



touch tales

theatre piece for two performers and cello

devised by

Katharina Arnold
and James Whittle

2015

touch tales (2014–15)

All movement, music and words devised by Katharina Arnold and James Whittle, except for MC Hammer's *U Can't Touch This* (bass-line transcribed by Whittle).

Premiere Katharina Arnold and James Whittle, Northern Art #3, Theatre Delicatessen, Sheffield, 3rd April 2015.

Duration c. 30 minutes

Lighting Soft and warm, generally simple and naturalistic to avoid a sense of staging. Occasionally harsher.

Costume Everyday informal clothes: comfortable shirt, jumper, jeans, coats.

A film version made in April 2015 is available on YouTube:

- Part 1 (scenes 1–5): <https://youtu.be/NMcDkk99hDk>
- Part 2 (scenes 6–9): <https://youtu.be/GRT-m7-VwIQ>

Programme Note

touch tales blurs the typical roles of dancer and musician in order to examine different forms of touch.

“If the cello had hands it would play itself. Since it has none, it lies there alone having only one wish: to be played, to sound, to sing, to do what it is supposed to.”

What makes touch loving, embracing, manipulative, neglecting, abusive? Does the cello want to be played? Is it used without its permission – does it provoke with its curves? In this piece, a series of interweaving stories about touch reflect on the consequences of actions.

“I know how to touch you, I know what you’ll sound like.

Tell me what you want. I’m listening.”

Script Shorthand

DSL/R downstage left/right

USL/R upstage left/right

OSL/R offstage left/right

SC stage centre

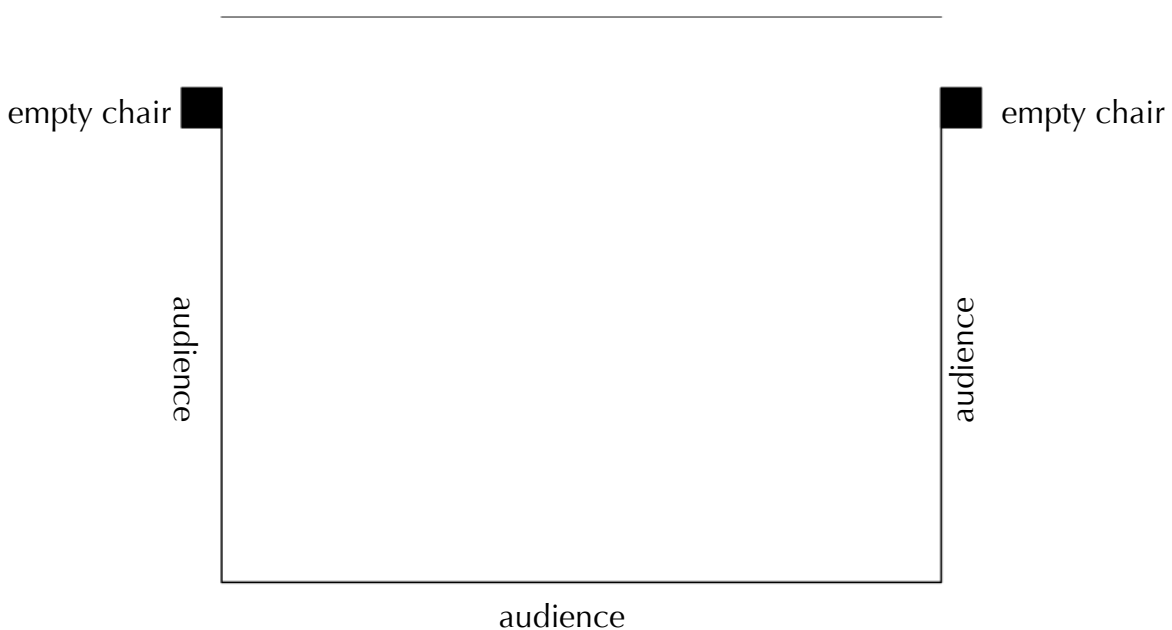
RH(S) left hand (side)

LH(S) right hand (side)

Props

- Cello and cello bow
- Cello case
- Cello cleaning cloth
- The tip of the cello's spike should be exposed (i.e. not covered by an endpin ferrule) so that when the cello is dragged across the floor it makes noise. If slipping on the floor surface when playing is an issue, use a cello 'black hole'.
- Two chairs at the nearest ends of the audience seating opposite each other.

