

each member of the group to share a word and a movement that described something about their experience at the end of the session. We went round the circle with each person speaking and moving his or her truth, each with their own gesture and tone. It came to the woman in question.

She looked somehow different now, softer perhaps. With tears in her eyes, she said, “belonging”, and her fingers and hands meandered down like roots from a thirsty tree to clasp the two hands of the participants either side of her. She squeezed these hands with a punctuated silence that left a resonance that filled the space with an indescribable richness.

‘Soul’ is the word I would use to describe this richness that seemed to hang in the air like a scent that day. It is, for now, the only word I can find that is large enough to hold, without reducing the expansiveness of, what she shared. It seems that dance and the experience of being in our bodies can be like a compass; it can be a way of orientating us to what is important and, often, to what is hidden or lost within us, whatever age we are.

Making time to wonder is paramount, and to remember the importance of wondering. The imagination is as vital in older age as it is in our childhood. It is a resource like the dance, which is always available to us.

So, as we move our histories, our histories move us. We can honour all that has been in our life in each dance, but we can also shake its grip on us; both are inextricably linked to each other. But whatever is revealed in the dance, as we get older it is important to have a space where we can be reminded that we belong; to each other, to ourselves, but also to the larger mystery that dancing and listening to the body can lead us towards.

Perhaps those moments of connection, in the dance with each other, move us that little bit closer to feeling ourselves into the answer of why we’re here.

Info

www.caitomos.com
caitomos@me.com

Standing alone

Carol Brown, Artistic Director of TAN Dance, gives a glimpse into the creation of Sorrowful Sun, a People Dancing – Wales Commission, and how an international partnership supported the dancers to work independently and achieve true and touching performances

Awarded one of the Wales Commissions for the People Dancing International Event, I wanted to use this opportunity to realise a dream to create a company of learning-disabled dancers with high artistic standards along the lines of the Spanish company Asi Somos, run by Onil Vizcaino. Asi Somos dance alone, very successfully, with no support workers. Watching such a company dance unaided, you realise that a very different and potent message is being conveyed. The award allowed me to work under Onil’s mentorship to create an inaugural work for performance at People Dancing in Cardiff in November 2014.

Onil would work with myself and my team, tutor and facilitator Cathy Coombs, and Associate Artist Leila Bebb. He would make two visits to

Wales and electronic communication would be constant over the ten weeks of the project. We would hold six-hour rehearsals once a week for nine weeks with two short residential courses close to the performance date.

The heart of our approach would be using dance as a field of action to give value to difference. We would work to the abilities and needs of each dancer while challenging them to go beyond what they thought would be possible. Onil talked with us about how we all have cognitive and perceptive processes that enable us to relate to the world around us and that for people with diverse capacities, these processes are influenced and limited by society’s assumptions of their abilities. Our dancers would have developed habits and strategies that might need to be broken through >>



Dragon’s Heart and Dragon’s Soul company, Sorrowful Sun. Photo: Gary Bevan



Dragon's Heart and Dragon's Soul company, Sorrowful Sun.
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freeing them to become versions of themselves that they hadn't thought possible. Onil warned us that our timescale might be too tight to achieve what we wished.

We had set ourselves a challenging task: to create a new company of six males and six females with learning disabilities who would dance a 30 minute piece unaided by support workers. This company, Dragon's Heart and Dragon's Soul, would take class and workshops, create material, live together on the residential courses and perform in a high profile venue. Our dancers were aged from late teens to early sixties and very diverse in their abilities; seven had Down's Syndrome and the others, a mixture of Autism and other learning difficulties.

Company rules and etiquette set the tone of what was expected. Rehearsals were a mixture of non-

technical warm-ups, contemporary technique class, drama and focus exercises, lots of emphasis on breath, exploration of material for the piece, and formation and rehearsal of the work to be performed. It was a big learning curve for all of us. For the dancers, the discipline of technique class and learning to create together with new people; for the staff, many things! An example was learning new techniques to convey information. For instance, if the dancer is motionless and is gazing on a focused point after receiving direction, this is an indication that they are searching their minds to try and understand; if their eyes are darting around they are not understanding and we must find another way of conveying information, such as visual aids and diagrams.

I thought it important that the work created had serious themes and content. I talked through my idea with the company and we began to create Sorrowful Sun, a Romeo and Juliet story based in a current conflict between two factions in the Middle East. The piece encompassed celebration, battle, love and grief and so demanded many different dynamics and dramatic portrayals beyond the dancers' lived experiences. I would avoid creating a piece using such a specific narrative with many of the groups I work with but I find that learning-disabled people have a purity of intent that can carry stories without cliché or exaggeration. This ability to perform from the heart is very moving to watch.

It was a scary time. A few weeks from the performance date, our piece, Sorrowful Sun, was coming together but still a long way from being performed independently without prompting. We had to keep the process pleasant for the dancers. Some were finding the standard we were working towards challenging. Onil kept assuring us that it was okay to keep encouraging people to push past their limits. I felt a huge sense of responsibility to my team, to the dancers and to the funders. Had I overreached?

It was common to have dancers missing from rehearsals and the residencies became more and more important as the time we would pull everything together. Artistically, this became the case but the residencies brought their own challenges. As with all people, the experience of living together shone a light on everyone's character. There was laughter, tears, fallings out, romances. We encouraged self-management rather than staff intervention, supervising the company members to respectfully voice their annoyance with each other and request better behaviour. By the end of the first residency, we were at the refining stage and we had a triumphant run through without prompting. We also had a company that was feeling like a family. Had we done it?

The Dragons had the opportunity to dress run Sorrowful Sun to an audience at TAN Dance's gala in Swansea a few days before the People Dancing performances in Cardiff. The audience response was hugely encouraging for the dancers and for the team. Then we had the problem of getting a company of people who felt they had reached their goal to work even harder to further improve the work for Cardiff. We watched Onil dig deeper with the dancers to elicit performances that were true and touching.

An exhausted but happy team watched our Dragons reach new heights and deeply move an international audience at People Dancing. Being able to learn from Onil's experience and expertise has taken our work to a much higher level. Our task now is to move the company forward. Onil has suggested that we have a social programme as well as a work programme and the Dragons have already enjoyed an Indian meal in a restaurant together. I think it's bowling next...

Info

www.tandance.org
carol@tandance.org