

CAN DO CAN DANCE

HAMBURGER TANZTAGE MIT ROYSTON MALDOOM (RHYTHM IS IT!)

Interview Janice Parker und Nina Pelletier, 05.09.06

Do you already have your choreography in mind when you start working or do you look at what the participants bring and then decide what you are going to do?

I do a bit of both, so I come with some images and ideas of things that inspire me, or things that have been in [...] my mind, in my imagination, but at the same time I want to see what the group will give me, what they produce themselves, and what kind of energy they have.

So it's very much shared in that way between the group and me, and a lot of the material comes from the group themselves. [...]

What do you want to provoke with the images, exercises and movements? How can you initiate a process, what kind of setting do you need to work with the participants?

How I work, you would probably call it structured improvisation – So I set a structure where I will lead the movements, but inside of that the individual people in the group will start making their own movements – and sometimes they are better than my movements, so I start to use their movements in my improvisation, and it grows that way. So there is a certain amount of structure which gives a freedom, so if you give structure, it gives a freedom to put yourself inside that structure, and often really lovely movements come out of that.

I would like to have a detail of the process: when you give them a structure – what kind of structure is it?

Often I start in a circle, because that gives a sense of community, the whole group working together, everybody can see everybody else, [...] I like to work with the movement, and with the body. I'll start with very simple exercises of stretching and opening and closing and a bit of shaking of different body parts, so I go through the body like an alphabet, and the body starts to, not only warm up, but have some feeling in it, some emotion in it and some expression in it. So I'll gradually work into the body and make the movements more and more energetic. I also work a lot with energy and quality. I like to do some things that are fast and some things that are slow, some things that are big, some things that are small and work with opposites, so we begin to build a big language in movement as well.

Do you always work with laments?

Not always, often I do now, because I actually like to do that because I find the movement more interesting. And it's more alive, often, and not so stuck in one technique, in one way, there's more variety and more expression in it. But I also work with professional dancers [...].

And you work with disabled people as well – is there a difference in the setting you give them?

Not really, no, I think there is very, very little difference in the way that I work. People with disabilities, I find, just come with phenomenal ideas often, fantastic movement. You might get somebody who is just perfect at moving extremely slowly, and for a professional dancer that would be a challenge, to find that way of moving themselves.

So I tend not to work in a different way [...] It can be very similar how I set things – and every group is different, so it's not just that a group of people with disabilities is different from a group of professional dancers. Within themselves, they are different as well, so you get some groups with

lots of energy and some groups with very little energy it completely changes, every group finds its own way really, and comes with something else and something of their own.

What do the participants learn and how do they learn? Do they exceed the limits? Are there special limits when you work with disabled people?

I really don't think of people with disabilities as the label we give them, and I don't think it's that distinct that it's only the people with a label disability that are disabled, we have all got things that we are really good at, and things that we can't do at all.

So there are certain movements that I am absolutely terrible at and couldn't do. I would be a terrible ballet dancer, I just cannot do it, my body won't do it, so that would be my disability. – So I think of it as a spectrum of people that all bring a different kind of strength, but at the same time I want to really challenge people to do more than they thought they could do themselves [...] So that we are not sitting there, thinking: Wow, that's fantastic for a person with a disability, I just want people to think "That's fantastic!" – or not, they might not like it, that's o.k., [...]

What is your piece about?

[...] It's about people, and it's about people becoming visible and being seen, becoming more of themselves, and becoming more individual. So my theme is quite an open theme, and quite a loose theme, but that's what I have in my head. [...]

How important is the result to you?

The result is very important to me that it has to be a piece of work that is essentially an art work, it's essentially a choreography. And I push things toward that standard, I don't let anything fall below that standard. That's what I expect of people, and that's what I believe people can produce. The choreography, it just has to stand up as a piece of art, that's what I aim for, it has to stand up as a choreography that can be judged as a choreography, that has choreographic structures in it. That's recognizable as one of my pieces, a piece that I might make with many different people, and that it's not considered something that is only good because it has people with disabilities in it, it has got to be more than that.

