

# STUART HALL FOUNDATION

## **SWEET TOOTH: Interview with Elaine Mitchener**

*SWEET TOOTH is a cross-disciplinary music theatre piece devised by vocal and movement artist Elaine Mitchener. It uses text, improvisation and movement to stage a dramatic engagement with the brutal realities of slavery, as revealed by historical records of the British sugar industry and to illuminate its contemporary echoes. The work was commissioned by Bluecoat Liverpool in partnership with the Stuart Hall Foundation and the International Slavery Museum. It was premiered at the Bluecoat, Liverpool in November 2017 and at St. George's Bloomsbury, London in February 2018.*

**Gilane Tawadros (GT):** How did you come to conceive SWEET TOOTH as a performance work?

**Elaine Mitchener (EM):** Musical ideas spring from the strangest sources. The idea for SWEET TOOTH came from a shared addiction of Scottish Tablet with my late father. That crumbly sweet substance sparked many questions in my mind concerning the deadly cost to human life and livelihood of one race in order to feed the addiction and greed of another; and how far people will go to satisfy their desire to gain wealth and satiate an appetite.

The Sugar Trade and the enslavement of millions of Africans, represented the zenith of capitalism; in other words, the removal of its most costly item: paying people for their work. By dehumanising one race, another gained in prosperity and wealth and the vast funds received in turn were used to develop Western society at all levels - education, culture, medicine, science - which we profit from today.

How could I tackle this vast topic through music? Was music the right medium through which to examine this area of human history? Did I have a right to? I had no idea how all-consuming this exciting journey would be.

My practice works primarily in movement and voice. Over the last five years working collaboratively with the choreographer Dam Van Huynh, I have created a technique which is grounded in classical vocal training (my teacher Jacqueline Bremar is brilliant) but also enables me to employ the physicality of contemporary dance. My philosophy of encounter-enact-engage allows me to develop and devise works combining found texts, sound, movement, vocalization, improvisation, and collaboration to create intimate and experimental music theatre performance pieces. Pulling together a team of extraordinary musicians, Sylvia Hallett, Marks Sanders and Jason Yarde along with Dam Van Huynh and invaluable guidance and insight from historian Christer Petley, we undertook two years of research and development.

I started creating from a blank space. The only definite idea I had was that I knew I wanted people to experience the work live and that sound would be integral. Through reading research, discussion and learning, it became clear to me that the work required a strong aural basis and not just a physical one. Meditating on what it might have been for enslaved Africans to experience the unknown and the sound and smell of fear, the strength, self-determination and resolve of rebellion; the essential activity of song and dance as a constant reminder of one's own humanity, history, tradition; these became the cornerstones of the work from which I was able to build a skeletal framework to hang ideas on.

The next stage was to ask the team to engage with the topic fully and to find their own personal ways into it. To embody the feelings for themselves; place themselves and their families into the situation and to express their reactions musically. What became clear (and what I had in mind) was that this work was not going to be a comfortable experience for us or the audience and it ought not be. I will have failed if people applaud loudly, whoop and cheer. So far the response has been silent reflection and thoughtful discussion afterwards, but I can't prevent an audience from responding to the work in a more enthusiastic way.

**GT:** SWEET TOOTH is a very uncomfortable piece to experience and it is an experience rather than a spectacle. It draws you in to a sequence of episodes or movements but has no overarching, linear narrative as you would expect from a fictional novel or a historical account. Can you say some more about the piece's relationship to historical research and how your approach to source material differs from that of a historian?

**EM:** It's such an immense subject that it was very clear early on that I would need to work with an expert to check facts and to alert me to current research and resources that might prove useful to the development of my ideas around the work and how to present it. Working with Dr Christer Petley proved

invaluable and I believe we learnt a lot from each other. I wanted to avoid voyeurism, victim 'porn' or any kind of spectacle and the idea was to try and evoke an unnerving sense of tension, claustrophobia and entrapment. Of course, one can never know what that really felt like, but we have narratives and accounts, diaries which describe each step of the experience, albeit mainly from the oppressor's point of view.

Not being a historian enabled me to focus on other aspects of the source material. Being a musician, I decided to draw the audience's attention to sound as the narrative, the sound of people, their voices, their expression of rage, fear, defiance, joy, comfort. These would be reminders that, although reduced by their oppressors to being part of the huge machinery of slavery, enslaved Africans were people who dreamed, loved, hoped and resisted, and finally overcame.

