



Pond, RHS Chelsea, 2017

# Open-air theatre

When it comes to landscape design, **Darren Hawkes** is one class act, striking gold from Chelsea to Cornwall. Words by *Fiona McGowan*.

I am trying to describe a game that my children play in a local sculpture garden. A platform made up of thousands of slices of slate abuts a large pond encircled by reeds and beech trees. The light catches the slate edges to reveal a chequerboard of light and dark squares. The game involves running around, stopping, then adding or subtracting scores according to the colour of the square you have landed on. It is further complicated by the fact that the participants do not know whether they have landed on 'light' or 'dark' – only the umpire can call it. For some reason, they can spend hours doing this.

I am waffling away about this to the man who designed the said platform, wondering how he will react to this somewhat bizarre interpretation of his RHS Chelsea Gold Medal-winning sculpture which now resides in Tremeneheere Sculpture Garden near Penzance. Darren Hawkes beams (which is a bit of a relief). "That's everything that garden design should be," he enthuses. "I've designed something, and it's used for a purpose which I hadn't thought of, but in a subliminal way.

What's happening is your children are interacting with the designed space, and with the most amazing planting around it, and the natural world..."

Darren's name is on the rostrum of some of the UK's top garden designers – as his two Golds and a Silver-Gilt from Chelsea Flower Show attest. He has been designing gardens for nearly two decades, although he really fell into it by accident. His early passion for acting led him to study at the Drama Centre London – famed for method acting and an intense psychological teaching style. After graduating, he supplemented his acting jobs with a bit of labouring work for a landscape gardener. "I was totally into theatre," he reminisces, "It was my life." But he needed regular paid work. His first job was hardly inspiring: "I spent six weeks digging a hole because they couldn't get a digger in to build a basement."

Over time, the anxiety of finding acting work was counteracted by the labouring work. "Gardening built my self-esteem. It was healthy," says Darren. "In the acting world, I had friends who were drinking too much, taking drugs, leading a nocturnal life. But I had to travel

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for maybe an hour and a half to get to a job for 8am and work really hard all day. I LOVED it. It was really, really rewarding.” He was lucky enough to work with some exceptional garden designers and effectively got himself an apprenticeship in landscaping. He lists some of the greatest influences of that time: Charles Chesshire, Robin Williams (not that one), Pamela Bulmore [check with Darren].

It is interesting to meet someone whose passion was so ignited by a sideline – so often successful people can trace their path directly back to some youthful desire. And while Darren says there was nothing in his childhood experience of gardens to hint at his current passion, he does have some subtle drivers from the landscape where he grew up. “Somerset has these big flat open spaces, you’ll often find the solitary or small groups of Lombardy poplars. The way those strong verticals exist on a big landscape – they’re so bold... If you fuzzed your eyes, you could be looking at a Franz Kline or a Clyfford Still painting.” He also spent a lot of time playing in unkempt fields right next to the M5, which might well have given him a feel for a more natural style of planting. Or it may not. He certainly suspects that at the starting point of design – “when you sit down with a blank piece of paper and think about how you’re going to divide a space” – he defaults to an abstract idea of “those big marks and then lots of space” in an echo of the stands of poplars on the wide Somerset landscapes.

Without formal training, Darren spent his labouring years absorbing knowledge of garden design as if a cactus in a drought. He now prides himself on being a professional garden designer who is still capable of building pretty much anything a client throws at him (although he doesn’t need to these days). But it was the Chelsea Flower Show that altered his direction. Having upped sticks from London, he and his family had settled in Fowey – where he literally went back to his gardening roots: sticking flyers in people’s doors, offering gardening work. It wasn’t long, however, before local clients realised that his skills extended way beyond a bit of hedge-trimming and lawnmowing. Cornwall being what it was, business began to thrive thanks to word-of-mouth recommendations. But in 2013, with Coutts private bank as a sponsor, Darren experienced another side to garden design.