Thrust staging layout



1. Family Portrait

As the audience enters, K and J are stood still USL in Family pose (J on left, K on right, with cello in case in the middle and front). K and J are not touching. Each has a hand on a cello case shoulder. K also holds the cello straps, ready for the Cowboy position. Once the audience is settled, they perform a sequence travelling DSR.

1. *Family Portrait. Normal selves to huge proud smiles.*
2. *Cowboy. Drop down to ride the case. Lasso hands & 'yeehaw!' faces.*
3. *Penis. K stands butch, J leans forward sexily in front of the case, hands on hips, looking up.*
4. *Newsreaders. Case becomes the news desk. Facing audience, warm tone:*

J: What makes touch loving, embracing, manipulative, neglecting, abusive?

K: How do we decide what a certain touch means?

J: Does it matter who is touching you?

K: Does it feel different being touched by a man or a woman?

J: Does it feel different touching a man or a woman?

They continue the movement sequence:

5. *Coffin. Lift case onto shoulders. Tragic: straight stare. 2/3 slow steps forward.*
6. *Machine gun. J drops, K pivots the case round his shoulder: 'trtrtrtrtrtr!!'*
7. *Baby cradle. K and J hold case as a baby together. 4 'Awwwww!' sounds.*
8. *Ram. 5 lunges forward with case, shouting 'Ha!'*
9. *Jetpack. J runs around making a high falsetto glissando down: wheeeeeeeeeee! K also runs around playfully. Both finish USR.*
10. *Family Portrait. K and J switched sides to before.*

2. Unpacking the cello

K: *(after a pause)* So, are you going to get it out?

J: Sure. When I want to.

K: Do you think it wants to get out? Does the cello want to be played?

J: Of course it does.

K: How can you be sure you're not using it without its permission?

J: *(starting to open the case and take the cello out)* Look: if the cello had hands it could play itself. But it doesn't, so presumably it sits in its case wishing to be played, to sound – to do what he is supposed to.

K: He? I thought he was a she?

J: Does it have to be one or the other?

K: Well doesn't he have a name then? Would you touch it differently if it were a she? (*takes off her coat and discards it OSR*)

J: No. And... no, it's neither he nor she. It's just an instrument. (*J puts cello and bow USL, takes off and discards coat, collects the empty chair and places it behind the cello, sits down and adjusts the cello spike*)

K: (*while chucking the cello cleaning cloth to J – who cleans the instrument – and putting the case out of the way far USR*) If you could choose the cello to be a he or a she, which would you choose? Would it make a difference if I touched it then?

J: I...

K: But you would treat it differently, right? Play it differently?

J: ...maybe... (*leaving the cloth on the back of the chair and tightening the bow*)

K: So why do you play it the way you do then? Surely it dictates the way you are playing it. Is it really submissive? I mean (*looking to the audience*) have you ever asked yourself what the chair beneath you is doing? Are you aware of how you are sitting on it right now? Which parts of your body are touching it? You know, I think we should give the chairs a rest for a while. (*to J*) Could you play some music for us?

3. Icebreaker

J starts plucking the bass-line to U Can't Touch This by MC Hammer, bopping along.



K invites the audience to stand up and join in with the icebreaker:

1. Warm-up: sidesteps
2. Stop hands (*out in front*)
3. 'No!' (*wagging finger*)
4. Head to the side (*hand to cheek, pushing head*)
5. Stop jump (*can also do double-speed*)
6. Freestyle! – *J moves to arco*

Eventually, J has had enough and changes the music into what the cello wants to play: romantic, expressive, rising in pitch. K stops dancing and turns to look J.

K: James, why did you change?

J: (*continuing playing, regardless*) The cello can play so much more!

