

Live Art in Scotland: Robert Softley Gale

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Robert Gale (RSG): My family worked in amateur theatre. From a very young age I was around theatrical people, that was from the age of three or four being taken to rehearsals and especially around pantomime when people were rehearsing panto, that was a big part of my early years. As I got older, I was always involved in that world, painting scenery or operating lights and sound, and eventually directing some stuff. I was never on stage because it was amateur theatre and the whole idea of a disabled young person being on stage was just like, what part can you play? The recurring joke was if they ever did *Christmas Carol*, I could be tiny Tim. When I went to Glasgow university, as part of my undergrad I took two years of theatre studies because I was interested in theatre but again, young guy, physical impairment, speech impediment, theatre wasn't the obvious place to aim for. When I was at Glasgow university, I was going to see bits of theatre, I was going to the Tron and The Arches. I think the first thing I saw was *The Merchant of Venice* at The Arches. I thought this is great, I love it, but again, it wasn't a career option in my head. I was more going down the management or computing science route, that made a lot more sense. In my first year at Glasgow, I just decided to take management as my honours subject. I got a call from a theatre company in Edinburgh, Theatre Workshop, to ask me to audition for them because they were offering a one-year contract, and I had never performed before, never been on stage before, I'd never done any of that but I was twenty-one and quite cocky, so I thought, yes! I'll give it a go [laughs].

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SG: [Laughs].

RSG: I went to the audition and for the audition I did [laughs] 'Isn't it Wonderful to be a Woman' from *The Steamie*, thinking at least they won't forget me, and I got offered the job. And then it all sort of snowballed from there, so that was 2001. Yes, god, twenty years ago. That's how it all began.

SG: Great, it's so funny thinking about the overlap of that. I was studying in Edinburgh at exactly the same time doing a literature degree, but pretty much the same years. So, you went and worked for Theatre Workshop, so I guess you stopped studying for a year to do that?

RSG: Then I went back to finish my last year because I'd got that far so I thought I might as well get a degree out of it, but my heart was not in it at that point. I thought, wow! I can work in theatre.

SG: What was Theatre Workshop like? Who were you working with then?

RSG: Robert Ray was the artistic director at that point. Two years before I started, they had a company of disabled actors, so we got five shows over the year which was a great way to learn a lot of stuff. I started in August and by the end of September, I had my first opening night of a professional piece of theatre. Looking back, I'm like what the hell was I doing [laughs] but because I didn't know enough at that point, I wasn't that nervous, but looking back on it, it was terrifying.

SG: What kind of work were you making? What shows were they?

RSG: Political work with a capital P. The first show was about the riots in Genoa in '97 I think that was, protestors had been killed so very sort of left-wing, looking at anti-capitalism riots, stuff like that. The work tended not to be about disability, it kind of used to be that disabled actors were involved in the case alongside non-disabled actors. I think that idea came from a great place of you know, disabled people are actually talented, and they should be part of this picture we present on stage. I wonder looking back whether the audience were ready for that, whether this idea of disability was maybe a little bit premature or a bit naïve. The work was political but not really disability-focused at that point.

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SG: Okay, so I'm guessing, just thinking about the timeline of this, that you finished studying and that's when you were invited to get involved with *Birds of Paradise*, is that the next chapter?

RSG: Yes. Right after my year at Theatre Workshop. Again, I was young and stupid, I worked at the Edinburgh Fringe and while doing that, during the day I was rehearsing for *Birds of Paradise* in Glasgow, and every night I'd do a 5:30pm show. Thinking about it now, I could collapse but I was young, it was fine. With *Birds of Paradise* that was the first show that I'd done where disability wasn't part of the show. This idea of putting the story of a disabled person on stage and having disabled performers tell that story was really a first for *Birds of Paradise*, and that show was written and directed by a guy called Gary Robinson who I'd met at Theatre Workshop, he'd done the Christmas show that I'd done. And then fifteen years later, Gary and I were running *Birds of Paradise* so it's all very interlinked and interwoven.

SG: Grand. I'm sort of conscious that *Birds of Paradise* is one of the longest running threads of your work but alongside that are other projects, some of which are yours and some of which are associated with *Birds of Paradise*, but there are also other companies and structures. Maybe we can go back to The Arches because there's a thread there which leads to a few different things. Let's focus in on that specific show, because I know *If These Spasms Could Speak* came out of Behaviour, so was that your first time working with The Arches, or had you worked with them before?

