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Curtis Uhlemann: Together through conflict

TW INTERVIEW

A young musician searches through his late grandmother's trunk and discovers mementoes of her life, which together tell the story of two people, from different sides of an ocean, brought together through the turmoil of World War II.

That world is recreated through video, sound and dance in 'The Warriors: A Love Story', a show inspired by a real-life relationship, conceived by American group ARCOS Dance and presented at the Fringe this month by Ines Wurth. We spoke to ARCOS's Artistic Director Curtis Uhlemann about that true story, how it inspired his show, and how it's now being retold on stage.

TW: Tell us about the premise of 'The Warriors'.

CU: 'The Warriors' is inspired by the idea of the legacies our grandparents leave us and what we choose to do with them. The show is based on the actual international marriage of a German dancer and American philosopher after World War II, two people who transformed their horrific experiences in the war - the bombing of Dresden, the inhumanities that come with seeking out and killing 'the enemy' - into a lifelong commitment to acts of love and beauty.

TW: The story is inspired by your multimedia director Elliot Gray Fisher's real life grandparents. What influence did their lives have on the piece?

CU: The recorded voices of Ursula and J Glenn Gray, taken from interviews

in the early 70s, are played in the production. And Glenn's book 'The Warriors: Reflections On Men In Battle' provided thematic and narrative inspiration. Plus even a few of the set pieces are objects that actually belonged to the couple. As far as the form goes, we experimented with post-modern and contemporary dance styles, trying to create movement that honours the era in which Ursula danced in Dresden - with German pioneers Mary Wigman and Gret Palucca - as well as our own. Their artistic influence and spirit of innovation in the past is present in our own choreography.

TW: Your show is set in a world in conflict, and a city surrounded by destruction. But, as the title tells us, this is a love story. Is there a message in that juxtaposition?

CU: In the show, Ursula is heard

using a German phrase "über leben" in reference to "living through" the bombing of Dresden, but goes on to say that it felt more like "dying" through it. The show explores how such profoundly destructive experiences make the elements of material life less important for survivors. The parts of our life such as love and companionship become more important for them, as we see in Glenn and Ursula's life. It's really not the kind of 'love story' one would think about when you hear that phrase: it's actually about people learning about a deeper love and deciding to live it and teach it in their lives. And perhaps the people they touched with this understanding led different lives for it and passed it along to everyone they knew. This production is an extension of that legacy.

TW: The multi-media content is a key element in your work. What kind of footage is used in this production?

CU: There is a wide variety of audio-visual material from the past century incorporated into the piece: rotoscoped versions of Eadweard Muybridge's 1890s studies of human and animal movement, in a stylised animation depicting the Dresden bombing; actual war propaganda from multiple countries; audio and film footage from a BBC interview in the 70s with Glenn and Ursula; home movie video from the 80s; contemporary news reports; and time-lapses shot during a recent trip



to Germany. There are also sequences involving filmed dancers and actors that interact with the live performers onstage in various ways.

TW: With the choreography, music, and multimedia all seemingly equally important in the piece, what is your creative process like? Which ones come first, and how does each element develop with the other?

CU: With this production in particular, we decided to create the show in a bit of a different way than we're used to doing. Because the story was inspired by real lives, and we had so

many documentary, archival, and found footage sources, we started by developing the video and audio pieces and real-life inspired scenes first and created the choreography around them. We also considered all the transitional moments as though they are their own pieces or ideas. That's something that we also think sets us apart from others: the work we do in seamless transitions between what might normally be distinct scenes with beginning and endings. We like to blend and overlap the moments just as we do the different media, looking at the entire show as a series of choreographed moments.