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Performing tenderness: fluidity and reciprocity in the performance of caring in *Fevered Sleep's Men & Girls Dance*

Amanda Stuart Fisher

Writing about what could be interpreted as a starting point for *Men & Girls Dance* in the 'newspaper' accompanying the production, David Harradine, one of *Fevered Sleep's* co-artistic directors, describes a moment at a local village bonfire, where he found himself watching a group of boys 'chasing each other round in the rain and mud' (Harradine, quoted in *Fevered Sleep*, 2017). As he stood watching the boys playing, he describes a growing sense of uneasiness as he realised that he too was being observed by the other adults present, who were positioning him as 'a solitary man, alone at the village bonfire, watching someone else's children playing' (Harradine, quoted in *Fevered Sleep*, 2017). The sensation of being watched and judged evoked an anxiety for Harradine both about the narratives that were being read into his presence at this event and his observation of the boy's playing, providing a poignant insight into the often unspoken social taboos that attach themselves to men's encounters with children. Harradine's account of this moment of self-conscious observation draws attention to a broader social unease indicative of the 'risk anxiety' (Jackson and Scott, 1999) that often permeates our perceptions of adult interactions with children in general and male adult relationships with children in particular. As sociologists Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott suggest, childhood today is increasingly viewed as a site of anxiety and risk, characterised both by children's risky behaviours and (adult) *risk anxiety*. Childhood, they argue, 'is increasingly being constructed as a precious realm under siege from those who would rob children of their childhood, and as being subverted from within by children who refuse to remain childlike' (Jackson and Scott, 1999: 86). The risk anxiety associated with children is often sexualised, '[crystallising] around the threat of sexual violence from strangers', yet this threat is 'rarely made explicit to children' (Jackson and Scott, 1999: 101) and so the anxiety remains in the minds of adults as something unsaid and unsayable. As Jackson and Scott

explain: 'Adults project their sexual scripts and anxieties on to children in ways which are relatively inaccessible because they are bounded by what cannot be said. This makes it extremely difficult to communicate to children the precise nature of the danger they are being warned about' (1999: 101). Furthermore, the conception of childhood as a period of innocence is, as childhood studies researcher Emma Renold points out, a highly gendered process, where innocence is also often eroticised and subjected to processes of 'feminisation' (2005: 24). As Renold argues, 'From depictions of sexualised images of prepubertal girls in the Victorian era [...], to the Lolita-like commodification of little girls as sexual consumers and performers in contemporary society [...], it is the girl-child, not the boy-child, whose innocence is eroticised' (2005: 23).

The issue of gender, girlhood and adult sexualised risk anxiety, while not explicitly addressed in *Men & Girls Dance*, emerges poignantly in this production as a social and cultural topography. Described as 'exquisitely beautiful' (Gardner, 2016), 'joyful' and as a 'celebration of the relationships on stage' (Love, 2016), *Men & Girls Dance* 'reclaims the rights of adults and children to be together, to play together and to dance together' (Fevered Sleep, 2017). While the production certainly celebrates adults and children being and dancing together, *Men & Girls Dance* arguably achieves much more than this and performs a mode of caring that both challenges and extends our understanding of both our preconceptions of encounters between men and girls and how we think about strength, vulnerability and the power structures of care in performance. Through its improvisational structure and choreography, *Men & Girls Dance* critiques many of the gender-normative assumptions that often become projected on to encounters between men and girls and replaces the adult risk anxiety associated with this with care-filled interactions that generate moments of togetherness, marked out by a mode of tender and reciprocal caring. In so doing, performed care emerges in this production as a mode of resistance, opening up new understandings about structures of caregiving and care receiving in performance and rethinking the ethical demands of working within contexts of vulnerability and risk.

One of the key ways that *Men & Girls Dance* reconsiders the dynamics of the encounter between men and girls is by offering a critique of the bifurcated, gendered categories of difference that tend to predetermine how we position masculinity and femininity in relation to men and girls. Rather than emphasising differences, *Men & Girls Dance* explores how masculinity and girlhood might be understood as being enfolded within the same world and constructed through the same discourses. My thinking in this area is influenced by the research of the cultural theorist Rebecca Coleman, who, in her book *The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, Images, Experience* (2009), examines the 'becoming' of girls' bodies through an engagement with Deleuze's concept of the 'fold'. By understanding both men and girls as being enfolded within the same discourses, I suggest that *Men & Girls Dance* interrogates the limitations of the highly gendered discourses that construct

our understanding of both girlhood and manhood, opening up new possibilities for thinking about how men and girls might be together.

Drawing on Coleman's account of 'enfolding', I argue that in *Men & Girls Dance* both the girls and men who participate must navigate the often unspoken taboos that become inscribed into the discourses of both masculinity and girlhood and the sexualised risk anxiety associated with this. Incorporating feminist theory, visual culture and theorisation of girlhood, Coleman problematises the concept of girls as passive spectators, rejecting the idea that girls automatically become subjugated to the negative images of women that appear in media and teen magazines. Instead, she positions girls as being enfolded within the same world as the mediated images of women in magazines, arguing that the experience of girls should be understood as operating *in relation* to these images. Rather than viewing 'images and bodies [...]' as spatially separate and capable of having effects on each other: "bad" images = "bad" bodies, Coleman argues for an 'ontology of becoming' where 'bodies and images are processes which are inextricably entwined and which become through each other' (2009: 17, 3).