RSG: To go one step further back, that came out because [of] the National Theatre of Scotland, I approached them when they first opened. That was in 2005, and I approached them when they first opened and said hi. Again, I'm quite confident so I said, why don't you make some work about disability? And they went through a few years where they commissioned me to write a piece called *Girl X*, which we did through NTS in 2011, I want to say. Jackie was at The Arches at that point and came along to see my NTS piece and said that's great, I really enjoyed that. That was written with a guy called Pol Hayvaert who is a Belgian director. Again, that sort of influence of European Belgian directors who, they look at a lot of British theatre and go, what the hell are you all doing? [laughs]. Pol was an influence at that point. We made *Girl X* and that was quite a hard-hitting political piece with a strong disability message. Jackie then approached me and said we're doing Behaviour

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in 2021, would I make something for there? I'd written a little bit of *Girl X* but Pol was really the one pulling it together, I was writing bits of dialogue but obviously not the whole thing. *If These Spasms Could Speak* was the first time that I'd written a show, but again, a lot of this is the bravado in me being a little bit cocky and going, yes I'll give it a go. Writing that show was hell because you're own your own when you're in front of a laptop and you've got a blank page and you don't know if it's good or crap. All of that stuff. Before that, being in rehearsal you could chuck out ideas and go, oh yes that doesn't work or well that does work. Doing it by yourself is a lot harder. *If These Spasms Could Speak* ran for three nights in 2012 and I thought that would be it. It's a one-man show. It also came about because of *Girl X* at NTS was me in a choir of seventeen people and that was hell because seventeen people were all trying to talk at the same time. I also realised that to tour a show of that scale is really difficult because it costs a fortune. So, I was like let's make a one-man show where it's all about me, so *Spasms* that came from that inspiration. Then as I say, I thought it would be three nights and that would be it. I applied to Made in Scotland to take it to the fringe in 2013, took it to the fringe, and then it all went a bit bonkers after that.

SG: Maybe we can talk about the experience of touring it and the experience of the Fringe. I'm interested in you talking about that experience of writing for yourself and knowing that the show involves the stories and experiences of a whole range of other people. Did the impulse to interview other people come out of being faced with the blank page or was that always part of the process?

RSG: It came out of starting to tell my story on stage, then that kind of Scottish west coast thing where we all go, oh no I can't talk about myself because that's far too egotistical so let me get other people involved and that way, I can disguise the fact that I'm talking about myself. I sent a questionnaire to disabled organisations and charities and got disabled people to tell me how they feel about their bodies and that was the starting point of building multiple perspectives. I had a recurring dread of a sense of how disabled people view their bodies because that's how the public see us most of the time, so I thought it was an important thing to look at. That's where getting other people involved became quite core to it. I also think the idea that, because the photographs that were projected were people who were interviewed, so there was an almost direct connection to the individual. I thought of this great idea that at the end of the show, there would be naked disabled people all over

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the screen, it would be some kind of revolutionary act but then I found out that most people are not like me, most people are a little bit more reserved [laughs] so I had to pull that back a bit and say well actually, we can just be very revealing in the stories that we tell. That was interesting path to go down, the framing of me and my bum all over Edinburgh. In the show I get undressed down to my underwear. The whole thing was about being seen and giving permission to be seen felt important to the show.

SG: Yes. I remember seeing it at the Fringe and there's a moment or a sequence where you ask someone to, I can't remember if they unbutton your shirt or button your shirt, I can't remember which way round it is. I guess there's something interesting, and maybe we'll talk about this in relation to your other work, and maybe this is where it sits or could sit within the framework of live art, is this interest in the live body, the explicit body, and the vulnerable body, just the body. The present body.

RSG: That little bit in the show almost came from nowhere. Everyone thinks it's my story, but it's not my story. It was actually my brother-in-law who went to the hospital and they started looking at his brother. It was based on a real story, but it wasn't mine. But yes, I got the audience to come up and undo a button, which for me, I've had people helping me undo buttons my whole life so there's nothing remarkable about that, it's perfectly ordinary. The minute you put it on stage and in a show, it becomes this thing. Interestingly, it was very different as I took it around the world. In Brazil people were going, I'll come and help you undress! That's great. In India or Estonia, it's much harder to get people to come up. It taught me a lot about audience performer contracts. The audience are ultimately going, what are you going to ask next? Am I agreeing to getting into bed with you or something? No, you're just unbuttoning a shirt. There are a lot of layers to that. People still talk to me about it. It always gives me something to ignite, the medical aspect of it, the vulnerability of it because needing that help is a genuine thing, I wasn't making it up. Quite often we've asked someone to come up and the first person would either say no or come up and sit back down because they felt nervous. So I was having to play the audience off each other and it was interesting. Every single night I always thought at least one person could do it eventually but sometimes it took a lot longer.

