

SEAMIS

"A dream of generations in the dust."



SEAMS

SEAMS was a one-off performance, developed and performed in Keele Chapel in Newcastle-Under-Lyme, Staffordshire, as part of The Social History Society's Annual Conference held at Keele University in June 2018.

It was made collaboratively by participatory performance company Restoke and The Dawdlers- a geopoetics research group at Keele University- and was performed by a cast of professional & non-professional performers.

In 2016, The Dawdlers wrote and exhibited poetry in response the former colliery site at Silverdale, to explore the legacies of North Staffordshire's coal mining industry and to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster in South Wales. Readings of these poems, plus a recording of a former Silverdale miner and some additional writing, became the foundation of the performance, around which music and movement were developed by Restoke to create SEAMS.

In under a week of rehearsals, Restoke, The Dawdlers and the cast created and performed SEAMS to an audience of 150 people, made up of conference delegates and the general public.

The project was funded by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Keele University, Keele Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Keele Institute for Social Inclusion and the Impact Case Study Development Fund, Keele University.



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Exterior and interior of
Keele Chapel on the Keele
University Campus. During
a Seams rehearsal.

The Collaboration

From the outset, Restoke and The Dawdlers discovered that there were significant similarities between their creative research practices- both exploring forms of site-specific responses to place. According to them, this made co-creating the performance in such a short time-frame possible. Clare Reynolds, director of Restoke, remarked that the Dawdlers never had any challenges understanding how Restoke worked. This made for easy relationships and a freeing level of trust and autonomy in the creative process. For Restoke, the limited time-frame in and of itself was also freeing.

“A LOT OF OUR TIME IS [USUALLY] TAKEN UP IN PLANNING AND DELIBERATING. IT WAS GOOD TO HAVE 3 OR 4 DAYS AND COMMIT TO AN ARTISTIC IDEA.” -CLARE, RESTOKE.

The founding member and leader of The Dawdlers, Dr Ceri Morgan, said that for her “it was easier to commit to additional work over a short period than commit for a longer period. There was something about that intensity that made it work”.

Nevertheless, Restoke acknowledges that, given more time, they would have worked in a more in-depth way with The Dawdlers to further integrate their words into the performance. Time would also have allowed them to introduce more technical elements, such as controlled lighting, to create a broader atmospheric range in the chapel to add further depth to the performance. From the point of view of The Dawdlers, who have never worked in this way before, only further collaborative work with Restoke could reveal how the co-creative approach could be improved upon.

It is undeniable that both Restoke and The Dawdlers learned from each other during the co-creative process. For Restoke director Clare, the experience allowed her to personally reflect on her own links to the mining industry.

“It opened up another world of our local history that I know about but never really explored, it got me researching more about the mining industry.” - Clare Restoke.

The work that The Dawdlers contributed to the performance highlighted the nuances of first-hand experiences of mining communities and landscapes, exploring the push and pull between romanticised visions of the industry and the reality. For Restoke, these tensions became the backbone of the performance and set a tone which greatly contributed to the success of the performance as a whole. (see audience feedback for further discussion on this point).

As well as delivering their readings, some of The Dawdlers took part in the broader development of the piece led by Restoke alongside the cast, engaging in whole-body explorations of the space, choreographed movement and group vocalisation. Ceri and Sylvia went on to perform as cast members in the piece in addition to delivering their readings. They and other Dawdlers have since felt inspired to use these physical and sensory techniques as tools in their own practices- to enable themselves and research participants to engage more deeply with place and as a means to reflect on their work and processes.

“For me, the flocking was a key movement, learning to see with your peripheral vision, sense people’s movements and not intellectualise everything before. Our training means that we process everything through our brains before we move most of the time. Learning how to move with your body and trust your body was really amazing.” -Ceri, The Dawdlers.

“CLARE SAID ‘THINK ABOUT WHAT’S CHANGED IN YOUR BODY’. THAT’S A QUESTION I DONT ASK MYSELF- WHAT’S CHANGED IN MY MIND AS A CONSEQUENCE OF DOING SOME WRITING? THAT’S SOMETHING I’VE STARTED TO DO NOW AS A RESULT OF THAT.” -SYLVIA, THE DAWDLERS

Other impacts of participation felt by The Dawdlers include greater literacy and understanding of performative storytelling, discovering new methods of exercising the body (for personal health) and the vocal chords (for public speaking), gaining more confidence and enjoyment from dance and expanded possibilities for the form their own writing could take.

