

Paul Huc (Entrust) with participant. Photo: Mary Grigg and Emma Smith.



Telling Tall Dance Tales

Artist **Mary Grigg** talks about her inclusive work during a 12-week dance project based on Aesop's Fables for children

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Top: Sofia Mirza and Daisy Swaby with participants exploring images that emerged from *The Tortoise and the Hare*.
Above: A moment of rest with props.
Left: Representing and showing the relationship between partners.
All photos: Mary Grigg and Emma Smith.

How can I begin to explain my first outing as a community dance artist? How can I piece together words that would do justice to the experience that was the Tall Dance Tales (TDT)?

Well, these were 12 inclusive, collaborative dance sessions for key stage 2 children, with and without additional needs, based on Aesop's well-loved fables. They were to culminate in a final performance at the RSC's The Other Place in Stratford-Upon-Avon. The project was born out of a chance meeting with locally based organisation Entrust Care Partnerships, a social enterprise caring for children, young people and adults with disabilities and would be my first 'funded' venture with KiTh.

KiTh being my emerging organisation meaning: acquaintances, friends, neighbours, or the like. This was my first collaboration, my first funded project, my first time with mostly children with additional needs. So lots of firsts.

I had always worked as a paid performer in commercial theatre or as a freelancer teaching artist, so asking for money from funders was another challenge I needed to get used to.

The previous fifteen years I had founded and developed The Tap 'n' Groove Dance Workshops and a myriad of children have passed through the door, many with diverse and additional needs. Over the years I have seen an increase in anxiety and tense bodies in the children I work with, most of them transferring from sitting at desks at school to my dance sessions. Some want to let rip as soon as they get in a dance environment and some want to shut down. At worst, I have seen an increase in mental health issues with teenagers, so it has been clear to me that young people carry a lot more around with them than bones, muscle and flesh. I wonder have I served them well as an educator, a facilitator? At times, I'm not so sure, but what was it in the past that got in the way. What was making me feel unsettled by the systems that were in place? What do I know now, that I didn't know then?

In retrospect, the last four years have seen a chameleon-like process; I feel a physical reaction in my body from what this experience has taught me, the people I have met and the

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knowledge they have shared with me. The first two years were heavily worded, cognitive and shifted my ideas on the many contexts of dance. I undertook an MA in Dance Pedagogy at Middlesex University and was led to the writings and ideas of Anna Halprin(1), Helen Poynor(2), Margaret Whitehead(3) and John Dewey(4). This heavily influenced my research inquiry at that time, seeking to understand: What are children getting from dance classes other than physical competences? What else is going on other than learning a bunch of steps and how to do them?

As a practitioner, I am now interested in the body and believe all bodies involved to be central to the creative collaborative process. I'm interested in the spaces in between those bodies and how they change and evolve. I think of it like a lava lamp, with dense matter that is tangible and soft moving around, shifting through space suspended, rising and falling in irregular and constantly changing shapes. I am curious to unpick the constrictive fields that we often place on dance and the embedded historical hierarchies that can drive our ideologies, habits and attitudes on what dance is. All this ruminating has culminated in what feels like a re-programming of my brain and all it stood for and, previously, believed in deeply. The approach to dancers' bodies, in regard to the scientific and the measurable can contribute to the fact that moving and dancing is actually something innately natural and honest and available to all of us. Movement is a way 'in' to discovering the creativity and potential in oneself; and that dance for a person can facilitate and grow the artist, not only putting emphasis on the skilful dancer but being another way of communicating. I questioned on what basis 'dance as an artform' is valued

and appreciated? I've come to believe in my own dancing that honesty in movement and the 'everyday' can be beautiful, touching and revealing.

All these strands led me to Helen Poynor's Walk of Life Training and to look at the community and the humanness of dance that begins with 'the body' and how those bodies relate and respond to one another. We all have a right to dance artistically, equally and share the same platform, whatever body structure we have and whatever we emotionally and experientially bring to that platform. These are our resources. Martha Graham once said it takes ten years to 'become' a dancer(1) yet Anna Halprin says it takes ten minutes.(5) How wonderful is that and I've had the pleasure of seeing her do it too.

