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# Cake, communitas and contact

Dance artist, educator, researcher and performing member of Amici Dance Theatre Company, **Lizz Fort** on the stories we share through dancing together

It was my birthday when I received an email from People Dancing asking if I'd like to contribute to this issue of *Animated*. So, in the spirit of birthdays I started writing about cake, which is a regular feature of Amici Dance Theatre Company's class on a Wednesday evening. There is a running joke that it is always somebody's birthday, which isn't surprising for a company with a 46-strong cast for its production *Tightrope*, in summer 2017. Add to that the production team at Turtle Key Arts(1) and it's easy to see how cake becomes integral to the company's ecology. Whilst we all find great humour in the continuous stream of birthdays, this company ritual represents a celebration of the diverse individuals in its community, the sense

of belonging and care for each other.

There is much more to Amici's story than cake. Under the artistic direction of Wolfgang Stange, Amici's diverse intergenerational company of disabled and non-disabled artists perform and deliver workshops and residencies worldwide, "challenging conventional attitudes about disability and the arts." Amici runs a weekly class for its 40+ members at The Lyric, Hammersmith where they are the resident community arts company, free Young Amici classes for 11-25-year-olds (currently recruiting for dancers) and a range of university placement opportunities.(2)

For me, at the heart of Amici are the less tangible, magical ingredients. These are the deeply felt, transitional and transformational experiences

that I often stumble to explain with words. And so I turn to anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner to help me articulate this. In her beautifully titled *Communitas: An Anthropology of Collective Joy*(3), Edith Turner extends the work of her husband Victor Turner who proposed the anthropological use of the concept of 'communitas'(4) in the 1960s(5,6). The book's front cover bears an uncanny resemblance to Amici's logo, a black silhouetted circle of people joined hand in hand, symbolising the start and finish of an Amici class. In this circle we witness and dance in solo, small group and whole class improvisations. It is this common experience that I think the Turners would agree nurtures a loss of ego and a rise of unity which >>



Amici workshop. Photo: Nik Mackey.



Tightrope, Amici's 30th anniversary show. Photo: Sheila Burnett.

are essential for *communitas* to spontaneously emerge(3, p3).

These collective experiences give rise to personal stories and Edith Turner proposes that “*communitas* can only be conveyed properly through stories. Because it is the sense felt by a plurality of people...”(3, p1). I would extend this to suggest that this ‘sense’ can also be felt by the many visitors that take part in our Amici classes, who have their own stories of their time with the company. One of my students on the Professional Dancer’s Teaching Diploma at the Royal Academy of Dance(7) visited the last class of Summer Term 2017, which included a rather epic, extended, large group improvisation. At this point in her studies, she had been away from her home in Mumbai, India, for a few weeks. Afterwards, we were enjoying Wolfgang’s birthday cake and I asked her about her experience in the class. She thought for a moment and with great sincerity and warmth, said that the class had reminded her how much she had missed human, physical touch since being away from her home. She said the class was the first time she had ‘felt at home’ since she had arrived in the UK. I immediately empathised with this aesthetic experience and was thrilled that in one session she had managed to articulate what I had been trying to articulate for three years. This, to me, felt like a story of *communitas*.

Her comments about human touch

are poignant here. In the experience of *communitas* through dance, touch and improvisation can connect a group of people in a profound way. In spring 2017, Amici Assistant Director Colm Gallagher, Amici dancer Stuart Cowie and I facilitated a project in a school with a group of children with medical, physical and emotional learning needs. About three weeks into the project we had been continually astounded by their focus, eye contact, commitment and sensitivity to one another during group improvisations. In week three my sense was that the group had united in this experience. I cannot comment on whether the children ‘felt’ *communitas*; nevertheless, in our discussion afterwards, the children had noticed key moments of personal and group significance in the improvisation, such as examples of copying, mirroring and working together. The school teacher also added an excellent link to the topic of ‘appropriate touch’ and a wider school initiative about safe touch and trusted adults. He referred to the adults in the space being people the children could trust. We talked about how it was OK to say no if someone initiated touch. Our improvisation had opened up a learning experience about creativity, inclusion and some of the ethical issues around participation.

These two short stories of *communitas* are a window into Amici’s practice. As an artist-researcher

and educator, these kinesthetic and affective moving experiences are a rich source of research and personal development for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Amici’s practice and the company’s performers challenge us to think about: who can dance; what dance can be; improvisation as a pedagogic, choreographic and performative tool; and the joy and feelings of connection and togetherness that dance can facilitate.

Finally, if you have stories of *communitas* to share, I would love to hear from you. I think stories, letters and conversations are some of the best ways to document and archive the diversity of community dance practice. A small group of us in London have started a community dance discussion group that meets about every two months at The National Theatre. If you would like to join us, please get in touch.

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### Info

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2. [www.amicidadance.org/about/amici-dance-theatre-company](http://www.amicidadance.org/about/amici-dance-theatre-company)
3. Turner, Edith. (2012) *Communitas: the anthropology of collective joy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan
4. In cultural anthropology, this is defined as “a strong sense of solidarity and bonding that develops among people experiencing a ritual, rite of passage, or other transitional state together.” [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/communitas](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/communitas)
5. Turner, Victor. (1964) *Between and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*. Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion, edited by June Helm, 4-20. Paper presented at the annual spring meetings of the American Ethnological Society, Chicago
6. Turner, Victor (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine
7. For more information on the RAD’s PDTD course, see [www.rad.org.uk/study/higher-education/higher-education-1/professional-dancers-teaching-diploma-1](http://www.rad.org.uk/study/higher-education/higher-education-1/professional-dancers-teaching-diploma-1)