Do you think it's important for the participants that there is a show at the end?

I think it's extremely important, because it gives sense to what they are doing [...] In the end they create something, and it becomes theirs that they create. And they are witnessed, they have an audience, and it's really important to do that. I think if early on you make a performance then it gives people really high motivation to do more and learn more, and extent what they can do – so for me it's quite vital.

You mentioned before that in this process people are getting more individual – could you describe how this happens? What is it that makes them feel that way – on the one hand it might be the feeling of community, and on the other hand maybe movements, maybe bodywork...

Well, I think everybody comes already with their own individuality, and I like to call it an aesthetic of difference. Ballet as an art form is for me the aesthetic of sameness. It's very important in ballet that everything's in line, everything is exact, everything is symmetrical – in classical, the old classical ballets, that was its aesthetic. [...]

So I am not necessarily trying to change anybody, I am trying to make them more of themselves, and work more into themselves with the movement. [...] And I think the other thing that happens is when you work with large groups of people and say I set a sequence that is the same – so I am asking people to do the same thing at the same time in a sequence – I think sometimes ironically...Ironically, because it is the same, it shows people's differences. [...] And I think people's own sense of self and sense of difference comes through having to be really present in the choreography, to ask them to really be there.

It's almost like being embodied, they have to take responsibility for themselves, to fill the movement with themselves and make it their own movement [...] and at the same time they have got to be absolutely aware of everybody else, [...] So they are present in themselves and aware of everything that's going on around them. It's really important to try and find that and push people towards it.

Do you think that three weeks is enough time, or are you usually working for a longer time, but not as often in the week?

No, three weeks is a good time, often I have to work in less time. So I am finding this a good time, and I think the piece is very good actually. Because you can overrehearse as well, it goes a bit dead, but I think we are in good time. Enough time to structure and make it, and enough time to work on the quality of it – that's my plan anyway. And I feel like that's my responsibility as a choreographer: it's not about the group not being able to do it, it's about me having to use all my skills to take them to that place. [...]

How can you still be passionate about your work?

Because people are fantastic, they never cease to amaze me! All this fantastic movement, and character and personality is inside them, and you just see it coming out and making stunning movement and dance, and that's my passion. [...]

One of the things that I do that I think is very important is that people with disabilities and people with learning disabilities have many many skills and talents and many are involved in dance in very different ways. What I like to do is work with the individual as well, so for instance I have one young man that I know and he is a fantastic dancer and it's what he wants to do with his whole life: he wants to be a dancer, but there is no opportunity for him anywhere because he has a disability and people have no concept that somebody with a disability could be a professional dancer. So I am very much working, trying to find funding, trying to find a course, so that he can be with anybody dancing and work towards professional standards and do a training. [...] So I like to really push opportunities for people with learning disabilities to have the chance to dance professionally or work with international artists on a solo project or things that really enable them to develop their skills and talents as best as it can be to their fullest and upper potential just like anybody of us would want and have the opportunity to do. [...]

Did you find any other ways to make successful publicity?

Possibilities... no, it's hard, it's very hard... Sometimes I invite people, sometimes I don't charge any money and invite people to come and see, but no, you just have to keep using a network and pushing it.

People with disabilities, they work in another context [...]. I have a man who is doing a solo work with an international choreographer and I want that solo work to be in an evening with solo works [...] and I try to put it into that context. [...]

It's so difficult to reach a different audience from the one that goes to the theatre all the time, the art audience... or maybe it's the parents of the disabled people, or friends – how can you go further?

It will be a repell-effect, because this project is in such a big theatre, I am sure there will be people going to it because they go to things in that theatre. There will also be people going who have never been in that theatre, because they are coming to this specific performance.

So you get two audiences coming together and that's very exciting! Where everybody wins, so it's good for everybody. Therefore I think putting things into that context is great, it's all that's important.