

THE PROMISE OF A GARDEN

*What sport shall we devise here in this garden,
To drive away the heavy thought of care?*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, RICHARD II



Outdoors but homely, natural yet domestic, gardens are liminal spaces. They carry us from one place, one way of being, into another. Front gardens are for show, a gift to passers-by, and the passage between public and private worlds. Back gardens are more direct, more honest, more intimate – sites of dream and fantasy, stage settings for family life. Behind the shed, quietly decomposing, lies what we no longer want.



In gardens we are one with the web of life. Their fruit and vegetables nourish us, and not only us, but bees and foxes, birds and slugs, nature's whole interdependent world. In gardens we too are animals, basking in sunshine. Sometimes we remember that we too are earth. When the balance of ecology is threatened by incontinence and greed, we care for biodiversity on the doorstep and do what we can. But the changing climate can be seen from the window too. The world is earth.



Gardens are infinitely creative, and absolutely reliable: nature will not be confined by human statute. Gardeners follow their hearts, unconcerned for approval or good taste. They craft art, happily composing with colour, scent, shape and feeling, knowing that change is always in the picture. Unselfconsciously, our gardens unfold our inner selves to the world, like blooms to the sun.



And during the coronavirus pandemic, gardens became sanctuaries, especially but not only for those fortunate enough to have their own. We watched spring come during lockdown, proving that life goes on, even when the clocks seemed not to. We walked a little patch – 100 times round, like Captain Tom – to keep well and stay safe. We took care of plants and birds when our loved ones were far away, or close by but out of reach. And then, when lockdown eased, we welcomed grandchildren, neighbours and friends into the safe sunlight of our gardens – private and public – able at last to be together, even if always a metre or two apart. We pollinated our hearts with stories and conversation.



In 'The Garden', The Performance Ensemble will offer the people of Leeds a moment of delight, calm, pleasure, healing, reflection and exchange. We will reimagine the Quarry Theatre of Leeds Playhouse as a garden of forking paths, a place in which to wander and wonder, to sit and meditate, to share stories and dreams, to recall the past and imagine the future, to cross and re-cross each other's journeys.



Over a month, the garden will gradually be filled with living plants and artificial ones, arbours and pools, spectacular displays and compost heaps, creatures of every kind, cordials and vegetables, memories, music and dreams. It will be filled with light, growing as the season's darkness recedes, until in the final week, the clocks go forward and we are propelled into spring. It will be filled day by day, as people bring pieces of the mosaic, to set them where they belong. It will be filled by performers, old hands and new, storytellers, dancers, musicians and mimes. It will be filled by visitors, guided round the garden by members of the Ensemble, or on headphones by an audio companion. It will be filled, in the final week, by an audience sharing the pleasures of a co-created performance that celebrates what we have come through and our collective resources for what is still to come.



The Garden will be a place of meetings – but safe and socially distanced exchanges, where people from different parts of the city and different parts of the world all have their place. As in all gardens, the origins of a plant is inconsequential: all that matters is that they are cared for so they flourish where they now are rooted. The crossing of their paths and their present positions are the beauty and particularity of The Garden.



Everyone in The Garden will know the importance of staying safe, respecting distances and wearing face coverings. The Garden will provide resources to those who don't have them. The guided routes and seating places will ensure that regular cleaning can be undertaken by the Gardeners. The Garden will have space for all.



The Garden will be dismantled after the final performances, scattered like seeds by people who take away something that they will care for in the months to come, planting its spirit of solidarity across the city until the next season, when the Performance Ensemble blooms again. Everywhere The Garden goes will become a potential site for further creative work: a storytelling session in a residential home, a tai chi session in a social club, a micro-concert in a public garden. Perhaps in the autumn, The Garden will reappear as a harvest festival, gathering all the plants and art that have been nurtured since the spring.



The Garden's custodians will be listed on The Performance Ensemble website and they will be invited to share news of their plant or artwork in the following months. Their garden stories will be collected and form another layer of mulch from which new shoots will grow. Everyone loves a garden.

*As I walked out in the mystic garden
On a hot summer day, hot summer lawn
Excuse me, ma'am, I beg your pardon
There's no one here, the gardener is gone*

BOB DYLAN, AIN'T TALKIN'