4. Cello dragging

Mid-music, K steals the cello from J, drags the spike on the floor, and puts it down. J picks up cello and puts it back near the chair. K drags it; J collects it. K drags it; J drags it. As K approaches a fourth time, J obstructs K.

J: Leave it alone! Do you think that's the right way to treat a cello?

K: Well it didn't complain did it? How am I supposed to touch it then?!

J: You really want to know? Fine. Stand in the middle of the room. Join your hands behind your back. Don't move for about five minutes. Don't speak either.

J moves K into SC facing the audience.

5. Anatomy lesson

J describes the cello/woman, moving round the space, always pointing with the cello bow at K (stood still throughout).

J: OK so you can see that we have quite a delicate object here.

At the top there is a thick block of wood, which we call the scroll. Protruding rather awkwardly on each side of it is a set of pegs. These can be twisted in either direction, to increase or decrease tension across the whole body.

The scroll sits on a neck. The neck is long and slender, delicate, smooth, thin, fragile. The neck joins to the main body, which comprises these rather shapely curves: observe please the round shoulders, the wide hips.

Sound resonates within this midriff, emanating from the F-holes on either side.

These strings, drawn right down the body, are held in constant tension.

Now we come to the bridge. This is the weakest, most vulnerable spot of the whole body, and the point of most tension. I would not recommend touching it unless you know exactly what you are doing.

The strings are anchored below the bridge by the tailpiece, which connects around the underside of the body.

The whole instrument pivots on a single spike, which should remain

permanently on the ground. *(pause)*

However, the cello can't make a sound without the bow. That's the real instrument. *(K begins a dance solo based on the movements described here)*

The hand drops, the shoulder releases.

The arm swings in and out, in long U shapes.

The right hand is in charge. The right hand controls the bow, its weight, its speed, its position – all through a single connection.

The bow is the real instrument.

6. Cello dancing

K attacks J, who ducks and moves away to watch K dance from afar USL.

J approaches K, draws the bow down to make a swoosh sound: K comes to a sudden stop. J begins manipulating K's movement with the bow, dominating.

K grabs the bow and pushes J away, then continues dancing with the bow. J goes to sit with the cello and performs a hand dance above up and down the fingerboard. At the end of the dance, K gives the bow to J.

J: Mind how you touch the neck. It is long and slender, delicate, smooth, thin, fragile.

K steps back, placing her hands on her neck.

J: *(lovingly)* I know how to touch you. *(puts cello down, now in a lighter tone)* I know what sound you'll make when I touch you.

J approaches the audience, offers a hand assertively to one person, and waits. If they person offer their hand, J takes his hand away. If they don't, J leaves his hand out.

J: *(sharp break, turning to K)* I can control you. I can't be wrong if you're leading me. *(walking towards K)* I know how to get the best out of you.

J takes K's hands off her neck, places his hands on K's neck. Thumbs up, intimate.

J: It's not my fault — it's never my fault. *(thumbs down to controlling/dangerous)*

After a pause, suddenly J pushes K onto an empty chair at the end of audience seating USR. J marches over to get the cleaning cloth, marches back wiping his hands while looking at K, throws the cloth at K, then goes straight back to chair and sits looking OSL. K is motionless. K looks at the cloth then holds it.

SUDDEN BREAK: into entertainer mode. K and J move to SC.

7. Touch Awareness Workshop

K: Welcome to our workshop, The Power of Touch! My assistant and I are so happy that so many of you have come today.

K folds the cloth and gives it to J, who takes it and gets K's SR chair to place behind K, puts the cloth on the chair's RHS, then places a second chair on the LHS.

K: Okay so let's just rub our palms against each other. Shake our hands, shake our arms. Stretch our fingers and open and close your hands. Now increase the speed and stop.

Both sit down, smiling wide. J fixes his eyes on one point. K performs these movements on J, whose left hand performs them in the air.

K: Move the left hand back and start waving with your right arm, right to left, stop on the outside and slowly lower your hand until it can rest with its full weight. Let the weight of your arm fully drop and spread over the whole surface of your palm. Now feel the surface underneath your palm. What temperature does it have? What does the fabric feel like? Slowly start moving your hand front and back. Increase the speed and try to touch more and more fabric. Feel the heat that builds up through the friction. Add occasional squeezes to your movement so you can fully feel the texture. Are you enjoying that? Are you having fun there?