Importing Coleman's theorisation of the becoming of girls bodies into my reading of *Men & Girls Dance* is productive because it draws attention to how performance projects like this can both resist and exist within the gendered structures that determine the way we think about men and girls. The heteronormative and gendered discourses that become inscribed into men's relationships with girls tend to posit masculinity as synonymous with a predatory sexuality and with action and aggression, while girlhood is viewed as being in some way equated with passivity, latent sexuality and the risk of corrupted innocence. However, through the performance of a tender togetherness, as I will argue in this chapter, *Men & Girls Dance* breaks down these divisions and instead generates moments of mutual caring and openness. By troubling and critiquing the bifurcated normative structures of gender that separate men and girls, adults and children, masculinity and femininity, the process of performed togetherness in *Men & Girls Dance* also invites us to rethink how the gendering of caring structures impacts on our understanding of care and how caring encounters can be rethought by positioning men and girls as enfolded and implicated in the same discourses of risk, threat and vulnerability.

Dancing with the media monster: performed caring as resistance

My initial encounter with *Men & Girls Dance* was as an audience member for the London edition of the performance that took place on 21 April 2017 at the Place Theatre. Prior to this, *Men & Girls Dance* had been performed at various other venues around the UK including Brighton, Nottingham, Salford, Huddersfield and Folkestone. Funded by Arts Council Strategic

Touring funds, every *Men & Girls Dance* performance is created through a residency within each of the different locations to which the company tours. In each setting, the company works with a group of 'adult, male professional contemporary dancers' who remain connected with the project throughout and a different group of local girls from the community 'who dance for fun' (Fevered Sleep, 2017). The performances that emerge are therefore specific to each area, are semi-improvised and co-created with the dancers who participate in the residency. By structuring the creation of each performance around a residency, Fevered Sleep are able to foster closer and more meaningful, participatory collaborations with each new community to which the show tours.

The atmosphere at the Place Theatre on the evening of 21 April certainly reflected this community-based participatory approach. A community reach that extended beyond the confines of the theatre was signalled initially by the presence of various writing materials laid out in the bar area, inviting audience members to write down their responses to the ideas the performance evoked. This invitation was eagerly taken up, enabling the audience to write themselves *into* the performance process and to leave a map tracing the thoughts and feelings of the spectators after each performance. It is an approach that was reproduced elsewhere on the tour, in what Fevered Sleep described as 'talking places', community-oriented discursive spaces that, as the project evaluation report indicates, sought to establish a 'safe space for the public to discuss the project's themes, unique to each tour residency' (Morris *et al.*, 2017: 4). In this sense, both on stage and off, this production 'was intentionally devised to create conversation – with the Talking Place and newspaper being key elements' (Morris *et al.*, 2017: 12). The *Men & Girls Dance* newspaper was created for each of the residencies and was used to extend the conversations raised by the performance and in the local talking places. It was distributed widely within the local community, in places such as schools, libraries, pubs and doctors' surgeries by 'community catalysts', individuals from the local community who were commissioned by Fevered Sleep to act as ambassadors for the project. The material in the newspaper reflects on the issues the performance explores, drawing on a wide range of different perspectives, including people associated with Fevered Sleep, the dancers themselves, members of the public who have seen the show and those who have been involved in the talking places. It also includes contributions from people interested in the themes explored in the performance, these were garnered through an 'open call' to those who live or work in each of the areas to which the performance toured.

These reflections extend and draw attention to the debates that surround the social taboo that the very concept of men dancing with young girls elicits, while also drawing out some complex and emotional responses the project provokes in those participating or watching it. The London newspaper, for example, included an extract from a safeguarding policy from an independent school advising against any form of physical contact between teachers and children, while also including reflections from audience

members who saw the show. One reflection, for example, says 'I'm actually really saddened that we live in a society where it's very difficult for men and girls to be together in that way' (Fevered Sleep, 2017). Whereas, another states that, 'It's hard to talk to people about this performance, because a relationship of tenderness and equality between men and girls is not something that has a presence in our society. It's hard to describe something that doesn't otherwise exist' (Fevered Sleep, 2017). Through both the structure of the project and the performances themselves, Fevered Sleep establishes dialogue and relationships of trust and engagement with local communities, the performers, the company and with audiences.

Taking my seat at the Place, with my partner and our two daughters, aged nine and twelve, I soon found myself engaging with some of the discourses of risk, girlhood, adolescence and masculinity that frame *Men & Girls Dance*. On the stage, the back wall was covered in newspaper print that had been stuck on to it. Nine girls aged between eight and eleven and four male dancers were engrossed with the task of sticking more newspapers together on the floor to form a large sheet of paper. The stage itself was strewn with stacks of crumpled newspapers, conveying an amalgamation of news stories and social commentary that had been crumpled up and tossed away. Asked for their first impressions, my eldest daughter said that she felt the setting to be 'symbolic', the newspapers, she felt, represented the stereotype 'that women are supposed to be skinny', while my youngest reported that the men 'look kind' because they were 'helping the children and playing at being a dinosaur' (Field notes, 21 April 2017). These reactions are indicative of the age gap between these two girls and their positioning within the transitional phases of adolescence. Indeed, my youngest daughter who, at nine years old, is at the very threshold of adolescence, did not, I suspect, initially see 'girls' on the stage but rather 'children'. Correlatively, my oldest daughter, aged twelve, immediately not only noted the gender of the children, but also started to piece together some of the symbolic connections proposed by the scenography in relation to the media's role in determining how men and girls might interact.

