

BENEATH THE SKIN: BODY COUNTING

By Amy Bell

The skin tells a lot. You can read it like a score of all the rhythms and processes going on inside and upon our bodies. We see and feel throbbing pulses, muscles twitching, sweat forming, bruises and scars tracing brushes with the outside world. Skin is the vibrating surface where all those syncopations clash, reverberate and fall in and out of sync.

As a contemporary dancer and choreographer my primary focus is embodied experience but I have invited two artists working with different perspectives on rhythm and surface to make a short film with me. Graham Clayton-Chance is an award winner filmmaker who regularly works dance and theatre. Amy Hurst is a drummer and artist whose projects include Raime, Rayographs and currently Wild Daughter. These are extracts of our first conversation together where I wondered, what beats bubble in our bodies and practices? Would we momentarily fall into step?

Amy Bell: I heard a piece of music yesterday in a café that I danced to when I was about 13. I couldn't remember any of the movement I had done to it but I could still remember the exact rhythm of the sequence. It was somehow vividly lodged in my nervous system when the actual pathway of the movement had long since disappeared. It made me think about how rhythms get entrenched in the body, hard-wired without us really having to consciously recall them. I was curious about how that might be for you guys working in different art forms. For instance, Amy you were telling me that you don't particularly love to count when you create, learn or play a song. Do you

rely more on intuition or body memory to know what you're doing?

Amy Hurst: I think the more and more I play something the more concrete it becomes.

AB: Concrete as in the clearer it is as material, or the stronger it is in your physicality?

AH: Well both I guess. I mean if I had learnt through having lessons rather than teaching myself I'd have been taught with counts. For me that's a very different way of thinking and different connection to playing. I tend to get a bit more of a *style* to what I play and I might add extra bits as I go. I tend to think of it more in sections than in terms of notes. So I'll have a *feel* for each section and I'll think, "Ok, go back to that *kind* of beat there."

AB: But then does that mean things are a bit approximate?

AH: Well, no. If I'm creating a beat that I like, then I write it down so I have a solid ground base. In a band we jam stuff and then record it so then we can re-learn the good bits. If we jam things enough, over time things come out of me I really like and I start to remember them and do them again. But I wouldn't necessarily replicate everything to a T. For me what I play is always in flux.

AB: So there's wiggle room inside a set structure, but it really relies on repetition to get it in the body?

AH: Yeah. I definitely need to get it in the muscle memory but at the same time keep it loose. I mean, I

could just play a solid beat and keep that going but I get bored. I like things to be more expressive.

AB: Me too. But do you think being less firmly attached to counts gives you that freedom and a different quality of playing?

AH: Well, it has its good and bad points. In one way it's a bit annoying that I didn't learn with counting. But I think it can be a bit freer and more connected. I mean, how does it work for you?

AB: Well, it very much depends on what I'm doing. I've done stuff where every tiny detail of the movement is set and that's easier to achieve precisely if the rhythm is really counted. But even if it's improvised, or contains a degree of improvisation you still have to physically agree with the other people you're with or to yourself what the internal rhythm is. It might change or you might be creating different rhythms between you, but for me, there's always something really important about a sense of riding the rhythms inside and around you. Sometimes that starts with conscious counting which then grows into becoming second nature through repetition, or sometimes it's something much more spontaneous, or connected to an emotion, a sensation or an image.

AH: Right, so like the beat I was playing earlier did feel like it had a particular *quality* that I could probably repeat but it wasn't really counted.

AB: Yeah, it felt like tumbling, really unpredictable kind of like [heavily unfolding, dropping arm and head actions]

AH: Yeah. You see it's at that point that you start to talk about drums in a very different language.

AB: Yes.

AH: And it becomes "tumbling" and that can actually translate into something that you would do in movement. So if you say to me, "do something tumbling" then I might play something completely different each time but it's really alive, much more than if you said, "Give me 16 bars of..."

AB: Totally. But Graham, I wonder whether you're also working with a feeling of rhythm when you're, say, editing.

Graham Clayton-Chance: Well, it depends on what you're working with, but normally in filmmaking things are actually quite formal. Editing is really about creating the continuity of action all the time so possibly pace is more of a guide than, say, rhythm. Pace is a sense of evening out the amount of times you move from camera to camera, moving the audience's perception of where the eye is going.

AH: It's like a visual flow. It's like magic, isn't it? One shot seems to be happening after another when actually they were done with two hours gap and a tea break.