On preparing for TDT it was the same as most dance projects I have worked on, it culminated in a performance. However, to unpick the thread that led to that final performance is to me what participatory dance practice is all about and something I had to experience and navigate for myself to find out, rather than learn from a textbook. It's unpredictable, it's connective, it gave agency to the participants and it was embodied and meaningful in a truly human and inclusive way. It also had some beautiful moments that no one could have planned. It communicated understanding, patience and acceptance; simple yet fundamental issues that can translate into wider society, a society where a culture of fear and distrust permeates widely. Participatory community dance can challenge agendas, can be raw and dangerous in a good way and it can be activism.

I felt different from the beginning of the project. There was something in the air after the initial sessions - we all felt it - the volunteers, the dance assistants and myself. I was very lucky to have great support workers and two students from Coventry University working with me as assistants, Sofia Mirza a 3rd year BA (Hons) Dance student and Sammy Wan a 2nd year BA (Hons) music student. This proved to add another creative thread as Sammy would use the images, feelings and memories that arose through the movement to create music for us >>

to use the following week. Another volunteer was Daisy Swaby (aged 16) from KiTh Youth Dance Company. I was keen to see how the flow between her and her young partner affected her, and her ideas on artistic practice. She told me she felt lucky to have gained the trust of her partner, a participant with additional needs. It had shown her that she had found a style of dance that suited her personality where everyone's growth and creativity was being noticed and there was kinaesthetic communication within the group.

It was very different than working on a fixed project maintaining that we all fit the same model. Seeds of trusted relationships had been nurtured - the communications, the processes, the planning, the noticing, the developing, it was all in there. There was an air of expectation in the group as to what might happen and that whatever that was, it was ok. We could dance, run, jump, draw, sing, shout, cry, play, rest. We gave the children a non-judgmental container for them to gain skill and control in their processes and for their dancing ideas to be followed. In fact, that unexpectedness became part of the development towards performance and it really suited the participants.

One example was when we were left without our recorded music and a child took a drum in his hands, started to play and a whole new piece was created. For the boy with Asperger Syndrome who had become primarily focused on the vibrations of the music player and had been very still, it was a way in, a new resource. We recycled this occurrence and so discovered a new creative method, to use the drum in the making of the dance. He ended up leading me to dance a duet with him. This is very different from my past when a teacher or choreographer held all the power and the aesthetic licence.

The four Aesop's Fables we worked with were: The Tortoise and the Hare, The Fox and the Crow, The Elephant and the Rat and The Boy Who Cried Wolf. The children would prise out themes, memories and images from the story, for instance what the animals feel like or sound like and these would be represented in their drawings, movement and discussions. The use of Lawrence Halprin's RSVP Cycles(6) was apparent and a key feature of



Sofia Mirza with participant.
Photo: Mary Grigg and Emma Smith.

the process. We would gather our Resources (R) which were mostly us, the children's histories and needs, our drawings, our ideas and props and our emotions, which were always very much on the surface. We would Score (S) and Valuation (V) (feeding back to our groups) where new resources (R) would be discovered and then performed (P) at the end of each session. The next week we would recycle, adjust our Scores and Perform again, chat about it and so on and so on until our sharing at the theatre; each time a new piece was created in time and space. On the final day we had wolves, poetry, feathers, flickering lights and carnival. It was exciting and the TDT group had built the skills and empowerment to work alone in front of a witnessing audience, a first for many.

The skill that community dance artists hold in the facilitating, listening, noticing, reflecting and even more so, the activism they bring, may be taken for granted by those that have practiced this way for years. However, for me, it has been a sort of unlearning, an awakening... stepping out then stepping in from a different direction. It has meant changing the way I lead and what I do. This new shape of my work and my new projects have a wholeness that is irreplaceable. The children in neat uniforms standing in lines have disappeared and been replaced by... well, anyone who wants to dance with me. Whatever age, shape or ability, it has empathy and kinaesthetic compassion at the centre of it, that to my experience ends up as

something that has more acceptance, more embodiment and more beautiful dancing bodies... a fizz in the air.

The discourse that surfaces in participatory dance I realise is an expanding field that could change perspectives in other fields too. How we relate to one another, allowing space to remind ourselves of the bodies we inhabit, vistas of the future, prizing out the creativity in others, in the everyday, in challenging a disciplinary society as to who holds the artistic licence, the power and changing landscape of performers and performing. I won't be looking back. I've learned that sometimes very subtle, intangible things are the most treasured.

Info

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