Gradually calm down the movement and let the hand rest. How does your hand feel now? Compare it to before. Do you recognise a difference? Does your hand feel different? Do you feel different? Did you enjoy that? Was it sensual enough for you?

K hands J the cloth. J wipes hands (K's hand still on thigh): neutral face, angry hands which rest on lap when done.

K: Where's the moment I could have stopped? Where's the moment I should have stopped?

Suddenly J pushes K to the floor. J remains sat looking at K for a long time.

J: Does it matter if a man does this to a woman? Does it look ridiculous when it's the other way round? Does it matter that I actually have no story about sexual harassment to tell? I don't know if I would be able to guess how many men have had a personal experience like that. Or how many women.

K: *(kneeling up)* Does it matter that up until today I have rarely told the story because it makes me feel uncomfortable? ME? I felt ashamed when I told James the story for the first time. It took me three attempts to actually tell him.

Does it matter that the last time a guy grabbed my bum, and I complained

about it to a young male colleague at work, his answer was: *look at J*

J: Isn't that a compliment?!

K stares deadly at J. J gets the cello and rests it down by K, before lying behind K.

K: You never actually asked me.

J: What do you mean?

K: As if you need to ask that.

J: I don't kn—

K gets up and takes the cello to a chair. J looks at the bow, gets up and goes to K.

J: Where's the moment I should have stopped? May I?

K: If you want to make me sound you need to know how to touch me. (*gets up and gives J the cello. To the audience*) We need two volunteers. Someone who would like to try playing the cello, and one more.

8. Cello playing

K brings the first audience member to DSL to stand close together and facing each other. Simultaneously, J gives a brief informal cello lesson to the second audience member: inviting them to sit on the chair, showing them how to hold the bow, then repeating some of the same directions K gives.

K: If you want to make me sound you need to know how to touch me. (*offer LH*)

The whole weight of your left hand has to fall into me.

It needs to fall from the shoulder into the fingertips. Like sinking into a pillow. There is no tension. (*RH strokes from shoulder to fingertips and takes over from LH. Shake arm gently. LH press on their right shoulder.*)

You feel me under your fingertips. (*put LH on sternum*)

A delicate touch makes me sounnnnnnd. Depending on your touch, I resonate differently. (*put LH on shoulder*)

The weight of your whole arm rests on me as if I am made of rubber. (*right arm underneath their left arm*)

Your arm is one long line. (*put their left arm further round shoulder*)

The weight of my body rests on you. (*into full body contact hug: K puts their right arm round back*)

K hums, before letting the audience member go back to their seat and moving into a dance and a short, harmonious voice and cello improvisation with J.

9. Family stories

J: You know, every time I go to see my grandparents I always go to give them a hug each when we say hello and goodbye. My Nan is fine with it, but I always sense my Grandad feels uncomfortable. Sometimes I get a side-on hug with one arm, other times it's more of a front-on, arm-half-way-round-the-shoulder kind of hug. I sense that he is holding himself back – I think it makes me hold back a little too. I don't want to stop myself from reaching out to people because I feel I shouldn't, because that's the way I want to show that I care. But maybe I should ask him how he feels.

K: I think you should.

J: Would you? (*puts down cello*)

K: Well I don't know... he's your grandfather.

J: How about you then?

J gets the case and starts packing the cello away. K gets the bow.

K: Me? I love being hugged. I love giving hugs. I am a tactile person. I actually struggled a lot with a lack of physical contact in the first few months that I lived in England - all I got was waves and smiles. Hugs were reserved for mothers, lovers, very close friends. Until I found close friends I was deprived of touch. And then, because most of my friends are male, every time I hugged them I felt watched, judged, because for others a hug is not just a hug. But I refuse to hold back because it might look wrong to other people. For me a hug is the most natural and honest expression of feeling.

K and J move to stand in the Family Portrait pose, but closer together.

K: You can't lie when you're hugging. Both people would feel it. I hope I will never be afraid to ask for a hug.

END