The age of the groups of girl dancers recruited for each of the residencies ranges between eight and eleven years, which means that the majority of the girls performing in the production are on the threshold of their early adolescent years. This transitional period of development, which is fluid and individual and incorporates both physical and psychological changes, is not easily defined by age alone. Psychoanalyst, Margot Waddell describes adolescence as a 'process of becoming, one that begins with puberty and ends [...] sometime during the twenties' (2018: xv). In these transitional years of 'becoming', adolescents negotiate a letting-go of childhood, while simultaneously projecting themselves into a conception of an adult self. As Waddell argues, it is a difficult period of time, a 'developmentally challenging borderland time between childhood and adulthood' (2018: 31). The process of moving through this transitional period is also framed by normative structures and values that become inscribed into cultural and

social attitudes towards childhood, gender and the other elements of the adolescent's emerging identity. Cultural theorist Catherine Driscoll distinguishes adolescence from the biological process of puberty and positions girlhood – or feminine adolescence, as she describes it – as a social and historical construct, determined by the dominant discourses of the age. Describing adolescence as a gendered terrain, Driscoll points out that, historically at least, women have tended to be viewed as possessing attributes that are also associated with the adolescent, such as malleability, fluidity and spontaneity, leading her to argue that '[t]wentieth-century adolescence is thus characterized by feminized attributes [...] even when the adolescents are men' (2002: 54). Girlhood itself tends to signify a transitional process that always remains incomplete and incompleteable because 'girlhood' denotes a process of becoming, the quest for an identity that ultimately erases any sense of girlhood as soon it reaches the desired goal: womanhood. This stands in contrast to how discourses of boyhood are constructed. Describing boyhood as 'a chaotic dynamism', for example, psychoanalyst Ken Corbett (2009) suggests that the transition from boy to man tends to be socially and psychologically viewed as a process in which masculinity is categorised and developed. The term 'boyhood', he argues, 'strives to capture and categorise the gender pattern called masculinity and more precisely the development of masculinity' (2009: 3). As I will go on to discuss later in this chapter, masculinity tends to be associated not with feelings, incompleteness and fluidity but with the presence of the masculine body and purposeful action.

The precarious, transitional terrain that the girls in *Fevered Sleep* are negotiating as they approach adolescence is therefore one not simply defined by a biological process, but is discursively constructed and framed by normative structures of gender. It is perhaps therefore not surprising, that at the start of *Men & Girls Dance*, my twelve-year-old daughter immediately made connections between the newspaper print and stereotypical images of femininity and women. In doing so, she was not only addressing the way women are stereotyped in the images that proliferate in the media, but also reflecting on what these stereotypes reveal about society's expectations of how women are expected to behave in relation to men. The action of sticking the newspapers together served to draw attention to the way that both men and girls are implicated and 'enfolded' within the social discourses that structure both girlhood and masculinity and how these structures predetermine how the co-presence of men and girls is to be construed.

Fevered Sleep's approach, however, refuses to position either the girls or the men as victims of these somewhat oppressive, heteronormative structures. Instead, the performance creates motifs of interdependence and cooperation that collectively operate to resist and counter these normative discourses. In these opening moments of the performance, we observed some of this interrelational togetherness beginning to emerge as the two groups of dancers became absorbed in the action of the sticking the newspapers together on the stage. The gesture of sticking together newspaper seemed also to symbolically highlight how relationality between men and

girls often comes to be narrated by the tabloid press and the media. The performance of this task also revealed an emergent, mutually held sense of openness and trust developing between the men and girls; this relational caring binded them together in a relationship that became more and more visible throughout the piece. However, the question of who is designated as caregivers or care receivers here becomes a difficult one to answer, as the power dynamics between the two groups of dancers remain in constant flux, shifting and changing as the performance progresses. In this sense, *Men & Girls Dance* does not reproduce representations of care as such, but through the co-presence and the performed encounters between the two groups of dancers, a mode of fluid caring begins to emerge, not bound to a specific caregiver or care receiver; rather, it becomes itself through structures of interdependence, fluidity and reciprocity that are mutually developed and fostered throughout.

As we shall see, this sense of a fluid reciprocal mode of caring between the dancers owes much to the methodological structures adopted during the creative process that are reflected on and documented in the *Men & Girls Dance* newspapers and in a video on the project posted on the company on the *Men & Girls Dance* micro-website. While some of the performed encounters of caring are rooted in certain choreographical choices, the tenderness and trust evident in the relationships between the men and the girls exceeds choreography and instead points to the participatory and improvisational strategies adopted during the construction of the piece. As Orla Markey, one of the young performers explains: 'It's not choreographic routine, it's like some of it is improvisation' (Markey, quoted in Fevered Sleep, 2018). The project documentation reveals how both groups of dancers were encouraged not to simply follow particular choreographical steps but instead were invited to open themselves up to each other to explore the limitations and possibilities of dancing with one another. In this sense, as Fevered Sleep co-artistic director Sam Butler points out, 'as an audience member you are seeing a unique experience' because in each performance, the playfulness of the action is differently improvised (Butler, quoted in Fevered Sleep, 2018). In this sense, the creative process required the dancers to not only engage with their bodies but also their selfhood and feelings, and it was the dancer's perceptions, joyfulness and sense of vulnerability that became central to the development of each performance. Care emerges in *Men & Girls Dance*, then, not as a representation of a caring encounter but as a form of embodied knowledge whereby the dancers come to know each other through an emerging and embodied understanding of caregiving and care receiving.

