Embodied Pain, Authenticity, and Ethics in Performance: Reflections on *Tender Steps*

SLIDE ONE

Take a moment and consider: *How do our bodies tell stories, and how is that then interpreted?*

Being a performer is exposing; it is raw, and it can feel real. Often the roles we take on are depictions of a scenario or a situation, a fabricated life that may have elements that ring true to your own lives. But rarely is the whole performance centred around an individual's story, an individual's pain and lived experience, that they then personally portray to an audience. The intersection of one's body and the meaning-making in performance leads us to question how bodies 'mean' and how audiences 'read' them. This has become a crucial point of inquiry for myself through my recent work *Tender Steps*. This dance for film explores my experience of baby loss. This personal journey shaped the creation of the film, and as I reflect upon this, I argue that its authenticity is fundamentally tied to that personal and physical connection to the exposed narrative.

Before I dig any further into this topic, I wish to voice a trigger warning. I have experienced baby loss; therefore, I understand that if you do not wish to stay and listen to this paper then please be assured I will not be offended. Please look after yourself and your own wellbeing.

My discussion today will look at four key areas.

Firstly I will explore how bodies function as vessels of meaning in performance.

Second I will analyse the relationship between authenticity and embodied choreography

Third I will discuss my discovered ethical challenges when using a lived experience within a creative process

And finally I will outline ways of supporting artists navigating personal trauma in their own, or others, creative processes.

SLIDE TWO: Bodies as Meaning-Making Vessels

It is hard to make a performance, performed by a human, neutral. Bodies carry meaning, and that in turn is interpreted by the observer through different cultural, social and emotional lenses. As Reeve (2011) states understanding these diverse perspectives is crucial for comprehending approaches to not just dance and theatre, but also medicine, psychotherapy, and ecology.

In *Tender Steps* my own body, the one that sadly endured the loss and pain of two children, became the source of content creation, which allowed for depth and truth. As you can imagine the creative process was deeply informed by this experience with movements organically emerging from the interrogation of the emotions and turmoil felt at that time. However if these movements were executed without the audiences knowledge of the lived experience they would resonate differently.

Take this movement: <mark>EXAMPLE (untwined)</mark>

On its own it is pretty to look at. Does it feel authentic?

Now if I were to tell you this movement derived from my desperate want to hold onto the child I was loosing, to grab hold of anything that allowed me to achieve this.

<mark>MOVEMENT EXAMPLE AGAIN</mark>

It resonates differently doesn't it?

The audience's perception of authenticity is shaped by this awareness, be it consciously or subconsciously, the relationship between the performer's lived experience and the movement is key. I knew this on my choreographic journey, I knew that audiences witnessing a body in dance often do not see the choreography, they read into the ways in which the movement exists in the vessel. The pain observed is seen through the tension in my limbs, the moments of stillness depicting emptiness, these instances evoke a narrative beyond verbal articulation. Human observing human via body language is as old as time. As Wolfgang (1995) explains it was originally a survival mechanism for identifying friends or foes, but it now provides valuable insights into human behaviour, making us astute to recognising subtleties in other's bodies.

Knowing that this has an impact on what is being generated raises importance questions to consider.

How well do such embodied experiences translate into performance?

Subsequently how do audiences interpret this performance?

But most importantly, to what extent does their knowledge of the performers connection to the content influence their perception of authenticity?

SLIDE THREE: Authenticity and the Limits of Embodied Choreography

Tender Steps is a manifestation of my own experience, derived from feeling like I was on my own, to learning many experience baby loss but do not feel it is something that can be shared. I believe art can be a tool to raise awareness, so I chose to take my story and put it on screen. To experience loss of any kind is life-changing, but to lose individuals you never had the chance to hold, yet carried within you, is an experience beyond words. Once I had processed my grief and had had two successful pregnancies, I felt an urge to share my story, for the benefit of others. The work is an eleven-minute film which is a depiction of the stages of grief I experienced after losing my babies. It is not graphic, it is interpretive, and the main aim was to allow for my personal story and emotions to resonate so that it gave others courage and support to continue on their journey of acceptance.