SG: Okay. It's so interesting, how the dynamic of that is playing with the audience's anxieties or sense of agency. They're the one that becomes anxious or vulnerable. How do I engage

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with a person with a physical disability, even though they've explicitly asked me to do something for them.

RSG: And also, how do I not assist them because they've asked me, they need the help. There are all sorts of things that go on in their eyes that I quite enjoy. That's the thing for me, that I always get with *Spasms*, everyone called it a one-hander, it wasn't, it was a two-hander. It was me and the audience every night and it was about taking them through that journey of their own stuff and seeing where that went.

SG: We might be jumping around in a timeline here, but I'm just thinking that *Purposeless Movements* would've been quite a few years later than that. Was that Edinburgh International Festival? Was that made for that?

RSG: No, we first did *Purposeless* in 2016 at Tramway. It was about three years after. We went from a big cast and me going I hate big casts, then did *Spasms* which was a one-man show and me going I hate a one-man show, and then did *Purposeless* with four guys and I get to sit at the back and not have to do the work anymore. It was quite a queer journey through all of that. But yes, we first did that in 2016 at Tramway and then we brought it back for 2019 at the International Festival.

SG: Okay. Maybe we talk a little bit about that show. I'm interested in how these shows are moving through a few different traditions or styles of performance. *If These Spasms Could Speak* is working with autobiographical performance in one way and then with *Purposeless Movements*, it's engaging with dance theatre as another very broad genre. Maybe we could talk about that, the development of that show. That was a Birds of Paradise production?

RSG: Yes, it was Birds of Paradise. Quite often things come about because of very boring practical reasons or very simple ideas that I have. So from *Spasms* I go, this is a bit ridiculous because you've got a guy with a speech impediment onstage for an hour talking quite a dense text to the audience and the show played with the idea that you wouldn't understand anything I said, but equally yes, quite hard work to do that every night. I think we did one hundred and four performances of *Spasms*. So then we go, okay how do we tell stories and talk a little bit less? [Laughs]. It really was like that. Also with *Spasms*, the whole moving around on the chair became a thing that I didn't think it would be but allowing people to watch me get onto stage and move about the stage and see how I moved. So I was like,

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okay, we've got a moving piece where you've got much more indication to look at how disabled people move. Then you go okay, what's the connection. They're all men, they've all got CP, things like that sort of come off. Then from quite simple questions, a lot of things fall on and there is a knock-on effect. I'm not going to put four guys on stage to tell my story, I want them to tell their stories. That's much more authentic. Also for me, is what the audience believes to be true, even through telling other people's stories, people quite often assume I'm talking about myself. Well, I know why, I think part of that is because you're a disabled person and so surely you're talking about yourself. Is that acting or is it not acting? I don't know. Quite often I'd get asked about my daughter. I know Mary Brennan wrote about my muscular dystrophy. If I had that I wouldn't be alive right now. Quite a lot with the truth and the perceived truth. I also think that we're crap at making things up, all I ever really do is retell stories in different ways. I can point at every single thing I've written and say actually that happened; I'm just telling it in a slightly more theatrical way. So that's how from *Spasms* to *Purposeless* came about, telling their stories and putting their stories on the stage and working with them as performers. We were messing about with the truth. The performer who doesn't have cerebral palsy, all of the stories he tells are his stories, they did happen to him, but because you're viewing him as a man with CP, you're imagining that happened because of the CP. It's not, it happened because we all get told to fuck off.

SG: It's so interesting thinking about the game that's being played there with audience expectation and with the performance quote unquote of disability and how it registers when you look at it, and then thinking about what's at stake in *My Left / Right Foot*, which takes that and makes it an even more explicit thing with the audience, and also you just saying there that everything that you work on you can see it's connected to something that's happened to you. Is this you revisiting an am-dram childhood?

RSG: Yes, completely. None of it is made up. The start of it is someone painting a radiator. I painted radiators at the am-dram club. A recurring joke with Mairi who is the producer is, can we not get another story of about a guy with cerebral palsy please? We're all fed up [laughs]. My whole career is filled with crap that we all went through.

SG: [laughs] I'm conscious that that's another show that was at the Fringe. So I suppose I'm partly just thinking about the landscape of Scotland. What's your experience been of the Fringe as a space for making new work? Because I think the fringe has always tried to sell

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itself as the space for risk and for experimentation. It's a lovely line, but I don't know how true it is!