To further explore this embodied understanding for the other, I draw on the theorisation of Maurice Hamington, a philosopher of care and contributor to this edited collection, who argues that constitutively care, by its very nature, can only be understood by 'attending to its embodied dimension' (Hamington, 2004: 4). Positioning care as '*an approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to contexts, relationships, and*

affective knowledge' (2004: 3, original emphasis), he argues that care for the other has an ontological basis, grounded in human existence: '[c]are is a way of being in the world', he writes, 'that the habits and behaviours of our body facilitate' (2004: 2). Drawing on Hamington's theorisation of care leads me to suggest that it is through the development of trust, interdependent relationships and openness in *Men & Girls Dance* that caring knowledge is able to develop between the two groups of dancers. Hamington develops the term 'caring knowledge' to describe an understanding of the self–other relationship that emerges through bodily co-presence within the caring encounter. As he argues, knowledge that is acquired through the body can often address that which cannot be iterated or verbally described and, as he also indicates, 'the body has the ability to capture the subtleties of emotion communicated outside of explicit language' (2004: 4).

In *Men & Girls Dance*, this unspoken caring knowledge is acquired and performed in various different ways throughout but becomes most visible within the moments of semi-improvised performed playfulness. In the performance I saw at the Place, one such moment of playfulness emerged in the first half of the performance in a game I will call 'newspaper monster' tag, which commences when the newspapers have been stuck together on the floor and a large-sheet collaged newsprint has been formed. At this point, two male dancers take centre stage and, with a slight gesture, invite the girls to come and join them. Gradually the girls moved to the centre and four of them began to playfully cover the heads of the two male dancers with newspaper. Once the dancers' heads were completely covered, a third male dancer appeared from beneath the newspaper at the back of the stage, where he had been concealed before the start of the show. He emerged completely covered in paper and slowly performed a dance as he moved forward down the stage. This led two of the girls to unwrap him, rip off the newspaper and reveal the man beneath. He in turn then unwrapped the heads of the other male dancers and everyone then gathered together around the giant sheet of newspaper collage created at the start of the performance that is then lifted up high into the air. Unseen by the audience, one of the male dancers had slipped beneath it, only to suddenly re-emerge as a 'newspaper monster' who rushed towards the girls, roaring at them ferociously. They responded and encouraged the chasing further, smiling, screaming and running until a wild game of tag ensues. The girls who had been caught by the monster, laughing, ripped the newspaper off him to reveal the dancer beneath. The paper that had been ripped off is then wrapped around the head of a fifth man, making a large, monstrous newspaper head. He then danced with his giant head until finally it was removed by two of the girls and thrown to the back of the stage. This 'newspaper monster' sequence was punctuated with much laughter and enjoyment from the dancers and consequently the audience. The newspaper, in this moment, became something the dancers were at different times enfolded within and that also bound and encumbered their movement. It was a playful encounter and it was clear that the girls and the 'monster' were enjoying the game they were playing with each

other. My youngest daughter was also laughing; she too enjoyed the fun she was witnessing.

What is so interesting about this newspaper monster tag game is that it both performed and, to some degree, deconstructed the gender dynamics of care. In her account of the way that care work is devalued by society, care ethicist Joan Tronto argues against the idea that caring should be positioned as being an innately feminine activity, rooted in the dyadic, mother–child caring encounter, arguing that care is ‘devalued conceptually through a connection with privacy, with emotion, and with the needy’ ([1993] 2009: 117). By making care a ‘private activity’, she suggests, it is seen as belonging only to a realm of women who ‘are expected to care for those in their household’ ([1993] 2009: 119). At the time of writing, it is twenty-five years since Tronto’s book was first published in 1993 and, arguably, there is now a wider recognition of the importance of de-gendering care, particularly in relation to childcare and care within the family. However, despite this, there is still evidence to suggest that cultural, economic and social barriers continue to make it difficult for men to participate equally in childcaring duties (see Sodha, 2018) and, as a consequence, caring for children remains socially constructed as an emotional labour that tends to be undertaken by women. This gendering of caring arguably contributes to the social acceptability of women being in close proximity with girls, but not men. While the gendering of care positions emotional labour and feeling work as intrinsically feminine, correlative discourses around masculinity, as Raewyn W. Connell argues, tend to centre around action rather than feeling and what the masculine body can and cannot do. As Connell argues:

True masculinity is always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Either the body drives and directs action (e.g. men are naturally more aggressive than women; rape results from uncontrollable lust or an innate urge to violence) or the body sets limits to action (e.g. men naturally do not take care of infants, homosexuality is unnatural and therefore confirmed to a perverse minority). (2005: 45)

Connell’s account of the structure of masculinity reveals how the regulatory discourses around gender and caring actively work against the possibility of men being seen as suitable nurturers and carers for children. By positioning care as an innately feminine attribute, as opposed to a rational action, discourses of gender and care prevent caring labour from being viewed as belonging to the realm of ‘masculinity’, thereby relegating this kind of activity to women and girls.