The vast knowledge base of historians is enviable. They are able to digest what they've painstakingly researched and re-present it for public understanding. However, I find that this is all conducted in a clinical way, as though these events are being viewed under a microscope or at arm's length. The purpose of SWEET TOOTH was to give a voice to those millions of people lost to slavery. Recalling their given names reminds us of their humanity. Referencing their work songs and rituals allows us to honour the culture which they developed and the legacy of which remains to this day. My job was to liberate the dry historical facts and somehow breathe life into them.

It was a challenge for me to view the historical material researched with an academic eye. I had to seek ways to absorb information, much of which was deeply upsetting, disturbing and difficult to accept. I had to digest it as historical fact and allow myself to find a creative and artistic response to it.

My decision to work abstractly with words was a conscious one in that I did not want them to obstruct the sound experience. Where words are used, they are used sparingly and are quickly fractured. Because SWEET TOOTH is also a visual work, I felt strongly that any 'narrative' could be felt and heard without the use of words.

**GT:** Can you say something about the episodic structure of SWEET TOOTH which has been conceived as a series of distinct chapters or movements?

**EM:** The decision to call these movements 'chapters' was a deliberate way of anchoring the work and the fact that it concerns a tragic episode, not only in the history of black people but in the history of humanity. This holocaust has repeated itself at different periods of human history. I employed a creative

semantic approach to liberate the source text material from books. Slavery in the British Caribbean was operated at a conveniently safe distance (not within the British Isles as in North America), and therefore I couldn't draw upon personal familial accounts or records. In this way I was more like an historian because of the slight impersonal distance.

**GT:** You are also a jazz musician, working with other musicians and using improvisation and other techniques to create unique sounds and compositions. How has this influenced the way in which you approached and composed SWEET TOOTH?

**EM:** I consider myself as a musician who works across and draws on difference genres: experimental/free-jazz, avant-garde contemporary new music, gospel, Afro-Caribbean (Jamaican) music, free-improvisation and I think these influences can be heard in this work. I never thought about 'composing' the work. Having worked with composers and performed works by composers, I realised that my approach would need to be different to work effectively. I always wanted a sonic experience and with movement SWEET TOOTH is a work that is seen and felt. Early on I imagined it as a radio piece (so I'm pleased it was eventually broadcast on BBC Radio 3), but as the piece developed over two years it told me that it also had to be a visual / movement experience. Lighting also plays a musical part in this work and Alex Johnston has designed incredibly striking lighting moods which move the work forward.

The artists I have brought together for this project bring with them a wealth of experience and expertise along with an openness to trying new ideas. We are all well versed in the world of free-improvisation, however, for SWEET TOOTH I knew its musical world couldn't be defined or restricted in this way. So we came together to workshop and research ideas and devise the piece along with Dam who was invaluable in helping us to access organic natural movement whilst playing.

Over time I was able to construct a method of structured improvisation upon which we were able to hang the skeletal form of the work. This method allows us the freedom to improvise whilst retaining the structural, musical form of the work. So although the concept is mine, how we arrive at realising it is very much a collective effort. My job was to work out what to retain or mull over an idea and to have the confidence to discard something because it's not right for the work. It's very important that each of us feels ownership of the work and finds our own narrative that can be communicated. It then becomes a powerfully direct statement of humanity to humanity.

**GT:** The events and experiences to which SWEET TOOTH refers took place in the historical past. What can this past teach us in the present?

**EM:** According to Michael Craton in his book *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, ‘Historians who believe history to be the story of man’s rise to civilisation tend to define civilisation to include the acceptance by all classes of their place with the socioeconomic system.’ Even from a liberal point of view its appearance is essentially that of accommodation and acceptance. These ideas have been challenged by writers and commentators such as CLR James and Herbert Aptheker, also the Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter and her theory of the human, which she discusses in her essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument.” The Atlantic Slave Trade, the Middle Passage, which largely took place during the so-called Age of Enlightenment, marked a brutal and catastrophic period of human history. The past teaches us a lesson that we seem unable to understand and learn from: humanity’s capacity for inhumanity. Professor Catherine Hall said that it’s easy to think that those involved in the slave trade are different to us, that we are different to them. We are not. Only when we acknowledge this simple truth are we able to change and make changes.

Gilane Tawadros is Vice-Chair of the Stuart Hall Foundation.

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