



## The Cove / Vertical.Nature.Base.

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Echo Echo Dance Theatre Compnay's 'The Cove'.

by **Michael Seaver** Reviewed 17 October

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Dance has always had a love-hate relationship with gravity. Ethnochoreologists will point to ritual dances that sought, not only to connect individuals with each other, but to connect with Mother Earth. Unison movement submitted to the pull of the earth with figures squatting or bent over, a deportment that changed through the centuries, particularly after the Enlightenment as courtly dances became codified and developed into ballet. By the nineteenth century ballerinas were portrayed as a weightless sylphs, immune to earthiness – metaphoric and real - and whenever “primitivism” was choreographed, like in Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*, there was a return to hunched-over unison. More recently, contemporary dance practice embraces a spectrum that chooses to either overcome or submit to the power of gravity.

Two recent Irish dance productions have been inspired by gravity, from distinctly different positions. Earlier this year, junk ensemble's **[The Falling Song \(http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/The-Falling-Song\)](http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/The-Falling-Song)** focused on the act and metaphysics of falling, either consciously or subconsciously. In particular, it revealed the moment between falling and not falling, the seductive point of instability at which there is a funnelled focus on one's existential state and fate. It's a moment found in the first moments of Echo Echo's new production *The Cove*: a solitary dancer stands on the edge of a ledge, inching forward as she looks down, eventually finding an unstable balance between standing and falling, infatuated with the danger.

*The Cove* is based on extensive engagement with a hidden cove, Port-a-Doris, on the Inishowen Peninsula. In 2011, choreographer Steve Batts and visual artists Dan Shipsides set up a base camp and for two weeks sought to embody the landscape through climbing, video and sound recordings, and dance. In addition, Shipsides constructed a 5m<sup>2</sup> stainless steel platform that reflected light and images and this developed into an installation called Vertical.Nature.Base. That has further developed into a *The Cove*, a flexible dance-theatre production that has been performed in a variety of configurations during its recent tour: the audience can be seated or free to walk around the perimeter of the proceedings.

Dance material developed throughout the process has been reconstructed, just like Shipsides' platform, which has been sliced into a maze of asymmetrical cubes, ramps, walls and crevices. Throughout the evening these coalesce into a fissured, Burren-like plateau and eventually the jigsaw is pushed together into a smooth slanted stage. In whatever configuration it plays a principal role in the dance, shaping how the performers move and relate to one another. In return they regard their surroundings with respect and wonderment, and seem to be inspired to a happily meditative state as they overcome its obstacles.



Movement material also depicts the dichotomy between rootedness to the earth and the desire to fly free. At various times the dancers stand, dropping all of their body weight towards the ground while their arms float skywards, simultaneously weaving, gathering and tracing lines in the air like graceful sea anemones.

The almost constant sound of waves place audience and performer directly into the cove, but there is no attempt to reproduce the landscape. Rather the cove is embodied in how the dancers relate to their surrounding and ultimately how they relate to each other. A sense of community is created, not just through a lot of unison movement, co-operation and constant eye contact between the performers, but even an apple is shared, gradually passed between all six dancers.

Christopher Norby's music constantly rubs against the movement, sometimes pushing the action forward, at other times acting as an undertow, through a wide palette of sounds that includes funk bass lines, jaunty waltz-like violin tunes and deep-throated ominous drones.

Although not ostensibly about the risk of falling, danger is ever-present. Towards the end six barefooted dancers walk around the perimeter of a platform with their eyes closed, guided only by their feet feeling the edge of the precipice. It's a simple image, and in another context could be regarded as a workshop exercise, but like much of the production there is a poetry to be found in the most mundane actions.

Ultimately *The Cove* reflects on how our surroundings shape our lives, both literally and metaphorically. Although told with fable-like simplicity, the dance is a multi-layered meditation on overcoming the constant force of gravity and the fear of falling in order to achieve the joyous freedom of the peak.

*Michael Seaver is dance critic with The Irish Times*

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## **The Cove by Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company**

**3 -17 October 2012**

Produced by **Echo Echo DDDance Theatre Compnay**  
In The Millennium Forum (also tour)

Director: Steve Batts  
Set Design: Dan Shipsides  
Composer: Christopher Norby  
Lighting Design: Robert Dahlke  
Costume Design: Helen Quigley

Dancers: Esther Alleyne, Janie Doherty, Ayesha Mailey, Kelly Quigley, Zoe Ramsey, Tonya Sheina.

- **Irish Theatre Magazine**
- 12 Fade Street
- Dublin 2
  
- Tel +353 (0)87 414 8511
- Email **[admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie](mailto:admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie)**

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