In the performance of the newspaper monster tag, it is these gendered discourses of masculinity and care, I suggest, that become symbolically evoked by the newsprint text that covers and conceals the male dancer. Simultaneously, however, the performance of the male dancer within this game does not seek to foreclose the dancer’s own masculinity. On the contrary, the performance remains very much in line with Connell’s account

of masculinity's focus on body and action, and it is the action of the game that emerges as a mode of care in this instance, while remaining rooted in a conceptualisation of masculinity that is physical and action orientated. Significantly, the form of care performed here is not a mode of emotional labour, rather it is a physical and visceral caring that takes account of the vulnerability of the girls in the space while also inviting them to take risks with their own co-presence with the newspaper monster and explore the limits and boundaries of this very physical game. It is a moment that is created from a certain degree of spontaneity and improvisation, and its success depends on the quality of the caring knowledge that has been acquired by both groups of dancers throughout the creative process itself.

Caring knowledge is also performed through the structure of the game itself, which is determined by reciprocity and interdependence; after all, it is the girls who invite the monster to chase them and the male dancers respond with just the right amount of ferocity and physical play. However, in other moments of *Men & Girls Dance*, care is performed with altogether different dynamics. In the following section of this chapter, I will consider how touch and attentiveness operates in *Men & Girls Dance*, which I suggest is another example of how caring knowledge emerges as a performed mode of caring for the other.

Performing tenderness: care as attentiveness

Her hand, touch, warmth, soft skin. Creases at the wrist. Old nail polish. Freckles on her arms and face [...] The heat of her back on my face as I listen to the creak of her body [...] I am drawn back to the audience. 'What are you thinking? Why am I so sad? Why won't you let this just be what it is – safe, simple, a demonstration of listening and watching with care? Is it my fault that you can't, is there something weird about how I do it? I look at each of the eyes looking at me. Some turn away, some smile, reassuring, awkward, family, friends scanning across them. I feel hot, the skin on my face feels like it's been hit and the bruise is coming through, tight skin and tender. I might cry. (Robert Clark, quoted in *Fevered Sleep*, 2017)

In his personal account of performing in *Men & Girls Dance*, dancer Robert Clark describes the feelings of vulnerability and anxiety he experienced when performing an exchange of close observation and description with one of the girl dancers. This is one of the most poignant examples of performed embodied caring that emerges in *Men & Girls Dance* and takes place through a series of close observations by the girls of the men and by the men of the girls. Emerging at various moments throughout the performance, these are tender exchanges of reciprocity and trust, where the dancers carefully attend to one another, observing and describing what they see, hear and feel. The first of these micro-observations in the version of *Men & Girls Dance* I saw at the Place commenced with two of the girls standing centre

stage with a microphone, describing one of the men dancing. Speaking into a microphone they carefully described the dancer they observed and any action or slight gesture that he made. This action of observation and description was then repeated but with one of the men observing one of the girls, closely describing what he saw and heard and using touch to describe what he could feel, placing his hand on her arm, for example. Later in the performance this motif was repeated and three girls observed and described three of the male dancers. This time they used touch to describe the feel of the other person, describing the feel of his skin, for example, and placing an ear on his back to describe the sound of his breath.

The descriptions produced through these moments of close observation were factual but also intimate, performing a mode of care that emerged as an attentiveness towards the other. This care was framed by an embodied knowledge of the other person but also by a sense of mutual openness and a recognition of a shared sense of vulnerability. The form of care performed in this context, possessed an almost meditative quality, drawing attention not only to the self–other relationship at hand, but also to a sense of shared humanness and an interrelatedness that connects us with other people. In these exchanges of observation and description, personal boundaries and consent were respected and carefully negotiated. The moments of touch, for example, focused only on arms and backs and were carefully and sensitively carried out. The language adopted to describe what was observed then became semi-ritualised, following a predetermined pattern that added to its meditative quality and always starting with ‘I see’, ‘I hear’ or ‘I feel’:

I can feel the hairs on his arms
 I can see his blue eyes blinking
 I can see his slightly red cheeks
 I can see him looking at me
 I can hear him breathing
 I can hear his pulse through his wrist. (Fevered Sleep, 2017)¹

The positionality of the observer and observed explored in these moments remains interchangeable and when the male dancer described the girl in front of him he too made use of the semi-ritualised form of address and used touch to describe what he saw and felt: ‘A strand of hair across her face [holding her hand] I feel the weight of her hand. I hear her laugh, I see a green mark on her wrist [placing his head on her back] I can hear her breath’ (Field notes, 21 April 2017).² As audience members, this process of observation and description was profoundly moving. There was a poignancy that seemed to derive from a tender and embodied attentiveness that emerged in the performance, fluidly flowing between the men and the girls. In this context, the performed care became mutual and reciprocated and in these gentle moments of exchange, the caring encounter felt to be held equally by both groups of dancers. The actions of observing and being observed, elicited a vulnerability from both the men and the girls as

through the process of describing or being described they became implicated within an intimate address that was established on a mutual process of an opening up to the other. It was also a moment that, in some way, responded and returned to the feelings of self-consciousness and anxiety experienced by Harradine at the village bonfire, as described above. This was highlighted by the male dancer who in the process of describing the girl in front of him says, 'I can see her looking at me.' Then looking at the audience, he extended this further, acknowledging that he too was being observed, saying, 'I can see you looking at me.' By reimagining and reflecting on the act of observing and describing in this way, the production repositioned these moments of observation and description as an exchange of tenderness where care entered the performance space and reconfigured the potentiality of a relational engagement between men and girls. These gentle moments of attentive caring emerged as an invitation to audiences to recognise caring afresh, shifting the characterisations of tenderness and togetherness away from the regulatory gendered discourses that usually frame it.

