stories is very fascinating as well.

John: And I find that really interesting. Again that link between, you know, I can be doing something in a woodland that somebody was doing in a woodland 100, 200, 300 years ago, and perhaps, nowadays, it might be seen as strange. We don't take a second look at somebody working in an office or trying to train something or whatever it might be that doesn't cause people to stop and think, whereas you come across somebody working in a woodland, you think oh what are they doing? why are they there? You know that's not, it's not farming, what are you doing? Whereas in the past obviously it was closer to people. So, I think again, that we've lost a little bit of connection with, with the countryside. It's not a sort of place that should be thought of as being 'other'. You know it should just be part of, where possible, people's lived experience. And that can be in towns, you know, that's much harder but we've got this on our doorstep. In certain areas, as you know, we have urban trees, and they are just they're just as important, you know. Street trees are fascinating you know. Why are they there? Where do they come from? There's just this sort of like assemblage, especially somewhere like London, where you have got these trees from all over the world that have come together in many places to form this sort of functioning ecosystem. It is, it's different to an ancient woodland, but it's equally important both in terms of its own value, for the trees themselves, biodiversity and so on and so forth but also but also as places where people can enjoy. Just because you're in a park that maybe has a collection of trees from parts of Africa, South America, Asia, where have you, you know, it is not a less valued or important space in my way of thinking to a pocket of ancient woodland, it's just different. And I just think there are so many different ways that people can engage with nature, with, with trees that there isn't sort of, to me, there certainly isn't a hierarchy of validity, or that somebody's experience is more important than somebody else's because you're in the middle of Herefordshire or in Hackney, it's, it's equally valuable. I think those experiences.

Kate : Yeah I guess what's valuable is that the trees are there. That they continue, continue to be counted, whatever they are, and they continue to be appreciated, and serve lots of functions not just keeping the, improving the air quality and, but also the function of being there and being part of a kind of network of well-being for people, which concrete can't really provide. Going back to what you were saying about working in a woodland. I think there's, there's a sense that I feel that we've become divorced from working with our hands. And, you know, the timescale of working with your hands. I just remembered reading, I don't know if you've read this book it's called 'A Golden Spruce', and it's, it's set in British Columbia. It's based on a true story, but it's basically a book about the forestry and, and the trees in British Columbia. And, and what struck me was how they started to fell trees by hand and these were enormous trees, trees that it would take 11 people to, you know stretched finger to finger to actually put their arms around the tree. And it would take them six months to fell one tree, and actually it would be useful for all sorts of things, and could be used for a really long time, up to, you know, recent years, and I think they're still logging but now they could fell whole mountainside, in a day. To me that that difference of time that machinery allows and so-called progress I just think ...it's... what have we lost, you know by mechanising things, by being able to do everything so much quicker and generate? I mean this is a huge question, a global question, but I just think, that made me think it's phenomenal that within a fairly short space of time going from six months to fell one tree to eat up a whole mountainside. But I just think about that, that thing about

time and working with your hands and working with your hands, slows everything down. And, and gives you time observe. Obviously, we can't go backwards but somehow, I think, I think maybe also the pandemic has made some people think, and given us a bit of time to go, how do we want to live our lives? Is this pace of incessant progress actually sustainable?

Soobie: Maybe that would be a good point to conclude but perhaps just to touch a little bit , perhaps you'd both like to say a little short bit at the end about how you kind of approach a tree whether you're working with it John in your conservation capacity or Kate with your dance or choreography capacity.

John: That's quite a difficult question. When we work with trees it often involves either felling or planting them. When you're felling a tree, you are, I think, fairly aware, or at least I'm aware that it is a living thing that has been there for a while. It has its own sort of existence as a living thing. So it's quite, it can be quite a difficult thing to respond to I suppose either emotionally or psychologically, when you're, you're cutting a tree down. However often for example, as we were on our walk, we were in a coppiced area so when you're cutting that you are cutting, you know for that to regenerate. So, you have that sense of the cycle of life, the growth, and that the sort of the potentiality of that coppice to become something in the future. And I think that then flows into when we are planting trees. You, well, I think again, like you were saying earlier, this isn't for me but this is creating new habitats. It's a good thing to do for lots of reasons but I like the idea of leaving a legacy. Having that working with trees in my own really small way, in the little patch of the Chilterns, South Bucks that I work in and leaving a legacy for future generations. And I think that's where a certain sense of respect for the landscape and what is here or has been here and what is to come. I think that's ,that's a really important thing for me.

Kate: Yeah, I think, in terms of the work that I've done, the dance work that I've done in and around trees it's more about cooperation, creating a space in which I think I feel I can have a conversation with the tree and the environment that it's in. And that might be a one-way conversation, But in my imagination it can be a reciprocal conversation, if I listen hard enough and carefully enough. I can. I can feel, it might sound very strange, but to feel like you are in some kind of conversation, relationship with the tree and the environment that you're dancing in. And that's always I think what I would like to, um, it's not a kind of massive deference or reverence, it's about listening and trying to be a part of that environment and not be a job! To just be a part of, integrate into, and immerse myself into that environment. But that doesn't mean I always have to be soft and fluttery; it means that I tried to enter into it in a way that isn't, isn't about, "Right, I got this tree 'ere, I've got to do some dancing right," but it's about appropriate approach, and a way of entering into being in the space, I think.

Soobie: I was very struck in your videos of some of the workshops you've done with young people in a park in North Wales, the naturalness of the children's response to the trees in lots of ways. Just, you know, swinging on the branches and they're just lovely the way they naturally enjoy the tree and want to be, you know, involved in the movement around it. Yes, it would be nice to think as we get older we can reclaim some of that enjoyment and, like you say, that kind of response to trees.

Kate: I suppose it's a sort of natural thing to climb a tree, isn't it? It's what every child , most children want to do. And we found that working with the kids in the trees... and the only reason we ended up doing that was because of COVID. Because we normally work inside a building. It was, it was lovely to, to kind of go outside with them in this lovely park, and we weren't in that workshop allowed to rig from the trees so we just, we just tied ropes around the trees and that what was amazing was that sense of connection. So, you could go far from the tree but still be connected by holding a rope. And hugging the trees, everybody wanted to hug the trees, and roll down the grassy slope and, yeah, I think it's, we're hoping to go back next time and actually be up in the trees in a month or so, if we're allowed to.

Soobie: Wow, that sounds exciting, yes it sounds really exciting. Oh, thank you both very much for your time today and it's been really amazing to hear your conversation.

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