

Dancing the Self: How movement for women became a women's movement

Performer, choreographer and facilitator **Zosia Jo Dowmunt** takes us to Egypt to share her story of how the research workshops for her solo dance work, (Un)Covered, provided the space to explore expression, empowerment and embodying the Self with women in Cairo

Like many things, this project grew organically. I'd been living and working as a dance artist in Cairo on and off for two years and was full to the brim with inspiration from the energy and challenges that came with it. From the openness and passion of every audience member, workshop participant and artist, to the beautiful but decaying architecture, overwhelmingly busy streets and relentless noise. The biggest challenge was being a woman here, with street harassment at endemic levels and a deeply entrenched misogyny.

Yet on the other hand, my own prejudice was crumbling around me. Just like many other British white middle class children, I was raised to respect other cultures but did not necessarily have much opportunity to fully understand them. I've met amazing women here, some who are veiled against the wishes of their families, and some who've removed their hijab and been met with fierce condemnation. The UK streets are not free of street harassment, and being a sexual object is no better than being hidden. The idea that Muslim women are more oppressed than the rest of us feels limiting for us all.

During my time in Cairo, I made a solo dance work called (Un)Covered as a protest against the politicisation of women's bodies via the clothes they wear. The piece advocated for autonomous choice above all else.

It was vital to me that as much as possible I involved Egyptian women in the creation of this work. I wanted to be able to tour it widely and easily so the most appropriate way of doing this was to involve them in the research. I started with a two-week course of workshops with a group of women, most of whom had never danced before. We explored empowering movement and embodying the Self. I entitled the course 'Dancing the Self' because I wanted to encourage them to inhabit their bodies fully and express themselves freely. At the end of the two weeks, I filmed some material and created a two-minute film, which is projected during (Un)Covered.

That first week, I planned the content fairly instinctively: simple phrase work; improvisations around reclaiming personal space; drawing and painting in imaginary colours; mirroring a partner... Each day, after playing around a theme, I offered a creative task and asked participants to perform. I'd not worked that much with adults in community settings before but I'd witnessed how directed play can be empowering so I applied many of the structures I've used with young people and adjusted my delivery style. I was amazed by the incredible power creative play had for adult women. Sometimes a participant was so blocked in a meditative exercise; finding it so hard to go inwards.

But then in an energetic movement game she became so confident and later, having had that experience, more connected to herself and willing to go deeper.

The first week was so over-subscribed that the studio asked me to run another. That stimulated need for some kind of progression and I created a further five-day course of workshops for those who wanted to keep dancing. When word spread, more and more women wanted to sign up. I am currently leading the fourth and fifth groups through the introductory course, which brings the total to more than 100 women.

The more I have led the course, the more I've examined what makes it work. There is the simple fact that women in Cairo lack spaces where they can come together and socialise away from the male gaze. This privacy gave those women who wear one the choice to remove their hijab. Some veils can physically restrict neck and head movement and make exercise less enjoyable, as well as it not being considered modest to move your body in certain ways in front of men. Even women who are not veiled often feel inhibited by the male gaze. By having a women only group, we enabled more veiled women to experience dance, without the fear that it is contrary to their religion and without the need to wear their hijab. We gave all women the chance to be physical and sensual >>



without inhibition. One woman told me that until the third day of the course, when she wore a vest, not even her parents had seen the skin of her collar bone and shoulders for years. She said she was liberated in being seen, within a safe environment, free of judgment. The other women showered her with compliments on her body. She glowed. Especially in such a hot climate, the feeling of uncovering the skin to the air is a beautiful sensation, one that I'm afraid I always took for granted until now.

An exercise we called 'starfish', where the mover expands out to a star shape on the floor and then curves into the center whilst rolling from the back surface of the body to the front in time with the breath, was a staple the participants came to love. It is useful not only for its dance-based benefits of core activation and smooth, efficient coordination, but also for its sensory feedback. Visiting fetal position, laying on the belly and the back, and moving through flexion/extension of the spine unwinds the flight/fight stress reflex and reduces tension, making the whole body receptive and available for movement. I started taking the opening and closing with the breath further, into a free improvisation, and planted the idea that they could be in control of when to be open to people and when to close; that they could fix their own boundaries and manage their own feelings. In Psychotherapy training, I learned that by building awareness we can process our feelings and responses, rather than being a victim of them. Instead of thinking that events or people 'make us' feel a certain way, we can acknowledge a feeling and then decide to address it. In a culture where even things like being on time is left to God's will - "I'll be there, Insha'Allah..." - this was a bit of a revelation. I witnessed the women sometimes getting tearful simply from moving in a certain way; sometimes laughing and giggling uncontrollably; and sometimes smiling naturally to themselves while they danced.

Partner work and performance has also been a vital element. It allows women to be affirmed, witnessed and praised as well as being more social. We create dances around ideas like carrying a ball of energy, power poses, wearing favourite clothes or



Photo: Roy Campbell-Moore

expressing feelings. We finish every session with a sharing to rapturous applause and each participant reflects on one thing she appreciates about herself from the session, and one thing she appreciates about someone else, allowing us all to see the progress we're making.

Some women came despite injuries or illness and discovered their body was more able than they realised. Others arrived hating their body, focusing only on how it looked, but left knowing how to be kind to themselves, appreciating what their body can do. "This has been a transforming journey for me", Sarah explained, "I love myself more. I love my body more." This confidence went beyond fitness or dance, it was also about women taking space in a society that can often be male dominated. Participant Yousra said, "Feeling expanding in space for the first time, as if loudly saying to the world with all the power and will I have: I'm here, here to influence and express. Now I can feel flying to overcome all disappointments and failures, believing that I have all the right to make mistakes, to learn and to cope; there is no wrong, there is a space for all of the mess of me to deeply accept myself and even be welcomed by the world...It was the Dancing the Self community." That spirit and the enthusiasm

with which a community of women approached the work is why I call it a movement. It feels both personal and political.

In April 2017, I recreated (Un)Covered as a group piece with 26 of the women I had worked with previously. (Un)Covered - En Masse has been a highlight of my career. It was true to the original spirit of the work to see such a diverse group of women, each so invested in their performance and empowered by the act of taking to the stage. These 26 women were all different shapes and sizes, from different religious and class backgrounds; some performing veiled, some in short dresses with hair down and flowing. Each was beautiful and spectacular. It felt like it had been too easy, like I'd barely done anything, simply provided a space and the women had blossomed into it in all their glory. It was humbling. I'll never forget the sight of them shaking, twisting and punching the air, patriarchal control vanishing to dust in their wake.

Info

(Un)Covered will be performed at Rich Mix, London on 30 September 2017.
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