

Gerry Turvey.
Photo: Andy Wood



Different landscapes

In September 2011 **Kim Gregory** and **Gerry Turvey** from Hoot Creative Arts in Huddersfield took a group of adults with mental health needs to perform a dance piece in Cape Town South Africa. This is the story of the life-changing journey of that adventure

Hoot Creative Arts has been delivering dance and music workshops for Adults with mental health needs for the past ten years.

In 2011 we took ourselves well out of our comfort zone, and to the other side of the world to share our practice and perform in front of audiences of up to 500 people.

During the past three years, Gerry Turvey has been developing the work of the dance group (LocoMotion) at Hoot and when they were invited to be part of the VSA (Very Special Arts) disability arts festival in Cape Town there was no hesitation and no choice but to go!

This was a major undertaking for Hoot, getting a group of mental health service users overseas to perform live on an international stage to large audiences. It took courage and commitment on the part of the LocoMotion dance participants, and they rose to the challenge.

Of course there wasn't enough time to raise the funds – but we did it. Of course there wasn't enough time to make the piece – but we found it. Of course we couldn't take such vulnerable people on a 12 hour plane journey and stay in Africa, but we did! Our vision and shared belief with those

at the festival came to inspire us 'it's impossible – but do-able'!

The piece

In just under two weeks, in every snatched moment we had, the group committed to rehearsing, preparing and planning the trip. The choreography was inspired by the idea of landscape: the dramatic landscapes of Yorkshire and of Cape Town as well as the idea of our personal ever changing inner landscapes. The group also created hand painted costumes with landscapes on the front and back.

One of the main features of this project was to do with holding one's nerve; the trip demanded a high level of commitment to an anxiety-provoking enterprise for both staff and the participants with mental health needs. These high levels of anxiety led to some challenging behaviours that needed careful management. However the benefits of the trip and the dancing outweighed this, to inspire, enhance and develop participants lives. A staff team of artistic input, participant support, and senior management was clearly good judgement. In addition a young dancer (Alison Grace) joined us as a volunteer, who helped in both the

artistic process and the overall support needed. We discovered that anything is possible, and not to be bound by expectations.

Performing

In Cape Town we found incredible warmth and hospitality with a spirit of sharing culture and creativity. Our input proved to be successful and we added to the achievement and the artistic content of the VSA festival. This was accomplished by the commitment, energy and enthusiasm, volunteered time and sheer belief on the part of all involved.

The combined impact has been quite profound – members of the dance group became a dance company, with a confidence and trust between themselves that is strong and evident to audiences. This alone has had a lasting positive effect on members' wellbeing and mental health. Members continue to cite the trip to South Africa as being a turning point in their wellbeing.

Two performances of our piece took place at Artscape Theatre in Cape Town, to audiences, many of whom were disabled people themselves. Following this we stayed at a 'living art farm' where we shared practice and

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performed again to a group from a local township who are working with music making and puppetry to inspire hope and aspiration in an area where 70% of the local population are living with the long-term effects of drug and alcohol abuse. The impact of this collaboration was quite intense and reflective for all of us. Participants of LocoMotion gained insights into how other cultures could live and this gave them some sense of the value of their own lives.

One LocoMotion participant said "I feel like I have seen the other side of South Africa. The real people not the tourist side. I feel like I have started a new life. It's the first day of my new life. So I will go back with a new attitude. Like shedding a skin as a snake would do".

The LocoMotion dancers expressed their feelings about their considerable achievements, increased self-worth and a lasting sense of expansion by sharing performance with the local musicians and dancers. Taking part in cross artform workshops with disabled children, and spending time with other artists, including drama students from Mpumalanga in South Africa, musicians

and workshop leaders from Europe, opened their perspective on how positive and life affirming the effect of arts practice is.

Returning

All group members kept a diary and together we created a blog and a film. All of this was disseminated around Yorkshire on our return in the form of a 'mini tour' including showing the performance and running workshops.

Feedback from audiences included the following:

"What an unbelievably inspiring performance – you should be so proud of your achievements."

"I enjoyed and was moved by this piece, and I felt that by watching it I was included in it."

Further learning from this whole experience, continues to inform Hoot's work as we expand our offer of opportunities to get involved in dance and creative activity for health and wellbeing.

It's difficult to catalogue the impact of such complex experiences for individuals, but since returning there is evidence from participants of them

being inspired artistically, of them being more self-accepting and more open to change. For some members this is a seismic change. As users of the mental health system the impact of this is possibly greater than with any other group. It has helped them towards a more sustainable recovery that has a lasting and ongoing positive impact on their wellbeing. This trip was in fact life changing.

Perspectives gained from the trip will also inform our artistic practice, passing on learning to a wider constituency back here in the UK. This is an undertaking that everyone involved feels very proud of, and continues to impact on all of our lives and in our dancing.

Of course there wasn't funding to cover the production of a film – but we made one anyway... The whole event was impossible... but do-able.

To see the short film of our experience and video diary go to YouTube <http://bit.ly/13H1f81>

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visit www.hootcreativearts.co.uk



Kim Gregory and Alison Grace, Different Landscapes, LocoMotion Dance. Photo: Participant