GCC: Yeah and rhythm for most things is possibly too demanding. I haven't worked on much where you can completely experiment with it.

AB: Is that because doing away with conventional rhythm means doing away with readable action?

GCC: Yeah, in conventional story telling there's just no need to explore rhythm. You're also working with a machine and you're working with the fabric of something. So you're working with these constraints and you're not really free. But for projects like this I really don't want to come with a plan, thinking about shots and framings, time codes.

AH: I like that.

GCC: Yeah, anything to stop that conscious bit happening. Because it's so overwhelming in my business, especially commercially. You know, you're so determined by shot lists and timings. So it's great to be free and to think differently.

AB: And how do you do that?

GCC: You can just think, "Well I'll just try and be free" or you can do something that generates different structures. For instance there are new technologies like motion tracking where you can programme cameras on a track to be in certain points at certain times, so you can programme their movement and rhythm. You could set up a rig all around you and programme the intervals so it could be one second here, three seconds there, two, one...

AH: Wow.

GCC: But I think it's about using technology not as a gimmick but to give new structures or even randomness. There are some computer programmes for editing where you

can lay down a music track and just tap the keyboard along with the track to lay down markers, you can have a bin of clips and it cuts it automatically to those markers. It's not totally random but you're choosing a randomiser to break free of conventional technique and structure. So you could start the edit by, say, remembering the physicality of something you danced and patting the rhythm of that thing on the keyboard to create a timeline. For me it's about just going, "What if?" and creating a situation where you bypass preconceptions because they come in a second, old habits. Habitual rhythms come from everything, just from life. All your life you work in such rigid rhythms.

AB: Yeah, we're so conditioned without even noticing half the time. And as a viewer or listener you feel the effect of rhythm like, say, a growing sense of unease or that your breathing is getting more disjointed but you don't know necessarily know why because in fact maybe it has nothing to do with the visible content of the work. That's where I find rhythm really amazing. It can take you somewhere you without you realising because it's almost invisible.

GCC: That'll be my homework.

AB: What?

GCC: Just researching breaking the rhythm. And I suppose we can do that by occupying each other's territories a bit, disrupting or borrowing each other's rhythms. I mean literally you could take the cuts from the structure of a film that broke rhythm, like a Goddard film, and work on the rhythm of that in sound or movement. I like the idea

of the invisible rhythm of one thing determining something else.

AB: So do I. Although if you do it all the time it gets exhausting. Like if your life is really rhythmically chaotic it feels a bit like jetlag. There is something to be said for repetition or flow carrying you a bit. If you repeat a rhythm enough you don't have to think about it anymore, it becomes second nature and it sort of frees up your brain. Recently I've been learning a work by Italian choreographer Alessandro Sciarroni called *FOLK-S*. It's really about transformation through quite extreme repetition so we keep going and going, bashing out the rhythm of the Austrian Shuhplattler folk dance, slapping our feet and thighs. What strikes me is that after a while of dancing it, you can overcome a certain type of exhaustion because the rhythm just keeps you going. It flows through you. It becomes like a meditation.

AH: Yeah it's like that on the drums. You get into a zone. It's really physical. Drumming creates a kind of crazed endorphin thing, like a trance where you're incredibly focused and there's all this sound swirling around you and you do go into a bit of a one with it. I love that feeling, being totally immersed. But you sometimes have to bring yourself back a bit as well because, you might have a tendency to speed up and the other musicians will be like, "What are you doing?!"

AB: And how is it when you're filming rather than editing Graham? Do you feel a sense the whole body when you're shooting something?

GCC: Well yeah, but I stop like there's an abyss at my feet when people start talking about the camera dancing. It's best if we don't talk about the camera dancing.

AB: Ha ha, why?

GCC: It just makes me fucking mad when I see shit dance films and people intellectualise the bad camerawork and say, "Oh it's great because they were dancing with the camera too!" Especially if an ex-dancer has a camera, everyone's masturbating.

AB: Yes, it's fanciful at best, but it is really worth something when you see intuitive sensitivity towards movement. Like in the *Ten Men* film you made with Nigel Charnock, for example, there are moments when you're right in the thick of the dancing and it just feels so vibrant.

GCC: I suppose that's an awareness of it as an operator, of how to catch action, how to wait for it and maybe you know something's passing though again and you'll catch x person going that way. So there is a sense of gut instinct working with something that's happening live around you, of *knowing* rather than thinking or calculating.

London, 2015