

## Reviews of Pulse from the Fringe

August 2016

### Jenny Davidson – FringeReview 2016-09-13

*Mairi Campbell takes the audience on what initially seems like trip into her personal biography, but turns out to be something of a more universal examination of finding your own voice, your own pulse, your own music*

The stage is sparsely furnished with just a chair, a music stand and a rustic tripod with a stone pendulum hanging from it. Mairi Campbell appears wearing a loose dark dress and begins to tell the story of her life from her late teens to her early 20s – clearly a formative period for who she has become as a person and a musician – using spoken word, song, dance, live and recorded music and projected lights.

Initially Pulse seems like just a piece of personal biography. Campbell begins with her studying classical music at the Guildhall in London and struggling to fit in. Instructions are barked at her – ‘soften your jaw’, ‘stop tapping your feet’ – and something doesn’t resonate with her. Here the meaning of the word pulse becomes clear: it is both the pulse of your own life and the pulse of the music, finding your own rhythm or a type of music. This is echoed in the pendulum, which could symbolise a metronome, the passing of time or a heartbeat, but in its rusticity suggests something primitive and ancient.

Returning frustrated and a bit broken to Scotland, Campbell spends some time on Lismore recovering and begins to discover folk music. Here she learns to play her first tune by ear, ‘The Boy’s Lament for his Dragon’, and her difficulty as a conservatoire-trained musician in picking this up highlights the difference between the two traditions. The biographical storytelling gradually becomes something bigger, more of a spiritual journey into music, and folklorist Margaret Bennett appears as a kind of guru figure – which if you’ve ever met Bennett, you can imagine – advising Campbell to go to Cape Breton to find herself.

While in one sense it is very specifically the story of Mairi Campbell’s own journey, in another it is universal. There are self-deprecatingly funny parts about her own immaturity that we can all recognise, her utter certainty, after ignoring Bennett’s advice to go to Canada and instead heading for Mexico, that Mexican Cesar is THE ONE and they will live happily ever after, then, having gone to Cape Breton after all, her total obsession with step dancing that in her enthusiasm she rams down the throats of everyone around her until told to stop in no uncertain terms by her sister.

Along with the amusing impressions, there is strong emotion, rage, frustration, confusion, joy, passion, and hints at times of crisis and possibly a breakdown. This variety along with a good pace and rhythm holds your attention. Her snippets of poetry, impressions and storytelling are accompanied by a soundtrack of original music and songs by Campbell and David Gray, live viola,

voice and the percussive beat of step dancing. Rather like in musicals when the emotion gets too much and the cast break into song, when the emotion is strong Campbell expresses the feeling through the viola or song, sometimes with words, often with nonsense vocables.

For a piece of storytelling it's unusually visual. Pulse is well choreographed with Campbell using her whole body, as well as the whole stage. Her movements are clearly carefully thought out. The bow often becomes an extension of herself, channelling her emotion, but also jokily used as a telephone. Projected lights on the backdrop are timed to complement and fit the music.

Campbell wears a baggy dark dress, which initially seems like an odd choice, but as the show progresses it is clear why this piece of clothing is a conscious decision not just something she happened to throw on. It serves as both a blank canvas for who she is at various periods of her life, it lets her at one point to blend into the dark background with only her face and hands highlighted by the stage lights and in its similarity to a cassock also gives a hint of some kind of religious role – she is a priestess taking the audience on a spiritual journey. This attention to the full visual experience makes this more than a spoken word performance and into a fully developed one-woman piece of theatre.

Pulse is much more than a piece of storytelling. You leave feeling as though you have been through a session of music therapy, but also with a sense of mystery, that there is something more left unsaid.

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<http://fringereview.co.uk/review/edinburgh-fringe/2016/mairi-campbell-pulse/>

## **Natasha Tripney – The Stage**

Mairi Campbell is a Scottish folk singer and musician. In Pulse, her debut autobiographical solo show, part of the Made in Scotland showcase, she explores her own story through music, dance and performance.

Scottish music, its rhythms and traditions, run through the piece. Campbell studied at Guildhall originally, where she felt restricted, prevented from tapping her feet in time with the music and expressing herself fully. So she roams, to Mexico and Canada, exploring different musical traditions along the way and having relationships with a series of men, trying to find herself and her music. She discovers Canadian step-dancing, the beat rising up through her feet, and it changes her – this old-new form of movement – it reshapes her approach to song and story.

Throughout the piece Campbell plays her own music, her fiddle a part of her. The stage is bare save for a tripod of sticks and a stone pendulum, marking time – animations are projected on the back wall.

The show feels slight at times, it lags in places, but Campbell is a forceful and idiosyncratic performer and when she invites the audience to form a chorus with her, to underscore her playing with their voices, it is a moment both beautiful and bright.

Verdict

Fitful but beguiling autobiographical mixture of storytelling and song

Natasha Tripney – The Stage \*\*\*

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/mairi-campbell-pulse-review-at-summerhall-edinburgh-fitful-but-beguiling/>

## **Musical Theatre Review - Fiona Orr**

For those unfamiliar with traditional Scottish music of the people – not the bagpipes and drums on the battlefield or the Royal Mile – but the intimacy of a voice creating amazing sound; this show is an education waiting to be found. What Campbell does here is invite the outsider in: full of generosity, she tells her very own story of how her life not only includes music, but has been lived through music.

Opening with a soundscape that urges her to take up her violin and play, we are taken back to Campbell in the 1980s and her training at the Guildhall in London. Here, she is instructed on how to become ‘an instrument’; the goal was all about training the musician to play their instrument in such a way that they could perform the works of any composer and respond to the preferences of their given conductor.

