

An embodied understanding



Main image: Linzy Na Nakorn. Inset, clockwise from top left: Holly Thomas; Louise Fryer and Louise Brown. Training event at 101 creation space. Photos: Sebastian Fry.



The Velcro Collective is a female-led dance, theatre and participatory arts collective based in the South West of England, that brings outdoor performance to life for visually impaired and sighted children and family audiences. Co-founder, **Louise Brown**, shares the uniquely collaborative process behind their latest show, *Crunch*, in conversation with visually impaired dancer, **Holly Thomas** and audio describer, **Dr. Louise Fryer**.

I co-founded The Velcro Collective with Lucy Ellis Howell in 2018. We had worked in inclusive dance practice as performers, practitioners, and producers since we were teenagers, way back in 1994! Early experience with Candoco has gone on to influence our practice, ethos and values. We aim to introduce unusual partnerships to outdoor spaces, creating new experiences for underrepresented artists and communities. Here, I want to share a little about our latest performance piece, *Crunch*, and the creative process behind it.

Through our process of making inclusive dance in outdoor spaces, we have discovered the delights and challenges of making work that is equally engaging and accessible for visually impaired and sighted children and their families. We have worked in woodland clearings, on playing fields, on common land and in curated spaces including Westonbirt Arboretum (Forestry England).

Crunch is an interactive outdoor dance theatre show telling stories from the forest and exploring our relationship with nature. We co-created it in 2022 with visually impaired children and their families as an inclusive performance, integrating audible sound and words, textural offerings and participatory elements.

Working in collaboration with visually impaired dance artist and collaborator, Holly Thomas and audio describer, Louise Fryer, alongside our artists and the families, we explored different methods of finding access for our audiences. We noticed how this differs when working in outdoor spaces, away from the more traditional indoor theatre experience of listening to audio description through headsets.

I want audiences to 'feel' the performance, kinaesthetically, not just as passive receivers. I want to enable our audiences to feel, touch, listen, make noise, and actively be part of the performance. We >>



Above: Linzy Na Nakorn & Bryn Thomas. Below: Tim Phelps. Crunch Sharing event Westonbirt Arboretum Photos: Lee Precious.

have been researching and finding out what works with our audiences and reimagining how we work with established audio description tools within our process. We wanted to share with you some of our discoveries, so I've invited Holly and Louise Fryer in conversation to share their experiences of being involved in the process....

Q: Louise (Fryer), what was your main interest in exploring this collaboration with us and Holly and why?

A: I've felt for a long time that audio description (AD) works best when it's integrated into the performance and when the creative artists are directly involved, rather than access being delegated to an external practitioner who adds on their description once the performance is complete.

Describing dance is especially challenging. The dancers are the experts and having the opportunity to work with them and involve them in the AD was a great opportunity, especially as Holly has a visual impairment herself and an interest in exploring where AD could go.

I also feel that AD can be more creative if it's not purely verbal. In outside spaces, the ambient



sound of rustling leaves, birdsong, the snapping of twigs and branches are often overlooked by sighted people. These can be hugely helpful to blind people as a way of establishing location and a sense of place. Even when describers do use words, the way those words are expressed, using a sound palette of pitch, dynamics and emotional timbre can evoke responses in those listening that bring an embodied understanding, not just recognition of their strict semantic meaning.

AD is a performance that also aids guided looking for sighted children who may be attending



VI family event. Photo: The Velcro Collective.

a dance performance for the first time and be uncertain where to focus. This way, AD can make the performance more accessible for all families. At least, that's the theory! This was an exciting opportunity to try it in practice.

Q: And Holly, can you give us a bit of insight into maybe a couple of the creative challenges that emerged as part of the process?

A: There was an interesting interplay between the development of the descriptive narrative and the choreography. It was quite challenging developing these two threads alongside each other. There were times when we needed to 'drop the description' and give the dancers the space they needed, to explore and develop the movement material. We would then focus on interweaving the description into the dance. At other times, we began with single words, sounds or spoken phrases and asked the dancers to generate movement phrases in response to these.

There was a lot to think about with regard to the timing of both the descriptive narrative and the movement, so that both worked harmoniously. At times our process involved quite a bit of 'toing and froing'. We found ourselves writing and re-writing

descriptive text and shifting the timings within the choreography to allow phrasing of both the dance and description. For me, collaborating with the team, to generate inclusive and engaging choreography, was a rich and creative process.

Q: How did the process work for you Louise F. in relation to the written audio description elements and working with Holly and Louise B. on this?

A: Describers are used to working on their own or with a fellow describer who might suggest a few changes. It was quite a shock to find my words completely re-written. Holly and Louise B. turned the description into a narrative flight of fancy. My role shifted to one in which I was trying to ensure the AD still reflected what was happening visually. I loved the vocal input of the dancers and, although the whole process took longer, it was in many ways a relief to share the access 'burden' with the company. But it involved a shift in mindset to realise my carefully crafted words were dispensable. >>



Linzy Na Nakorn, Crunch Sharing event Westonbirt Arboretum Photo: Lee Precious.



VI family event. Photo: The Velcro Collective.

Q: Holly, what would you say are your main artistic takeaways from making Crunch?

A: It was amazing to see how quickly the performers were able to work with and hold the creative description and find the interplay between the spoken word and the physicality of their movement. There were so many creative and artistic gains from embedding inclusive practice from the very beginning of the project.

As a visually impaired dancer and spectator, I often find that live dance performance feels distant or 'out of reach', so I was really interested to think about how we might bring the dance to the audience and work with proximity. It was great to have the chance to work with Louise and the team and try out some ideas with the performers and with our audience. I really enjoyed witnessing the audience's responses to the micro-audio-dances that travelled around the performance space. I also loved the sensory descriptive language and playful interactive choreography that arose from working with natural materials, such as fallen leaves, twigs and soil.

I have learned a lot about making work for young audiences. As a team, we needed to ensure that the show was both accessible and engaging for all the young people that we worked with. So, we had to consider the vocabulary we used, and how we might use sounds in ways that were both playful and descriptive.

For example, we created a character who guided the audience through the woodland into the performance space. Sonny 'the woodsman' used music, song and story, to describe the visual and sensory elements of the natural surroundings, the performers' appearance, their costumes and moments of the choreography.

Reflecting on the process and the journey we have been on with the team, there have been a series of key learnings:



VI family event. Photo: Lee Precious.

- Collaboration and working inclusively from the outset is a given for us, but we need to recognise the time this takes and consider this in the planning stages
- We need to make sure there is enough time and space, in and out of the studio, to work on each layer of the inclusive performance as they are all interlinked and constantly affect one another (movement, sound, descriptive story telling)
- This collaborative process of creating accessible work is fun, playful and joyous. We had to take risks and test new ways of finding those truly integrated moments of learning along the way
- Every process is different depending on the work we are making, but we always connect with visually impaired (VI) artists, the VI community, and audio describers in the process. This collaborative process enables the work to develop authentically by the community which the performance is aimed at
- We've also learnt, however, that our work has impacted other audiences including under 5's, SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabled) children and neurodiverse children and adults due to the multi-layered accessible content built within it. We will be going on to explore this further in our works.

We have been carefully documenting this rich process for future use and sector sharing and already delivered a locally based, nationally well-attended training at 101 Outdoor Arts in partnership with People Dancing. Depending on the outcome of funding applications, Crunch will be touring in 2023/24. We are always keen to learn, develop practice, exchange and share and we welcome new connections and collaborations. Please do get in touch.

Info

thevelcrocollective@gmail.com

www.thevelcrocollective.com

Crunch! Trailer: <https://youtu.be/HnEyLwkEwRO>