RSG: I mean, now my perspective of the Fringe is if you've got quite a bit of money and you want to tour internationally, go to the Fringe. *Spasms* was the ideal thing for the Fringe. Neil Webb at the British Council came to the second show, recommended it to all his colleagues and contacts, brought literally hundreds of international delegates and that's why it all went worldwide for years afterwards. If you tour a show internationally the Fringe is ideal, if you want to make money out of something then forget it [laughs] because it costs you a fortune. Experimentation, yes, but you can only play to five people. *My Left / Right Foot* was the least experimental thing I've ever done. It's a musical comedy which was designed from the get-go to reach the most people, but it's not experimental. People are now paying fifteen to twenty pounds and they want a guaranteed good night out. *My Left / Right Foot* had to give them a big musical comedy to make them laugh. If we could also get a little bit of disability politics in there, then great.

SG: It's quite a tactical approach, you know what the context of the Fringe is, you know what the deal is.

RSG: Yes, yes. I've just heard somebody at the door. I'll be back in one second.

SG: Sure, no worries.

RSG: What were we talking about?

SG: We're just talking about your clear sense of what that show needed to be and needed to do, and what you wanted to be in the context of the festival. I don't want to set up a false contrast, but I'm then thinking if the Fringe is a space where you go with really clear intentions in mind, then thinking about the other spaces in the Scottish scene where you can take more open-ended risks, where you can make work without knowing where it's going. We've touched on The Arches already, I guess I'm thinking about things like BUZZCUT. Maybe we can talk a little bit about that.

RSG: When The Arches went there was a real lack of that. Things like *Take Me Somewhere* are great, but it's not a venue. The Arches gave you that chance to go into a room and not know what the hell you're going to do, and if it was crap which it was most of the time, nobody heard about it [laughs]. It was fine, but if it wasn't crap then you could develop it

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further. I think we all mourned The Arches quite badly because it was a great space for experimentation.

SG: Yes. If what I've read was right, it was the imaginary festival that came out of the closure of The Arches which is one of the things Jackie led on in that period of consultation that led to Take Me Somewhere and you imagined the thing that then became *Discourse or Intercourse*, is that right?

RSG: Yes exactly, I imagined something that could never happen. I was asked to image a bit of theatre that you could never make, and I thought of porn. I wrote the *Discourse or Intercourse / Talking and Fucking* proposal and then about six months later she came back to me and said that thing that you said you could never do, can you do that? So yes, that was the sewing for it. Take Me Somewhere was perfect and I did that under my own name because it was pretty experimental and pretty risky, not just risqué but risky. It could be clapping around a shower while talking about porn and I didn't really want to get into why I thought that was a great idea. They're all great, but yes, I kept it separate.

SG: I suppose I'm interested in that work as another solo work and a work which is for me, characterised by this live and immediate exchange with the audience, so maybe not a solo work, it's maybe another relational work. And having done maybe a few different versions of it. I think I saw it as part of Take Me Somewhere at CCA.

RSG: Yes.

SG: And then you would've done it at BUZZCUT and at Arika maybe?

RSG: I was going to do it for Battersea Arts Centre in November 2020 but that all got pulled because of the pandemic and so that commission became *Take me to Bed*, so you can see how things evolve and grow and end up being something different which was inspired by *Discourse or Intercourse*. The funny thing for me is that quite often work gets described as being challenging or confrontational and all of those sorts of things, but at the same time there's a big part of me that just wants people to like me and so I use comedy, I crack jokes, I go out of my way to make people feel comfortable and to not make them too uncomfortable, but I do make work that makes them uncomfortable. A big part of that I think is about disability, about having to ingratiate myself to people and having to get people to get over my impairment. So if I'm funny and engaging and I'm cracking a joke,

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they'll laugh and hear what I say better, etcetera etcetera. A part of me goes into the work where, yes I want to challenge people, yes I want to ask questions about why there aren't more disabled porn stars and what impact that has around disability and sexuality, but I always end up doing it in a way that's quite nice and cuddly. So *Discourse or Intercourse*, you weren't going to be forced to look at porn, you had the choice. You could just look at people talking about porn and disability. *Talking and Fucking*, again choice had to be part of the show. I didn't want folk to feel put off and I'm always doing that, I'm always trying to not put people off, but find the part of the show where I can push them a bit further where I can make them a little bit uncomfortable. With *Spasms*, the first seventy per cent of the show is jokes and making gunny anecdotes and stuff, and then I ask someone to unbutton my shirt. If it started with unbuttoning my shirt, it wouldn't have worked. With *Discourse or Intercourse*, when I got to the Arika version I developed after a card game where people could ask questions or could ask me to do things to them. Again, I'm always like how can we break this barrier of conforming? How do I get them to get comfortable? For me, that's about if they invited me to touch them or inviting them to touch me, how does that work? It only for a certain type of person. It works at Arika, it works at BUZZCUT, it wouldn't work at the Fringe.