As Campbell explains, this led to a blindness: “They never saw me. They stopped my pulse.” The pulse is not only a metaphor here, the pulse is the life-force; it is that part of the human spirit that transcends being contained in boundaries. It is a blend of skill, art, vitality and expression that almost everyone can relate to at the core of their being.

Campbell repeatedly found herself in situations where words were not enough for her to express meaning. In such cases, she picks up her violin or releases her wondrous voice.

Her command of both is so flexible that she can sway where the winds blowing around may push her. Just like a young tree, Campbell seems to grow strong as we look at her and listen, and beneath the ground – out of sight – her roots continue to spread and grow too.

There is a wonderful sequence of movement and sound where we see Campbell both as the follower and leader of her bow: this exquisite sequence is as strong an interpretation as I have seen expressing the master and slave relationship between the creator and the instrument.

We witness genuine *jouissance* between Campbell and the notes she plays. It is exhilarating to realise how the pulse she finds in her feet, inspired by Canadians in Nova Scotia, connects to her fingers on the violin.

In searching the world over to find other sounds and lives, Campbell came back here: to Scotland – where both she and her voice take flight. Join her and be uplifted.

Musical Theatre Review - \*\*\*\*\*

Fiona Orr

10/8/16

<http://musicaltheatrereview.com/mairi-campbell-pulse-edinburgh-festival-fringe/>

## **Three Weeks - Aida Rocci**

“Fall in love with Scotland. Take your time.” That’s the advice Mairi Campbell’s grandmother gave her, and these words also encapsulate the audience’s experience in ‘Pulse’: a slow but deep falling in love alongside Campbell as she searches for her voice. Through music, theatre, poetry and movement, Campbell weaves a carefully detailed story of her relationship with music and her culture. From the first moment of this journey, the award-winning Scottish musician’s bare and unabashed honesty captivates you, and every time she plays the viola, an unspoken sense of belonging inundates the room. Even if you’ve never heard her music before, or never listened to Scottish folklore, by the end of ‘Pulse’ you’ll feel transformed.

Three Weeks \*\*\*\*\*

Aida Rocci -

Wed 10th August 2016

<http://www.threeweeksedinburgh.com/article/mairi-campbell-pulse-greengold-projects-and-authentic-artist-collective/>

## **TV bomb**

Pulse is a clever show. Covering the time from Mairi Campbell's final year at world famous conservatoire, Guildhall in London, and journeying to the present day where she has found her heartbeat, her pulse, the vein that runs through her Scottish music journey. The show tells a story through music, drama and dance written by Campbell herself in collaboration with director, Kath Burlinson.

The story starts with Campbell finishing up her musical education and yet, for her and the audience, the journey is only just beginning. Campbell felt stifled at Guildhall and like they had taken the heart, the pulse, away from her music. They had taken the love and the creativity away. She returned to Lismore and was encouraged by the locals to go and 'find herself.'

The show then takes us to Mexico where she describes a humorous lust for the wrong man and on to Cape Breton where she finds just what she is looking for – something new (yet old) and exciting – step dance.

Campbell plays viola passionately and the show builds to a crescendo of beats from her feet through her body to the voicing of her true emotions and how creativity comes from curiosity and being brave enough to experiment. It is hard in a one-woman show to keep the energy going and the audience captivated, but with little other than her instrument and a flat stone pendulum symbolising her Highland crofting roots, Campbell manages it with aplomb.

Her plain costume seems an odd choice in a show full of personality and a homecoming of who she has become and where she could travel next - changing costumes for different time periods or a splash of colour might have added some more spark to this clearly 'sparky' woman.

There is no doubting that Summerhall has a gem in Mairi Campbell's show this Fringe.

Aisling Maguire

TV bomb \*\*\*\*

14/8/16

<http://www.tvbomb.co.uk/review/mairi-campbell-pulse/>

## **TSOTF – the Sick of the Fringe**

23/8/16

Full disclosure: when I hear Mairi Campbell's voice, I feel at home. Campbell's version of Auld Lang Syne is my regular YouTube go-to cry-song (it featured in Sex & the City The Movie) and when I hear her voice I feel safe, and warm, able to cry... I feel home. Watching Campbell's journey to find her home and her authentic voice, therefore, felt like a journey I already associated with her. Much has been written on the science of the voice and of music (Wellcome Collection's This is a Voice exhibition being a recent major example), from the study of how the voice and ear physically understand and receive sound, to the chemicals released in our brain upon hearing music, to the physical benefits derived from dance. In Mairi Campbell's Pulse, however, it is the quest to find the music which suited her body, to find the music which fit with her bones, which is the central journey. The history of music (and folk music in particular) is inherently bound to questions of nationality, or migration, of colonialism, and of intercultural exchange – and this is an area around which Pulse treads lightly – but in Campbell's journey, an idea of 'home' feels less psychological or political and more physical, even genetic.

Recent scientific studies have attempted to locate either a music gene, or a scientific correlation between distinct populations and the music they make. For Campbell, her experience with both classical music (at Guildhall and in Mexico), and folk music (both with and without footwork in Canada and Scotland), seems to entail a complex interplay between genetics, nationality, gender norms, environmentalism and spirituality. For us as audience members, however, we experience her music in the bones, the ear, the heart. Part of me wishes I understood, scientifically and intellectually, how music and this voice makes me feel home... or maybe not... I wouldn't want my brain to get in the way. (BL)  
Pulse is at Summerhall Old Lab until August 28th. Venue is wheelchair accessible and BSL shows are available - <https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on/mairi-campbell-pulse>

<http://thesickofthefringe.com/week-three/pulse>