“It has taught me that I can be more flexible with form... Seeing that there may be potential for my writing to be adapted through dance, film and visual arts.” - Stephen, The Dawdlers.



^ Performers rehearsing 'flocking'.



^ Stephen delivering his reading during the performance.



^ Stephen taking part in sensory exploration of the chapel during rehearsals.



The Performers

Both Restoke and the Dawdlers are passionate about participation, so it was no question that SEAMS would include non-professional performers. The nineteen-strong cast, aged between 14 and 78 was made up of three professional and sixteen non-professionals performers. Fourteen of the performers had responded to an open call through Restoke's social media channels and mailing lists. Despite the short timeframe, Restoke was overwhelmed by responses from people keen to get involved in sharing stories of the local area's mining heritage.

"WHEN WE DID THE FIRST CALL OUT FOR PARTICIPATION LOTS OF PEOPLE COMMENTED AND CAME FORWARD TO TALK ABOUT THEIR OWN PERSONAL LINKS WITH THE MINING INDUSTRY." -CLARE, RESTOKE.

With only four days to rehearse, Restoke had to be more prescriptive about the choreography and form of the performance than usual. Traditionally, Restoke develop shows with participants over a period of many months. Despite this, the performers quickly found an emotional connection to the subject, which provided the motivation they needed to stay involved. During these four days, Restoke worked with the performers, many of whom had little or no prior experience of performing, in a way that built confidence in a relaxed, inspiring and pleasurable environment.

***"I had signed up to an activity completely out of my comfort zone... and was completely amazed to find everybody so helpful, unthreatening and so professional in their delivery of help and advice. I loved every minute of it."* - Eileen, Cast member.**

To focus on the positive from a disastrous historical event. I live in the area but didn't know about this before.

Injured in
med at Silverdale

I would not call myself a dancer, but this has awoken something, about movement, my body, of wanting to laugh and burst into tears at it's motion.

Inspired
Educated
Connected.

- Relaxed,
- Connected to people
- Opened to other people & the space.

From a coal mining town, so interested in theme and to have a chance to dance and perform.

Many of the performers said that they gained a better understanding and connection to the mining industry through the development process, as well as a deeper insight into live performance work. Every cast member surveyed said they would be more likely to take part in a live performance in the future based on their experience of taking part in SEAMS.

For some of the performers, the legacy of participating in SEAMS is already evident. Since the end of the performance, one of the cast members, Eileen, has joined two drama groups, and as a result, so have four of her friends.

“Since we are retired I have to say it has had a positive effect on my health both physically and optimistically. It has influenced all parts of my life.” - Eileen, Cast member.

This feeling of general wellbeing was echoed by other cast members, some of whom got involved with SEAMS based on past positive experiences of working with Restoke.

“The subject was sensitively handled, and it was a life-affirming experience. I believe Restoke tackle social issues in a sensitive and humane way. I was uplifted from this experience.” - Inderjit, Cast member.

