

Joseph Twilley – 1908: Body and Soul

A couple of months ago I applied for the role of historical researcher for a project running as part of the Creative Campus Initiative with a theatre company Lightning Ensemble, exploring the 1908 London Olympics. Having never really had an interest in sport this was a first for me, but I took comfort in the fact that since it was a theatrical piece, I could develop my research skills and carried on...!

We're currently two months into the project and I have to say I've developed a bit of a love for everything Olympic and everything 1908! The aim of the project is to bring to life some of the key figures and stories from the first London Olympics, so my work really focuses on researching three key figures: Lord Desborough, organiser and the 'Lord Coe' of 1908, Martin Sheridan, an Irish-American athlete captain of the USA team, and finally Madge Syers, an amazing woman who won gold in the women's solo figure skating.

Madge Syers alone has an amazing story to tell; she was the daughter of a self-made builder and property speculator, Edward Jarvis Cave, and thanks to her father's wealth managed to train at the exclusive Prince's Skating Club in Knightsbridge. Widely regarded as the best skater in the world, she competed in the 1902 World Championships as the only woman in a field of men and came second, going on to find glory in 1908. Coincidentally, the Women's Social and Political Union held a large exhibition at the rink where Madge won her gold medal the following year, leaving not only another detail in the history of women's equality but the only photographs we have of the club.

My role in the project is to source these stories which are then being brought to life by a team of designers, aerial artists and a writer in a truly immersive performance. Using the latest sound technology from the University of Brighton, we hope to recreate the atmosphere of the games by using a mix of acting and circus aerobatics to capture the excitement and exertion of the 1908 athletes.

The project is proving completely eye-opening to work on and I have to say I'm a true convert to sport, if not actually having to run, skate or cycle myself! Perhaps the most striking detail of the research is the uniquely personal stories of the athletes themselves, coming from an era before standardised, high-tech training and the elite Olympics we prepare for today, perfect for a reimaging in the theatre.

Performances will take place in mid-June at Jacksons Lane Theatre in North London and more information can be found through the Lightning Ensemble website:
www.lightningensemble.co.uk