In this way, these performances of attentive touch and intimate encounter both reflect on and invert some of the social taboos that are inscribed both in the way we think about care and how we think about gender, feelings and acts of tenderness. Writing in 1935, in his book *The Origins of Love and Hate*, the psychiatrist Ian Suttie adopts the term 'the "taboo" on tenderness' ([1935] 2005) to describe how certain feelings acquire a taboo status because they are perceived as being highly gendered. In his essay, Suttie argues that for men, feelings of tenderness must be repressed because tenderness is constructed as something socially and psychologically unacceptable within normative masculinity, despite it being – in Suttie's terms – 'the very *stuff* of sociability' ([1935] 2005: 80, original emphasis). Drawing on Freud's account of the love of an infant towards his or her mother, which Freud characterises as an object-related desire, Suttie argues that tenderness has become understood as 'a derivative of sexuality' ([1935] 2005: 80) and feelings of tenderness, for men at least, acquire a social taboo status when not encountered in relation to sexuality. This leads Suttie to suggest that men must then seek out moments of homosociality, such as scenes of brotherhood or affectionate relationships with pet animals in order to sublimate these repressed feelings of tenderness.

Of course, our understanding of sexuality, gender and psychoanalysis has changed significantly since Suttie was writing in the early part of the twentieth century. However, I am inclined to agree with cultural theorist Gavin Miller, who argues that despite these changes, Suttie's 'argument still holds true, *mutatis mutandis*' (2007: 669). Arguably today, the capacity for men to exhibit forms of tenderness to children, but particularly to adolescent girls, is often undermined by discourses of risk and anxiety that sexualise such gestures. Through the tender and poignant performances of care and proximity in *Men & Girls Dance*, audiences are invited to uncouple tenderness from sexuality and to look beyond the gendered discourses that ultimately restrict conceptions of girlhood and masculinity and

which ultimately exclude men from the possibility of these kinds of caring encounters. As discussed above, the risk anxiety that so often becomes inscribed into men's interactions with girls tends to remain unspoken and, while this is not explicitly addressed by the performance, the taboo of men's co-presence with adolescent girls becomes present in the performance as a spoken fear, hovering at the edges of the stage, within the minds of both the audience and the male dancers, who, as we discover from the *Men & Girls Dance* newspaper, are concerned about how the audience will judge them. The evaluation report for the project also indicates that the very ideas explored within it were initially met with 'suspicion and resistance' from some of the communities in which the residencies took place (Morris *et al.*, 2017: 21). In this sense, rather than banishing the 'monsters that lurk in our suspicious minds', as the theatre critic Lyn Gardner suggests in her review of the show (2016), *Men & Girls Dance*, I suggest, stages an engagement with these suspicions and anxieties and, by generating moments of mutual and reciprocal caring, resists them.

The repeated performance of the motif of observation and description between the men and girls, therefore, not only resists the discourses of risk anxiety that get inscribed into encounters of tenderness between men and girls, but it also generates new ways of thinking about the way caring can be conceptualised and embodied. Through the mutually held moments of attentiveness between the men and girls, relationships of trust and openness are foregrounded, revealing how performance can generate a caring togetherness and a performed sociability, which implicates a group of individuals in a fluid exchange of responsiveness and mutual support.

Performing trust and togetherness: care as an embodied aesthetic

These moments of *caring togetherness* do not emerge arbitrarily, rather they are structured into the fabric of the rehearsal process and the choreographical structure of the piece itself. As the documentation of the project in the *Men & Girls Dance* newspaper reveals, in rehearsal, both groups of dancers were directed to set aside pre-learned approaches to dance and performance and were instead invited to explore the experience of 'being themselves' and their responses to dancing with one another. Fevered Sleep's co-artistic director, Sam Butler, explains that this instruction often came as 'a surprise', particularly for the girls who approached the process thinking they were 'going to be doing some very snazzy choreography and maybe some lovely leaps and lifts and turns and maybe some splits' (Butler, quoted in Fevered Sleep, 2017). On the contrary, through the processual, participatory development of the piece, a sense of respectful being-together was fostered, allowing a shared sense of care and trust to develop. As Harradine argues, these relationships needed safety and care to be nurtured and emerged out

of a rehearsal process that was ‘completely about trust and respect and care and tenderness and playfulness and love’ (Harradine, quoted in Fevered Sleep, 2017).

Harradine’s reference to the importance of ‘trust’ here draws attention to the central positioning of the embodied concepts of dependency and trust in theories of care where ‘trust’ is positioned as constitutively bound to relationality, because it requires some form of dialectical engagement with one or more selves. Care ethicist Virginia Held, for example, positions trust as ‘a value inherent in an ethic of care’, arguing that ‘good caring relations require and are characterised by it’ (2006: 56). Yet for Held, ‘trust’ does not simply describe the caring encounter itself, rather it determines an intention. She argues that, ‘To trust is not simply to predict what someone will do; it is most needed when what others will do is uncertain. It is an understanding that another person or persons will have trustworthy intentions, rather than intentions to take advantage of one. For there to be trust between persons, such understanding must be mutual’ (2006: 57).

