

A woman with short, curly brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark green long-sleeved top with a white feathered collar. Her right arm is raised high, with her hand open and fingers slightly curled. She has her eyes closed and a serene expression. The background is a solid, vibrant blue. The text "Dance of attunement" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

Dance of attunement

Louise Klarnett, The Maggie Project, filming. Photo: Alice Underwood.

What difference can a dance artist make to the lives of people in crisis? Since January 2019, independent artist **Louise Klarnett** has been the dance artist in residence at The Magpie Project, a community initiative for homeless under-fives and their mothers based in Newham, East London. Her words afford us an exclusive insight into this extremely protected space to witness the ‘dance of attunement’: a touchstone of the supremely delicate, ultra-responsive and deeply informed practice she has developed there both in person and online.

Over the past 23 years, I have developed an extensive dance and movement practice working across London, nationally, in-person and via zoom with young babies through to ninety-plus year olds, especially with those facing challenging circumstances. These include health issues, trauma, economic deprivation and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities).

The Magpie Project works with mums and under-fives in temporary or insecure accommodation. They provide families with practical essentials, advice and support from organisations and other professionals that include Shelter, London Black Women’s Project, Health Visitors and Children’s Centre Family Support Workers.

We collaborate to offer a drop-in supported stay and play at a small community building in Newham, East London. Within a three-hour session an average of 45 mothers and many more children come and go and get their needs – advice, advocacy, housing support, nappies, food, case work – met. The women accessing the project bear the physical and emotional effects of forced migration, homelessness, trafficking, FGM, abuse, violence. They live with a low sense of safety and unaddressed trauma exacerbated by their continuing insecure housing and immigration status.

Despite mothers’ enormous efforts and overcoming their own exhaustion, children display a disproportionate number of emotional, social, physical developmental issues and delays including, but not limited to, facial expression, language, communication, posture, feeding and eating, potty training, emotional regulation/ behaviour.

The Magpie Project works towards being trauma and psychologically informed and is moving towards a curiosity around being somatically informed too. Holding space for, centring and empowering mother and child with choice at every turn, can be a challenge for visiting professionals, who, on entering the space, are asked to leave their expectations, assumptions and entitlement – to attention, to time,

to being able to hear themselves think (!) at the door.

Mothers and children hold trauma within the body, which can influence their sense of themselves and connectedness to others. Their recovery from trauma involves a restoration of safety, relationships, self-regulation and creativity. (1)

To me, trauma is palpable in the space. It is noisy and can feel chaotic with almost everything happening on one large room. It is amongst this frenetic coming and going that I operate. My creative practice meets this head on, and I fully embrace it, but this work is not for everyone.

“How do you dance with someone you are not in a room with?”

The pandemic lockdown presented unique challenges. The whole dance world was faced with the question above, but this particular group of mums and children – already in crisis – was huge. We were reluctant to rush on to zoom and into any intervention that did not feel right, so took a few months in conversation with Dance Art Foundation (2) to think deeply about how we could engage mums and their children in a meaningful authentic way.

We created eight films (3) – gifts, each an open invitation to move, take time, make space – released in a curated way once a week, having sent out socks, feathers, phone holders (to aid viewing) to mums. These films and their very specific content remain a resource, have inspired in person workshops by others and been revisited by participants and myself in professional development/training.

“What are you doing?”

So, what difference can a dance artist in residence make to the lives of these mums and children, many of whom are still in the midst of their crises and struggles?

What is the point of ‘dancing’ when you have not slept or eaten? The Magpie Project holds a deep commitment to meeting mums’ physical and

>>

“The work I do in this context as a dance artist invites and creates safety, relationship (however brief) and is a window into creative expression.”



Louise Klarnett, The Magpie Project, filming. Photo: Alice Underwood.



The Magpie Project, filming. Photo: Louise Klarnett.

urgent practical needs first, moving through safety and belonging, culminating in healing and the transformational effects of joy. High quality creative provision and opportunities are offered within the same space as the nappies, shelter and other services.

In the past, I've led dance sessions and workshops for everyone in every combination: mums, 'minis' (babies and toddlers), staff, volunteers, sometimes just the mums, while volunteers take care of children. In dialogue with project founder, Jane Williams, we initially implemented this structure as a way of being able to 'measure, record and show' what we were doing. As we gained confidence in the work, we agreed what was preferable - for the time being - was a free flow, improvisational approach, in which I read, react, invite and respond to the energy, tone and needs presenting themselves in the room.

“How is this dance?”

A dance might start, or be, anywhere, wherever called and for however long. This means that the work benefits the babies and young children at the best time for them and in response to them. (A trauma informed approach). This could be on a mum's lap, while she is in conversation with a professional, encouraging visual tracking and facial expression relating to social engagement /polyvagal



theory (4); or dancing a baby into peaceful sleep, while a mum has a moment to get a cup of tea or make an important phone call. Dances might be big and bold, matching a child's energy and moving into supporting regulation, or almost invisible, listening deeply through presence and touch.