Filmed in one continuous take, in the beautiful landscape of the Derbyshire Dales, the work connects to nature and harnesses the timeless and primal reality of baby loss. It shows the loneliness, the anger, and the acceptance, with a haunting lullaby depicting the sense of loss of something that was yet to be. It resonated with those that had experienced a loss and brought knowledge to those who had not. Described as 'absolutely stunning' (Instagram, Adaire to Dance, 2025) and 'very touching, very meaningful' (Anonymous, 2024), the film clearly was raising awareness in the way that I had hoped. But at what expense? I had shared a very personal experience; one I felt could not be depicted by an individual who had not lived through it. This

personal narrative had pushed boundaries that meant audiences marvelled that 'to create such a magnificent piece of art based on something so utterly heartbreaking is truly magical' (Sophie, 2024). The exposure had resulted in magic. Would this have been the case if it were another depicting my experience?

Movement and choreography is routinely replicated, this is how we share our practice, but the particular weight of a lived experience that informs the said physicality cannot be as easily transferred. There is a certain quality that a personal story can bring to a performance. This being said I know that all performance involves a level of interpretation, we as performers consistently embody emotions and stories beyond our own narratives. But when a story is deeply routed in personal trauma, such as *Tender Steps,* the question of authenticity remains, with a doubt over if another had taken on the central role, someone without baby loss experience, would this authenticity be diluted?

SLIDE FOUR: Ethical Challenges

Deciding to use my lived experience to generate a piece of performance did raise ethical concerns, as it would in any performance exploring this route into creative practice. On one hand I felt I could provide a realistic depth to the work because I had endured baby loss, but on the other there was the concern of repeatedly reliving that experience and trauma and this not being emotionally sustainable.

These concerns do extend beyond my own self to the broader performance landscape. Should a performer who does not have lived experience of a certain trauma be asked to embody it? Does this risk turning pain into just something to look at, rather than understanding its deeper meaning? Therefore, should only those with explicit experience be allowed to tell these stories? These questions do not have simple answers.

Many out there enjoy a real-life scenario, with reality television high on the watch list year on year with ElectrolQ (2025) stating that 40% of us tune in for these true-to-life depictions. It feels relatable, it helps us feel connected, but is it ethically acceptable when we witness distress and trauma? A personal narrative, be it on stage or screen, does open the performer up to inquest. When you are then using your own narrative to fuel this portrayal, are you giving consent to the audience to have ownership? Some would argue that the moment you present to an audience you lose control over interpretation and meaning, this is for the audience to decipher. For me, handing over my story of baby loss did not relinquish my control, it shared an experience that I knew many would have also lived through or at least relate to. I took a gamble with my own emotional wellbeing for the greater good, to push myself physically and present a piece of work that would raise awareness and bring solace. This was not a gamble I wanted to try with another performer in my place, I did not want my trauma to be embodied by another. I was prepared for my voice to be used and interpreted if it meant that baby loss could begin to be a topic that was not taboo. I was prepared for my body and voice to belong to the observer.

SLIDE FIVE: Strategies for Ethical and Sustainable Creative Practice

Such a decision did mean I had to implement strategies into the creative process to allow for my own wellbeing to be considered. It was important to me that the process remained ethical and sustainable. I worked with a team of whom all had been part of my life when I lost my children, this was a key aspect that made the process achievable. But we did implement other strategies too, and reflecting upon this I have four approaches that I recommend artists utilise when using lived experience in their work:

1. **Building a supportive creative team:** Either using those who are connected to your story or those who are trauma-informed and sensitive to the topic.
2. **Incorporating Therapeutic Exercises:** Integrate grounding techniques for the performer. This can include and are not limited to journaling, and structured debriefs in safe spaces for processing the emotions.
3. **Safe environment**: Create a creative space that allows the performer to step aside when needed. Have a breakout room for quiet and contemplation if required.
4. **Get into nature**: Find time to be in nature as a group, to breath the air and to silently acknowledge what you are working through.

Using these approaches means we can cultivate a space where personal work can be generated without compromising the wellbeing of the artist in question.

SLIDE SIX: Conclusion

Embodied storytelling has the power to communicate truths that words alone cannot. This power does have responsibility though. A responsibility to consider not just how a story is told, but also how the performer who is telling the story is supported. I hope you will continue this conversation and that we remember the complexities of performance, we want to make sure the process is impactful but remains humane.

Through my work I have learnt that personal narrative carries immense weight in performance, but it must be handled with care, for the artist and the audience. I invite you to take this discussion into your own practice and consider how we as creators can embody storytelling in a way that honours both the narrative and the storyteller.

I feel *Tender Steps* speaks for itself, and I have allowed time for us to experience it as a collective after hearing my thoughts on embodied pain, authenticity and ethics in performance.

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