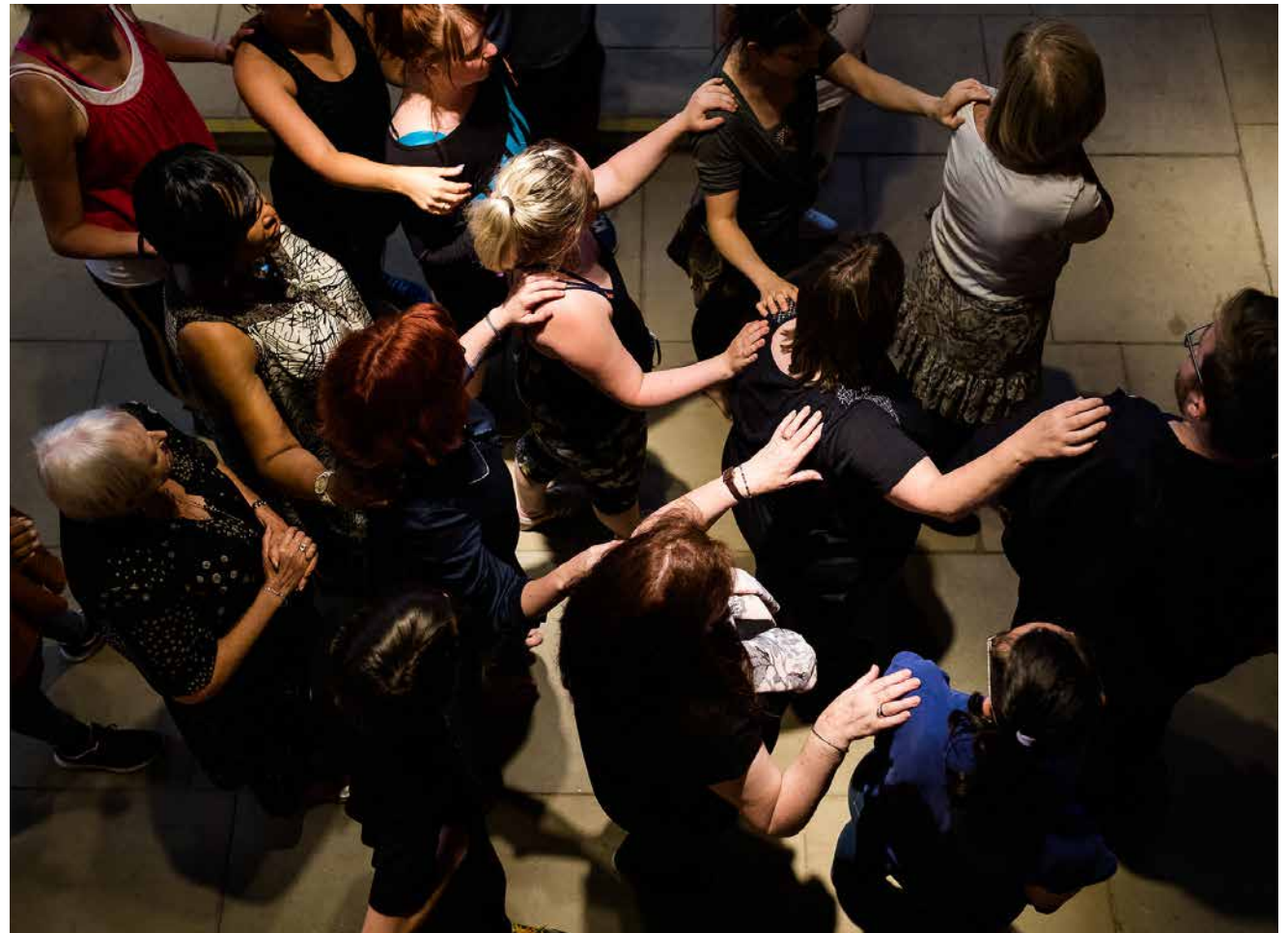
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Feedback from the non-professional performers during rehearsals about what inspired them to take part and how it made them feel.

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Non-professional performers rehearsing at Keele Chapel.

The professional dancers who took part in the performance were also uplifted by the experience, and relished the opportunity to work in a participatory setting. Frankie, who is relatively new to participatory methods, learned new warm up techniques and improvisation skills, while Anna, who has more experience working with Restoke, was delighted to refresh her skills in the field of participatory performance.

“It has simply reminded me about the wonderful joy of work with participation at its heart and reminded me why I love my job and I’m humbled and thrilled to work with wonderful people... It affirmed the type of work I want to be involved with and the ethos with which I want to work.”- Anna, Professional Dancer.

For Anna, the short time-frame made the material feel very fresh and exciting. However, she would have liked the opportunity to “embody it more with more rehearsal”.



The Audience

Most of the audience feedback was gathered immediately after the show and provides rich information about the quality and initial impact of the performance. Out of the large quantity of detailed feedback, three main themes emerge: Remembrance, Change in Perception and Artistic Quality.

Remembrance

A great deal of the feedback began with descriptions of how moving and powerful the performance had been, particularly in relation to the importance of both documenting and commemorating stories relating to mining. Many of the audience members talked about 'remembering' as an act of solidarity. For those in the audience who were old enough to remember the industry and the Aberfan disaster, the performance prompted them to reflect on their own memories. Others commented that the performance shone a light on an often-overlooked part of the country and social history.



**“Important
memory work.”**

**“still today very little justice
is given to former mining
communities and it is
important to remember their
struggle and resilience.”**

Change in Perception

There were a number of audience members who commented about their own connection to mining communities. Some simply sharing their stories and others mentioning how evocative the performance had been, not just of the local mining heritage, but of other mining communities in the UK and in Europe. This suggests that the performance transcended local interest alone and successfully evoked the lived experience of mining communities further afield.

“As someone coming from the ‘Ruhrgebiet’ mining area of Germany, it was especially interesting to compare traditions and family memories. Very easy to relate to.”

