

38 WOMEN

Choreographers note

Welcome to the performance of 38 WOMEN. This is the culmination of a creative performance project which started in September as part of the public engagement programme of CoisCéim/ANU co-production THESE ROOMS. Involving over thirty women of different ages from across Dublin and beyond, the project took place at CoisCéim studio and at Collins Barracks, the National Museum of Ireland – Decorative Arts and History. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the museum and all the staff for their generous support and for making the project possible. As an archive and repository for the nation's stories, it has been particularly inspiring to work at Collins Barracks. Given the building's former purpose as a military establishment, it is perhaps fitting that the performance of 38 WOMEN takes place in some of the old barracks rooms in 2016.

What have you, I, we witnessed? What have we seen, heard and physically felt? What are the experiences that make us who we are?

Over the past few weeks, we as a group set out to investigate the notion of bearing witness and the idea that 'we live by the stories we have about our lives; they shape our lives' (Bearing Witness: Gautier & Scalmati; Karnac Books 2010). We drew from personal experiences, from the stories we hold – from that which is embodied. We also looked at the value of storytelling and the importance of re-imagining our experiences as a life-affirming process. In this we were aided by a wonderful physical theatre workshop given by ANU Artistic Director Louise Lowe and CoisCéim Artistic Director David Bolger, and workshops by National Museum of Ireland Curator Brenda Malone and ANU Producer/Actor Leanna Cuttle. These fascinating sessions gave us insight into the objects held at the museum and stimulated exploration of our relationship to objects – and to conjuring up our own stories.

Gradually we found themes in common, experiences we shared and memories uniquely individual. We practiced, created choreography, stretched our bodies into strange shapes and had a lot of fun dancing to some great music. The process was not always easy – there was considerable discussion and some disagreement. We struggled with how to interpret reality, to translate words into the poetic (but sometimes vague) form of dance. Slowly we began to discover ways to tell our stories through movement; to embody our stories and give them life.

This performance offers a few chapters of the many stories uncovered. We invite you to watch, listen, read and respond as you wish - enjoy!

I would like to extend a huge and heartfelt thanks to all the women who took part – for their creativity, generosity, energy, bold initiative and spirit – who contributed to making this such a challenging, interesting and vibrant project.

Philippa Donnellan – December 2016

These performances are dedicated to the many women we have known who inspire and energise us. We also wish to pay our respect to the memory of the 38 women, to which the title refers, who testified as witnesses to the atrocity perpetrated by the British Armed Forces during the week of the Easter Rising 1916.