A dance or interaction might also be targeted, supporting a mum and 'mini' with English as a second language. For example, a 'conversation' may occur wherein her baby sitting upright might seem 'good' e.g. being propped up against cushions or similar. I encourage floor time first, however, to integrate primitive reflexes, to build and support the physical strength to sit unaided, the natural patterns of development. These 'conversations' between us use few words, occasionally translators, but mostly gestures.

“What is attunement?”

Interaction may involve bringing mum and child into relationship through supported attunement, encouraging the witnessing of their child. While attachment is the emotional bond between parents and children, attunement is the way we “tune in” to a child's needs, work to understand their thoughts, respond to how they are feeling and behaving. Both are important to the way a child views the world, feels safe and forms relationships with others



The Magpie Project, filming. Photo: Louise Klarnett.

throughout life. (5)

Mothers, who have perhaps had no sleep, are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)/unresolved trauma or have simply never had a break from full responsibility for their baby, are not able yet to expend the emotional resources necessary to be present to their child in this kind of interaction. Modelling by myself and their peers give value to these acts of attunement and are a major foundational part of the work.

>>



The Magpie Project, filming. Photo: Louise Klarnett.

“So what am I doing (when it looks like so little!)?”

I am using perception – I witness, observe, notice, see, details. Posture, muscle tone, facial expression, head shape, eye movement, developmental stage (where possible), relationship to mum, to others, to staff, spatial orientation to mum.

Where there is activation, distress, alarm, overwhelm, anger, hyper-vigilance I (endeavour to) model nervous system responses, to down-regulate myself and where appropriate, co-regulate. As a body worker as well a dance artist, I am acutely aware of my own ability to hold space safely. The work of Steve Haines (6) particularly the mnemonic OMG – orient, move, ground (to which we added B for breathe) – is a useful resource and one I’ve shared with staff and volunteers at the project.

The work I do in this context as a dance artist invites and creates safety, relationship (however brief) and is a window into creative expression: tiny movements to initially distract or invite attention, use of Dr Dave Hewett’s Intensive Interaction approaches; (7) more obvious movements, or sometimes using external stimulation such as props – bubbles, feathers, fabrics. I might use repetition, simple choreographic devices – Q&A / action/ reaction; strength – invitations to push or pull; holding/ listening touch, continuous motion, vestibular stimulation, grounding – often with me as their nervous system into co-regulation and settling.

Where there is disassociation, freeze state, introversion, fear I try to manage my own nervous system to avoid becoming too drawn in and invite, and titrate, moments of attunement through seeing and being seen, connecting through breath, sound, movement, dance, touch and facial expression.

It is the dance of attunement.

Jane Williams, writes in a blog post (8) about the ‘magic’ of having a dance artist in residence on the Magpie Project “(because) babies don’t stop being babies just because they are homeless” and still need to develop, to experience joy, engagement and connection with others and the world. She ends, as I will here, with my own account of an almost imperceptible dance that grew over one session:

“Some bound over into my ‘space’ confident, open, tactile.

One little girl with long thick eyelashes and wide, wide eyes, silently notices me across the room through the noise, and people and toys.

She looks then looks away, looks again.

I align my midline and widen my perceptual field to include her in my improvisation from across the space, through the noise and people and toys.

This relationship builds slowly over the duration of the whole session.

She takes / catches my eye and is somehow a little nearer to me, navigating and testing the safety and the possibilities.

We look, blink, look away.

I smile, gesture a sort of ‘wave’, reach without expectation.

I sway in my midline and spiral in improvised motion with many other children from the sky to the ground and find stillness as well as energy, in and out of contact as appropriate.

She is still there, across the space, through the noise and people and toys.

Nearing the end of the session this little one initiates a movement conversation.

A wave for a word. A game, repeating but changing. Her wave, small, without eyes, bigger with eyes, bigger with eyes and in response to my gesture and eyes. A slight smile across her eyes, knowing she and I are playing the same game.

Closer but still distant in the room. I hope I might spark this dance again.”(4)

References

1. What is trauma: <https://www.kazzum.org/trauma-informed-approach>
2. Dance Art Foundation www.danceartfoundation.com
3. www.themagpieproject.dance/#films
4. Polyvagal theory, <https://www.verywellmind.com/polyvagal-theory-4588049> named by Dr Stephen Porges, in 1994, after the vagus, a cranial nerve, which, he theorises, plays a role in emotion regulation, social connection and fear response
5. www.first5la.org/article/ages-stages-attachment-and-attunement/
6. Steve Haines Trauma Is Really Strange www.bodycollege.net
7. www.intensiveinteraction.org
8. www.themagpieproject.org/2020/02/02/what-does-our-dancer-is-residence-do/

Info

- www.louiseklarnett.co.uk
- www.louiseklarnettcranosacral.com
- www.themagpieproject.org
- www.themagpieproject.dance/#films