Prepare for take-off

A disused aircraft hangar is the setting for Siobhan Davies's spectacular dance comeback, two years after a funding disaster coincided with her CBE. She talks to Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

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'You drive into a mammoth airfield with criss-crosses of runway. And at odds, facing in all different directions, are these old hangars, which are curved, long buildings, utterly empty. So here is a place that has a history, and then, in this unusual journey they're taking, the audience enter into a space in which, unusually, a piece of dance happens. So already the imagination has been thrown up into the air to be caught, fresh, at the point when the performance begins."

Siobhan Davies is describing the extraordinary experience she is setting up with her latest dance creation. The first thing she had to do to start work in Hangar 3022 was sweep away the piles of straw that farmers had left in it. There were, though, no fighter planes any more.

Plants and Ghosts is to be premiered next week, not in the smart theatres normally associated with Davies's productions but at the old American air base of Upper Heyford, a dozen miles north of Oxford. Formerly the largest Cold War air base in Europe, the site is now the object of a tug-of-war between housing developers and those who believe that it is a historic military site of rare importance.

Davies is staying out of the politics, though she concedes that she feels inspired by the history of the place and by the circumstances in which she was invited there. "The man who runs Upper Heyford has no idea about modern dance," she says, "but he adores his space, his airfield, his hangars. So I am in conversation with a passionate man about

what can happen in his building."

Passion is what Davies oozes, quietly, as a character as well as a creator. Over the past 20 years, she has grown from a choreographer to whose work the adjectives "polite", "English" and "worthy" readily attached themselves, into something rare: a true and complete poet of the stage. Her dances do not smack you with their thrills, or grab you with their amusements. Instead, she has discovered how to pierce your imagination, perhaps your soul too, with such haunting chamber creations as The Art of Touch, The Glass Blew In, Wanting to Tell Stories and Different Trains.

Two years ago, though, Davies felt badly in need of a break. "Any artist whose next decade is 50-60 has to look seriously at what that is," she tells me. "You are no longer a young person full of ideas that shock you all the time; you're not the totally mature artist that you hope you will become. It's a strange, questioning period. But if I feel I can attack it in a new way, a lot more can happen - to keep that energy and curiosity in order to make sure that my ideas do shock me."

The tour of Plants and Ghosts to an airfield, a gallery, a warehouse and other unorthodox venues marks this new stage, in which she means to challenge the idea most people - and she herself - have had of her. She has spent the break partly thinking up new ways and places to present dance, partly sorting out a permanent centre for her company, a battle that at last looks won.

A building at a school in Southwark, south-east London, is to be converted with £2 million of Lottery money and another £1 million raised privately, into the rehearsal, research and office facilities she has never had, despite a sheaf of awards and recognition.

She got a CBE at New Year - it is the story of her life that this news came just as she had been told that the funding of the building had collapsed. "It was quite funny that that day, the letter arrived. And I thought, lovely to get an award, but what for? Because I won't be able to do anything!"

Fortunately, the scheme got back on the road again soon afterwards and Davies was able to enjoy her honour. "There's something in the citation that says you are 'beloved'. And I thought that was such a tender thing to say about something that could be rather self-important, that I rather enjoy it," she says.

She's a modest woman, which, arguably, has held her back. A potentially very important achievement of the past year has been the forming of a committee of six eminent people in visual art and theatre who will be pushing Davies's name and the claim of independent dance to a broader recognition.

"I can't tell you yet who they are, but it's an extraordinary group and I am bowled over by it." The dance world, she says, is too small and insular, too content to "rattle around in our little box. We need to make the box bigger by stepping outside it, and making other people aware and interested."

But she will stay with her usual box of dancers, mature individuals whose confidence in themselves makes them more her associates than her instruments. "I said to one of my dancers, 'It's wonderful to watch you move, but it's even more wonderful to see you thinking through your body.' It takes a lot of practice to do that."

This moment of ease, the perfect, fearless fusion of skill and vision, is Davies's constant quest. Earlier this week she was watching her old guru, Merce Cunningham, at the Barbican.

"Why I go to see him and Trisha Brown and Robert Wilson regularly is that they have a very particular take on what they want to achieve, and by hell or high water they are going to go towards it. Sometimes they fail, but that's irrelevant. It's the fact that they've thrown the ball over there and said, 'I'm going for it.' That gives so much pleasure, and that's what I'm trying for."

- 'Plants and Ghosts' premieres at Hangar 3022, Upper Heyford airfield, Thurs-Sun, then tours to London, Saltaire, Bristol and Brighton (information: 020 7228 6020).