There was a significant number of audience members who learned something new from the performance, particularly the younger audience members who had little personal experience of the industry first hand, or those who are not from mining areas. Many of these audience members reflected on their general lack of knowledge and understanding of the deep impact that the mining industry has had on communities and individuals. Many felt inspired to research the history further and reflect on the impacts that are still being felt today.



“The performance has made me want to go away and read more about the disaster and miners’ strike more widely.”

“AS AN INCOMER TO STOKE, ITS EASY TO NOT REALISE HOW IMPORTANT MINING HAS BEEN HERE. IT MADE ME THINK ABOUT THIS.”

“Seams moved me and caused me to reflect in a way I never have before about mining, work, loss, community and love.”

“A VERY MOVING PERFORMANCE FOR AN EXTREMELY DIFFICULT SUBJECT, THE HISTORY OF WHICH, AS A FOREIGNER, I IGNORED.”

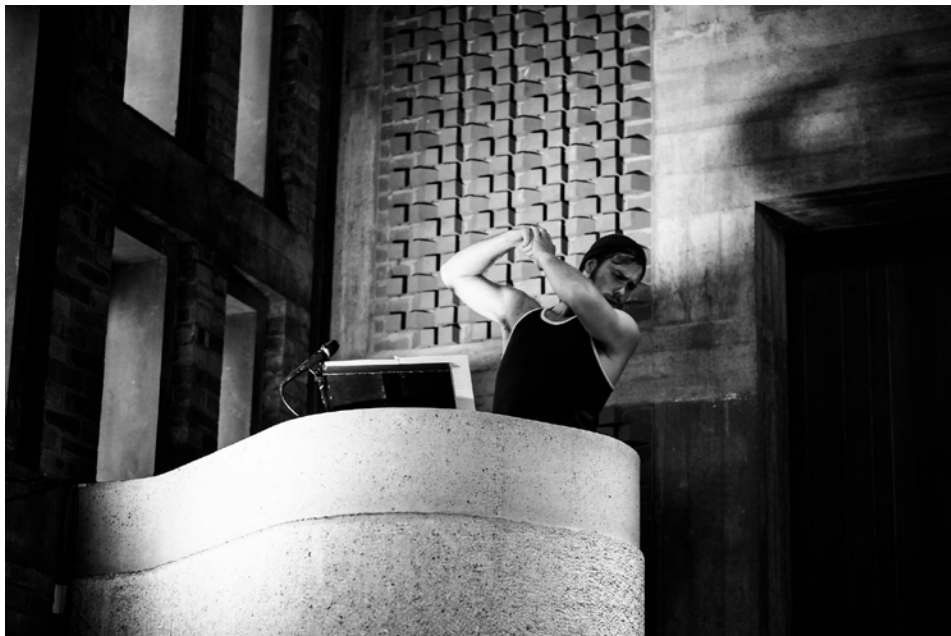
“As someone who’s not from the mining community I, rather naively, did not know just how many people/communities are still affected by mining disasters.”



Some of the audience members who knew the area well were inspired to think differently about familiar locations and stories.

**“Saw Silverdale Country Park
differently”**

**“IT HELPED ME TO VIEW OUR MINING HISTORY
MORE POSITIVELY”**



Many audience members said that they had learned more about the subject from the stories contained within the performance. However, there was a surprising theme that emerged from the academic delegation—about how the sensory and aesthetic interpretation of the subject had helped them to gain a deeper connection to their knowledge.

**“I thought I knew this story very well,
Today I realised I hadn’t felt it before now.”**

“I kept thinking how creative it would be for students of history (my discipline) to engage with historical performances like this. I hope it can become a firmer part of how history is done and discussed in the academy.”

“As a historian of coal mining communities, I never expected to see my research in the form of interpretive dance, but I like it. Had not really thought so much about the sensory aspect of mining before.”

**“Keele should do more,
much more of this.”**

Artistic Quality

The success of the sensory conveyance of the subject owes much to the artistic quality of the performance, which was widely acknowledged by the audience in their emotional responses to the performance. There were many comments about the quality of specific elements of the piece- including dance, music, readings and use of space. One standout theme in the comments regarding quality was the appreciation of the tone of the performance. Audience members applauded the subtlety, complexity and balanced handling of the subject matter, which is a direct result of The Dawdlers written contribution to the narratives explored in the piece.

“Even in such a short piece you conveyed the complexity of the relationship with mining, the mines and the community.”