SG: The way you're describing the different versions of the show, there's this interest in finding different ways of negotiating consent or negotiating relations to create spaces where people feel like they can do things or ask for things that otherwise they would be really leery of, even in the space of a permissive place like BUZZCUT or Arika.

RSG: We always talk about the audience like it's a homogenous group, but they never are. You have to be responsive to where they're at. It's about permission. The first show I spoke about, *Girl X*, that's the first time I'd put anything on stage. One of my lines in that show was something like, all this poetry stuff is great, but would you fuck me? I feel like every show that I've done has basically been asking that question [laughs]. Obviously, it's not all about sex but it is all about sex. It's something about asking that question and the ways in which makes people more or less comfortable. It's all in that same area.

SG: Yes, I'm really conscious of the lens that I always bring to performance but it's that thread of queerness that runs through lots of the projects. In a lot of your work it feels like there's an interest in taking desire seriously, and opening it up. As you say, it's something

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that's also maybe a bit uncomfortable when we take it seriously and when we think about it. Who gets to be involved in it? What kinds of desire are possible?

RSG: I've been asking people would you fuck me for about fifteen to twenty years. As soon as somebody answers that question with yes, my next question would be why? And that'll be much scarier because they have to justify it or think about it [laughs].

SG: [Laughs].

RSG: I spend so much time talking about policy and the law and how we get a more equal society, but there's something about how we connect to each other as people only at that level of physicality, or at least at an intellectual level we need to pick away at that and go, what's going on here?

SG: It's why I like the title of the work. The choice *Talking or Fucking* is completely true because it describes one of the shapes of the show, but it's also the two things that are at stake: what are we talking about and what are we actually doing.

RSG: Pre-COVID, that all felt okay. We had our first gig at the CCA and Jackie came to the dress rehearsal and I was wet and naked and I thought here's my career about to go up in flames. But now, I don't know when that will be possible again, but I hope we can do it again.

SG: Yes. That particular kind of intimate performance. I'm trying to keep all of these conversations to an hour because I know everyone has stuff to do. We touched on this a bit, that broader landscape in Scotland, we touched on some threads of this. But one of the last things I wanted to ask you about was where you see there are spaces for experimentation or risk-taking, or if there are particular institutions that have played a role in your work that we maybe haven't touched on?

RSG: Again, I feel that the last year has made the whole question of risk quite a different thing. On one hand, I had venues saying bring back *My Left / Right Foot* because we can pack out the auditorium and we haven't put on work for a year, let's get in thousands of people, and I'm like okay but that's not taking risks we know that works. On the other hand, who's going to want to sit beside someone or two thousand people? You know, when's that going to happen? So risk in the sense of we've been doing a lot of digital work last year and this year and risk becomes very different in digital work. We started talking about doing

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Discourse or Intercourse online and it just doesn't work because you're on Zoom or you're on Skype and you can hit 'leave' at any point. You can hit that button or shut your laptop and away you go. Risk is a different thing in this context. If I'm going to sit in a room and talk about disability and sex, if you're uncomfortable in the show you'd have to get up and walk out and obviously anyone could do that but that's a whole different thing to leaving a Zoom call. So, I get quite fascinated and quite het up about this thing of risk, and the idea of how we can push it further. The irony is that when I go to works, I hate being asked to do things. I hate when other performers make me take part because I feel really uncomfortable, but it's all I ever do to other people. It's a real question for me of how I push myself to take risk further. I'm trying to work now with other collaborators and there's part of me that wants to be nice to people, to ingratiate myself to people, how can I challenge that and make it more confrontational and make it a bit more uncomfortable without it becoming something that people don't want to see. But sorry, your question was about spaces for that. I do think things like BUZZCUT are important to get that space and *Take Me Somewhere*, absolutely. I mean bring back *The Arches*, but I don't think we're going to get that for a while. There's something about space and there's something about *The Arches* especially, the smell, the fact that you could do things in that place and nobody would ever [laughs], I once shot a porn film in *The Arches*. Of course you could use it in the lower levels and nobody would find you for days, even weeks, because nobody was there. Somewhere like that where, metaphorically and actually, you can take risks feels very important.