Darren at Chelsea



Family garden, Penzance

“Winning my first award at Chelsea made no difference to my business in that I didn’t get loads of lovely enquiries afterwards, but it changed how I felt about the work. I began to ask: ‘How can I take a space and use it as a canvas to create something that is an artistic expression for myself?’ So it became a lot more rewarding, and hopefully more exciting for a client. It also makes business sense that you start differentiating yourself from other designers.” Although he admits that it was terrifying, and he made mistakes on that first show garden, many of the elements that he incorporated became something of a trademark. The chequered slate platform that featured in his Gold Medal-winning garden for Brewin Dolphin two years later had a precursor in the stone and brick sculptural forms in his original one. He says that he thinks that there’s a frustrated sculptor in him: “I see everything as a sculptural element. With more creative garden design, there’s this lovely opportunity to think of a material that may express your thoughts better than a plant, and you weigh up whether that’s appropriate.” He is keen to keep using manufactured materials like concrete or metal: “It’s that interplay between soft and fragile plants and something that is hard and manufactured. That’s what excites me.”

Perhaps because of his background in acting, Darren has a strong sense of empathy, eking out an



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understanding of a client before putting pen to paper. He investigates a person's taste, assesses whether they are an extrovert (who might like an elevated terrace), or an introvert (who might prefer a secluded garden with tall, cascading plants and deep borders), looks at their interior design and even their taste in music to get a handle on the initial style. In fact, he says, it is probably his favourite thing about his work – meeting and understanding his clients. The technical design process itself doesn't get his juices flowing in the same way. It's for this reason that he likes to be hands-on with his projects from start to finish – not just to ensure that the designs stay on track, but to maintain the relationship with the client. He now has two businesses – a garden build service called Wheelbarrow for clients in Devon and Cornwall, and the high-level design business providing garden designs for clients all over the country.

That empathy also gives Darren a strong social conscience. Perhaps his most impactful work to date has been the designs he created for Maggie's – a pioneering cancer care charity that fuses architecture and landscape design to create tranquil environments for those coping with cancer. His 2017 entry for RHS Chelsea was sponsored by Linklaters and focused on creating an outdoor environment that is subtly soothing to people who may be struggling with any number of issues connected with a cancer diagnosis. It was about providing space where people can be solitary and feel protected or can gather privately in family groups. Darren worked on designing "a landscape that is uplifting, supporting, calming, that provides a space where you may be able to sit on a bench and take five minutes to breathe and think..." With famed architects from Richard Rogers and Norman Foster to Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and Thomas Heatherwick chosen to design Maggie's Centres around the world, Darren Hawkes was in revered company, and determined to live up to their standards.

Maggie's was so impressed with the RHS Chelsea garden that they commissioned him to create a loch-side garden for the Maggie's Centre in Scotland and one at Barts Hospital in London. It clearly means a lot to him. "Our working life is so selfish and driven by aesthetic and money – particularly in the work I do – that to be able to do something that is really helping is such a gift." Could this be a turning point in his career? The passion is certainly there to transform our public spaces: "In our capital cities and large towns, there is an understanding that we need to create more green corridors," he says with passion. "We need more trees planted in our cities and towns, for wellbeing: people need more community-based spaces that can be adaptable and aren't prescriptive."

However, not one to get ahead of himself, Darren explains that public spaces tend to be created by landscape architects, rather than garden designers – a distinction which he says is largely to do with an understanding of regulations and experience in the 'desire lines' of the way that people move through a public space versus a private garden. While the experience of working with Maggie's was clearly transformative and he sees the need for improving communal spaces, Darren also thinks that private space has never been more vital: "I suspect that in a world that is so busy, in real terms of us running around and driving fast and working long hours, but also in terms of input from media and our phones and technology, the need to escape to a space which is yours – however small – which is private and calming is probably greater than it has been for a very long time."

This is clearly the stage for which Darren Hawkes was destined, his acting skills re-directed into producing an open-air theatre that relies on nature for its drama. **M**

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