This sense of a mutuality of trust is particularly significant in the context of performance because it suggests that the physical interactions within a performance and the rehearsal process that generated it both have an ethical dimension. Certainly, it would seem important that the development of trusting relationships during the creative process ultimately fosters productive forms of risk-taking in which performers feel supported and cared for. This interconnectedness between caring and trust informs the Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup’s account of the ethical demand, where he addresses not the intention behind trusting relationships but the obligation evoked when others *place their trust in us*. For Løgstrup, this obligation is part of an unspoken ethical demand that emerges when we encounter another person’s trust. Trust here becomes a process of self-surrender, leading Løgstrup to argue that ‘[t]hrough the trust which a person either shows or asks of another person he or she surrenders something of his or her life to that person’ (1997: 17). The encounter with a relationship of trust then becomes a mode of opening up to the other, a process that compels us to take care of the one who has trustingly placed themselves into our hands. This action of opening up to another also evokes caring, in Løgstrup’s terms it ‘implies the demand that we take care of the life which has been placed in our hands’ (1997: 53).

The ethical demand to take care of the other in *Men & Girls Dance*, is arguably encountered by both groups of dancers who must, at various points in the process, open themselves up to the other, placing their trust in another’s hands. Trust and care then becomes a fluid encounter that flows between the dancers, underpinning both the creative process and the performance itself, implicating each of the dancers in an ethical relationship of responsibility to each other. In her account of drama education, Helen Nicholson describes trust as a ‘slippery concept’ that ‘is generally understood [as involving a] correspondence between belief and expectation, commitment to a person or situation, responsibility for oneself, co-operative

behaviour and care for others' (2002: 82). Connecting trust with responsibility and a care for the other, Nicholson draws attention to the complexity of trusting relationships, arguing that these 'can be painful and difficult, as well as pleasurable, liberating and rewarding' (2002: 87). In each of these accounts, trust and care emerge as being intimately connected; certainly both concepts could be understood to be mutually sustaining and convoked by the situation in which they are demanded.

In *Men & Girls Dance*, the performances of trust and care are also closely associated with an attentiveness that is carefully constructed and that implicates both the men and the girls in a careful togetherness that is co-created and mutually held. In this sense, *Men & Girls Dance* reveals how performance can begin to disrupt some of the traditional bifurcated structures of care, where caring becomes a mode of transaction between a caregiver and care receiver. Through a performed attentiveness and mutual trust, care is no longer bound only to the loci of a caregiver; instead it emerges within a set of complex relationships that become highly fluid. Deriving etymologically from a Latin term meaning 'to give heed to', the concept of 'attentiveness' embraces both a sense of care and thoughtfulness but also the idea of attention and focus (as in 'to attend to someone or something'). To be 'attentive' to another person then signifies both a regard for the other but also a sense responsiveness and the act of paying close attention. For care ethicist Joan Tronto, attentiveness is understood as being 'the first moral aspect of caring', denoting a process of 'simply recognising the needs of those around us' ([1993] 2009: 127).³ Drawing on the philosopher Simone Weil's theorisation of attention and will, Tronto – like Weil – aligns attention with a sense of passivity, placing it firmly in opposition to will. In this sense, for Tronto and Weil, 'attentiveness' discloses an opening up to the other, an act of self-surrender – rather than something that prescribes a specific moral action as such. For Weil, attention emerges from a faithfulness or a commitment to a situation and is an almost meditative, sacred opening up and surrendering of oneself to an encounter with the other. While Tronto does not adopt Weil's sense of a religiosity of attention, she argues that Weil's vision of 'passivity' and 'the absence of will' aids our understanding of the relationship between attentiveness and care, for 'in order to recognise and be attentive to others', she argues, '[o]ne needs, in a sense, to suspend one's own goals, ambitions, plans of life, and concerns' ([1993] 2009: 128).

In *Men & Girls Dance*, we get a glimpse of this setting aside of the goal-orientated will. For here, both the men and the girls engage in a process of self-surrender and opening up to the other, where personal vulnerability and anxiety are allowed to co-exist and become implicated within in the relationships of trust that emerge between the two groups of dancers and are staged aesthetically in the choreography itself. In this way, caring is performed not simply as a process of caregiving or care receiving; rather, care is reimagined as an embodied aesthetic that is reciprocal and that generates what could best be described as a community of care, a community that places an ethical demand on the performers who form it.

Conclusion: tenderness and care as a way of knowing the other

This vision of caring emerging as something communally held, fluid and unbound by predetermined roles of caregiver and care receiver disrupts conceptions of caring relationships as being structured around a transactional exchange between the giver and receiver of care. Through the performance of a fluidity of care, any sense of a caregiver or care receiver or a 'them' or an 'us', becomes disrupted and care is performed not as a transaction but as a qualitative engagement between a group of performers. In the exchanges and mutually held moments of caring modelled in *Men & Girls Dance*, there emerges a mutual tenderness that flows between the performers, a fluid caring that, like the ethical demand, has an infinitely demanding quality. It is not an action that can be completed and concluded, rather it has an epistemological character; it is a way of knowing rather than a *type of knowledge*, determining how the dancers operate together and take responsibility for one another within the space of the performance.