“GOOD TO BE REMINDED OF THE TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT ABERFAN AND THE PARTS OF AN INDUSTRY THAT PERHAPS IS PRONE TO ROMANTICISATION.”

“Very thought provoking, illustrating the way heavy industry became not only a part of but the centre of many communities, saying both positives and negatives. Illustrated the role of the whole society and put a thoroughly modern take on it. Very impressed.”

“To have produced this performance in the short time of 4 days is commendable. Even in the short time, there was good depth to the story.”

Incredibly moving. It had a huge impact on me - so sincere, meaningful, brave. Very well timed & structured, music, dance words. Was in tears.



Many of the audience members were surprised to learn how quickly the performance had been produced, suggesting that the quality of the piece was higher than expected for such a brief project. No one commented that the piece seemed unresolved or needed further development, though some audience members commented that they wished it had been longer. This echoes what many of the audience members said about wanting to see more- more performances of SEAMS and more work on the subject by Restoke and The Dawdlers.

4 DAYS - REALLY!?

**“WOULD LIKE IT TO BE LONGER, MOSTLY BECAUSE
I LIKED IT AND WANTED MORE.”**

“I wish it ran more than today, I’d direct people to attend.”

**“I really hope that SEAMS can continue
doing this work. What a perfect way to
end a day at a conference!”**



Participation

SEAMS included a solo performance by professional dance artist Frankie Hickman which was choreographed around a voice recording of former miner Roy Allbutt, talking about his experiences of working at the coal face in Silverdale Colliery. This recording was made by Ceri and The Dawdlers during their original geopoetics research in 2016. Restoke sought and were granted permission by Roy to include this recording in SEAMS and he and his wife Linda saw it for the first time as audience members at the performance.

“We were both really ‘blown away’ by the performance and truly moved. Roy was almost dumbstruck when he heard his voice coming through.” - Linda Allbutt

Roy was touched and a little embarrassed by his voice, saying “If I had known [at the time] that it was going to be used publicly I would have tried to sound a little more eloquent”. This suggests that because of the nature of the project -having been researched in one context and applied in another- there was a little trepidation about how it would come across to audiences. In future collaborative projects between Restoke and The Dawdlers, participation of this nature would be sought within the context of an eventual public performance.

It was slightly embarrassing for him to see himself being represented by the performer but he was quietly proud.”
-Linda Allbutt

For Linda, the performance was a reminder of their past, and prompted her to reflect on her experiences as a miner’s wife.

“I WAS CLOSE TO TEARS TO RECALL WHAT WE HAD ALL GONE THROUGH OVER THE YEARS BUT ALSO VERY PROUD TO BE MARRIED TO SUCH A STRONG AND LOYAL MAN.” -LINDA ALLBUTT

When reflecting on the project as a whole, The Dawdlers said that they would like to have included more direct participation with miners and their families. This is something that could be explored further alongside Restoke in the future.



The Future

Having proven the potential for a successful and mutually beneficial ongoing relationship with Keele University, both Restoke and The Dawdlers regard SEAMS as a starting point for a longer-term collaboration. This partnership might further explore the synthesis of geopoetics and participatory performance, its efficacy as a research methodology, a means of dissemination, a pedagogical practice and as a new means of creating site-specific participatory art.

“it gives you an understanding that you don’t have to be in your head, you can use your body as a tool for research, something that collects data but also produces it at the same time. I didn’t think that way very often before, but I do more so now.”

- Stephen, The Dawdlers.



Credits

Restoke:

Clare Reynolds- Co-artistic Director- Choreography
Paul Rogerson- Co-artistic Director- Production and Vocals

Associate Artists:

Frankie Hickman- Professional Performer
Anna Belyavin- Professional Performer
Kit Henson- Vocal Coach
Grace Pennington- Vocal Coach
Gabriella Gay- Costume
Jenny Harper- Photographer
Nicola Winstanley- Artist Evaluator

The Dawdlers:

Ceri Morgan
Sylvia Crawley
Stephen Seabridge
Daniel Skentelbery

Filmmaker:

Joseph Binks

The Performers:

Yolanda Gómez Gálvez
Lynne Bailey
Rachel Bate
Beatriz Brett
Gwen Chavalier-Brookes
Amy Cowap
Leon Cowap

Wendy Goodwin
Becky Page
Eileen Pearson
Lucy Prall
Keith Roberts
Indie Sandhu
Therese Dimelow

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RESTOKE
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Evaluation Document by Nicola Winstanley
Photography by Jenny Harper