



Above left: Carolyn Naish. **Above right:** Manuela Beste. Photo: Bernard Mordan.

Strictly Bed...vroom

Carolyn Naish, Director of Lauderdale House, and **Manuela Beste**, Head of Evelina Hospital School, on a recent dance programme developed with young participants

Over the past eight years Lauderdale House, an arts and education centre situated in a Grade II* listed building in Highgate, London, has been involved in placing artists from all art forms into children's hospitals as part of its outreach educational work.

This work started when Lauderdale House was asked to work with the school at Great Ormond Street Hospital over the three half term breaks each academic year. During term-time the young people in hospital have school lessons, but at half term they are encouraged to come down to the schoolroom to participate in different arts activities. Since then we have expanded the programme, working with different schools, trying different formats and experimenting with a variety of art forms.

Placing artists in a hospital setting has been extremely rewarding for both the artists and the participants. Trying to reach as many young people as possible, the artists have worked throughout the hospital - in the schoolroom, one-to-ones on the different wards, in dialysis (with babies, primary level plus 11-16 year-olds) with young people with psychological difficulties, and in isolation wards. Within each group the age range can vary and this has made work interesting to plan. The school chose the spread of children that were to be visited by the artists.

Often the young people have complex physical and learning requirements. What makes it really rewarding is when communication is established between the young people and the artists.

The most important aspect has been to make the work child-focussed. At no time were the artists asked to be either entertainers or therapists. The result of working in this way has meant that the artists are there to interact positively with the young people often achieving results that far outreached everyone's expectations. As a result the well-being and the health of the children seemed to improve.

Successes are personal, the experience touches both the artist and child in different ways. Particular examples that

stand out are when one young person walked his first four steps for the Physiotherapist because he wanted to get back to filming with an artist, and a young girl who had refused to communicate suddenly started to sing and articulate her difficulties in a music session.

But the most rewarding part of this work is being able to watch the point when the imagination takes over and you see young people escaping into a different realm. During the time at the Great Ormond Street Hospital, projects have included writing a Hospital Soap with Hampstead Theatre, composing and DJ'ing, sculpture graffiti and many other forms of visual arts.

During 2007 Lauderdale House was asked to introduce some dance and that was the starting point for looking for a choreographer who would be able to work within a hospital environment using the physical space and the objects that are associated with hospitals. Originally planned for another hospital the project transferred to the Evelina Children's Hospital School and was planned to work during school time. This work was funded by Clore Duffield Foundation and Bloombergs.

In Spring 2008, Lauderdale House in Highgate, commissioned Luca Silvestrini (the choreographer of Protein Dance) and three dancers (Luca Tong, Sally Marie and Pauline Huguet) to run a two week dance project, Strictly Bedvroom, at the Evelina Hospital School in the Evelina Children's Hospital at Guys and St. Thomas. The aim of the project was to challenge all children - even those required to stay in their beds on the wards - to use their bodies and the hospital environment to bring about 'changes' and 'transformations'.

During the project, children (and adults!) came to see how their bodies could be used to communicate - and change - mood, feeling, meaning through movement. Hospital equipment and furniture were used as props, taking on new 'character' roles - e.g. a dividing bed screen became a shadow puppet theatre with the aid of a lamp; wheelchairs and beds were transformed into moving machines as

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All pictures: Protein Dance at the Evelina Children's Hospital, London. Photos: Roswitha Chesher.

children used arms and legs, high and low positions to run, crawl, roll, and leap through a tunnel of waves generated by a transparent blue-green cloth. Drip stands, dialysis chairs, the arched steel-framed windows of the atrium roof became 'props and scenery' in short two minute mime-stories.

Children explored the wide open spaces of the public atrium, often to a musical backdrop, getting hands-on experience of the different textures, shapes and temperatures to be found in the curved, flat, smooth, rough-edged surfaces found all around. They learnt to explore their own bodies, finding they could transform themselves into letters of the alphabet, letterboxes, bridges, tunnels, doors, windows and trains - the possibilities increasing the more hand and body parts worked together.

Drama, music and art workshops have been regular features of the Evelina Hospital School's extended curriculum and venturing into the world of dance was a new experience. It was a challenge to organise six dancers across nine medical departments on three wards, each with children of varying degrees of 'wellness' or ability to engage, but by day three, everyone had settled into a routine. Dancers worked one-to-one on the wards in the mornings with children unable to leave their beds. Children

of all ages joined the afternoon workshops held in the hospital's large, spacious atrium. In-patients were frequently joined by siblings, parents and carers, other relatives and school staff.

Hospital education has several complementary aims. For many children, coming into hospital is a daunting experience. This is particularly so for children with chronic or life-threatening conditions or complex disabilities, where repeated admissions and procedures are often necessary. The prospect of treatment can be frightening and cause deep-seated anxiety; treatment itself (and its aftermath) can be painful with long periods of inactivity and boredom; being away from home, family and friends can be an alienating and lonely experience. Hospital education has many purposes. Foremost among these, it is there to bring 'normality' and 'creative challenge' to a child's stay, thereby contributing to emotional and physical well-being.

The Strictly Bedroom project was highly successful at motivating children to engage both on the wards and in group workshops. Dancers linked closely with school and medical professionals to assess a child's ability to engage and adapted planned activities to meet the mixed age, mixed ability and complex needs of children who wished to



participate. Activities were fun and purposeful, containing a strong element of problem solving, reflective thinking and co-operative learning.

In a hospital context, clientele changes daily. Children, who participate on day one of a project, are often no longer there by day three. Similarly, new children are to be welcomed and initiated. The choreographer had been briefed about these challenges beforehand. Each afternoon workshop was a self-contained unit, with skills and activities of subsequent workshops complementing those that had gone before. This model worked well, allowing new arrivals in hospital to be integrated into the group with sensitivity and ease, while longer-stay patients could extend and build on previously learnt skills.

The aims of the project had been two-fold: to make children more aware of their bodies and how movement could be used to communicate and transform reality; to engage children in the creation of dance as an art form for purposes of performance. The choreographer and dance team were particularly keen for children to develop a 'sense of audience' for their performance and to 'be a reflective audience'. With children performing one-to-one by the bedside and others performing in the atrium away from

bedside view, giving live performances with audience participation was clearly going to be difficult. In addition, with a constant stream of children joining and leaving the project throughout the two-week period, it was clear there could be no 'gala performance'.

Lauderdale House came up with the solution - engage a filmmaker. Roswitha Cheshire recorded all aspects of the project, from its initial planning phase through to dance sessions on the wards, workshops in the atrium and children's rehearsed mini-performances. Her collaboration brought a third dimension to the project: children could perform to camera. Children could 'review' performances, becoming reflective practitioners and / or critics of others. Roswitha was also commissioned to produce a final film of the project - part documentary, part performance. This two-part film was launched at the Evelina Children's Hospital to a mixed audience of children, parents, school staff and hospital professionals. The DVD has been circulated to participant's homes and schools, extending further the potential for audience participation and performance appreciation.

contact cnaish@lauderdale.org.uk

www.communitydance.org.uk