As the piece develops, this sense of a mutual care becomes more robust, allowing the dancers to take greater risks with one another producing some exhilarating and beautiful moments of togetherness. This occurred most strongly for me in the final section of the performance. Here, the men and girls danced together using increasingly complex, choreographical and aesthetic structures. No longer observing and describing each other as being separate and at a distance from one another, the men took the girls in their arms and lifted them high, creating some beautiful and exciting lifts sequences. These lifts were risky but were also bold and dynamic as the smallness of the girls' bodies was juxtaposed with the strength of the men's bodies – a contrast that became woven into the choreography itself. Yet these lifts did not conceal the labour of their creation, these were not ballet-type lifts that were executed with little or no visible effort; instead the choreography allowed us to witness the complicity and trust between the girls and the men that facilitated these moments of elevation. These were actions that were constructed through a process of co-created and reciprocated engagement, for while it was the men's strength that lifted the girls, the girls sustained each lift with the careful positioning of their bodies and poise. There were also moments when the choreography was designed to show the girls supporting or taking the weight of the men. In this sense, this choreography becomes established upon relationships of interdependence and a mutually held caring that is founded and fostered through the methodological development of the piece. As audience members, we witness not only the aesthetics of these moments, but a glimpse of what becomes possible through the pursuance of a process rooted in caring exchanges and mutually held attentiveness.

Men & Girls Dance invites audiences to look beyond the specifics of each performance and think differently about the moments of togetherness between men and girls more broadly. The mutuality and affective quality of

these caring exchanges unsettles some of the preconceived considerations around strength and weakness, vulnerability and power that tend to become so inextricably gendered and inscribed with the discourses of risk and anxiety that circulate around moments of proximity between men and girls. In this sense, by taking such risks with the very conceit and development of the *Men & Girls Dance* project, Fevered Sleep invites audiences to look beyond social taboos and to imagine a context in which the performance of care in some way replaces, or at the very least challenges, the discourse of anxiety and risk that can frame and predetermine relationships between men and girls.

The existentially demanding process of moving *beyond* risk anxiety is summed up well by Nathan Goodman, one of the performers in the piece, who in the Fevered Sleep video describes the challenges of being involved in a creative process that required him not only to be present as a dancer but as a 'human'. He says, 'There was no hiding [...]; if you're quiet, they know you're quiet. It wasn't just about being a dancer, it was also about being human and opening up to them, for them to open up to you, so then that whole connection could work' (Goodman, quoted in Fevered Sleep, 2017). By embedding care, relationality and reciprocity within the choreographic structure of *Men & Girls Dance*, the production demanded a different form of engagement from the dancers who participated in it. Rather than simply following choreographical sequences, the design of the creative process invited the dancers to explore the dynamics and nuances of caring for one another, collectively recognising moments of individual and shared vulnerability, trust and risk. Arguably, to make this mode of mutual opening possible, both groups of dancers had to commit themselves to an attentiveness to one another. Drawing on Joan Tronto's theorisation of attentiveness, as discussed above, I suggest the dancers had to 'suspend' their individual 'goals and ambitions' and to commit to a form of collective togetherness where they would be able to 'recognise and be attentive to others' (Tronto, [1993] 2009: 128). By responding to the risk anxiety that circulates around interactions and moments of co-proximity between men and girls not with fear and avoidance but with care, tenderness and openness, *Men & Girls Dance* also begins to critique some of the gendered and oppressive discourses of masculinity and adolescence that so efficiently serve and prop up the taboos that establish and ossify bifurcations such as masculinity and femininity, men and girls, them and us. Placing caring encounters centrally within the choreography of the performance structurally positions both the male and girl dancers and their lived experience of girlhood and masculinity as being in some way enfolded within the same world. The lived experiences of both groups of dancers, to borrow from Rebecca Coleman, become '*folded though [their] bodies in particular ways*' (2009: 214, original emphasis) and are implicitly explored and examined by the relationships and structures of dependency and trust that develop from and are sustained by the performance process itself.

In this sense, I suggest, *Men & Girls Dance* invites us to consider how performances of care can initiate new ways of thinking about interrelationality and can be harnessed to illuminate and navigate the perilous range of anxieties that close down and prejudge how certain relationships are to be construed or imagined. In this context, performance and care can be understood as operating together as mutually transforming elements. Care places certain demands upon performance, opening up new ways of understanding the relationships of dependency and mutual support that make performing possible. Correlatively, performance provokes us to think afresh about the structure of the caring encounter itself and to recognise the power dynamics and structural inequalities that frame certain kinds of caring encounters with other people. Performing care can trouble the taboos and preconceptions that frame how we think about the gendering of caring, by challenging us to think differently about the embodied concepts of strength, power and vulnerability. Rather than concealing the risk of vulnerability, the mutually held caring in *Men & Girls Dance* reveals how it is possible to generate a performance approach that recognises and celebrates the risks of opening up to another, inviting us to look beyond the taboo of tenderness and to rethink what might be gained by acknowledging, exploring and understanding how the many interrelated connections between men and girls operate and how best to understand this experience of being folded within the world together.

Notes

- 1 This is an example of some of the descriptions of the men observed by the girls in the London performances and transcribed in the *Men & Girls* newspaper (Fevered Sleep, 2017).
- 2 Transcribed by the author from the performance at the Place Theatre, London, 2017.
- 3 Joan Tronto argues that there are 'four ethical elements of care', she names these as: 'attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness' ([1993] 2009: 127).