

## In What Sense is Play Powerful?



*Extract from the article "Who can I play with today? – an interview with Jenn Ben-Yakov about the Power of Play" by Ruth Meyer, published in, Nieuwsbrief voor Dans-en Bewegingsexpressie Therapie, no 69, November 2001, a newsletter for Dutch and Belgian dance and movement therapists. The editor has kindly given permission for us to print this extract. We include the biography of Jenn Ben-Yakov from the article and follow with a section which directly quotes Jenn Ben-Yakov herself on the power of play. H.H.*

### Jenn Ben-Yakov

After studying at Yale Drama School and with Joseph Chaiken and Uta Hagen in New Haven, Jenn joined the Open Theatre in 1967. She has been directing and creating collaborative theatre works in Holland since 1978. Alongside of her theatre work Jenn has a history of immersion in the dance and movement field. She studied Modern Dance with a scholarship from the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance and with Judith Dunn. She was introduced to dance therapy by Irmgaard Bartenieff, who worked in the NYC psychiatric wards in the 60ties. She continued her dance therapy education with Johanna Climenko and did training programs with Laura Perls, Bruce Reed, Bill Solomon and Jay Stattman. Jenn Ben-Yakov became a well-known international director/teacher of actors, dancers and dance therapists. In Holland she teaches at the Theaterschool in Amsterdam and taught at the Dansacademie Tilburg for 22 years, developing a unique

drama program for dance and movement therapy students.

### Jenn talks on the power of play

Play is not a technique. It is rather being caught in the moment unburdened by conscious reality or the weight of the past and continual self-consciousness. The power of play lifts us from stress and anxiety. But rather than allowing play to release power, people are often blocked by shame, ambivalence and guilt, repressing playfulness rather than releasing it. For example when we take the computer to the beach.

Play is both an activity and a state of mind. In play mind and body are often united – we are not just thinking or just doing. Our mind may think psychologically about: the way I was, the way I am or the way I could be – our wish for the future. In play we can re-enter the nonlinear situation of our childhood, where past, present and future overlap. Time just is and we are in it. Our actions and activity touch and stimulate a core sense of self. Curiosity is one of the allies. The power of play is to strengthen our self-definition. In a game or exercise you begin to act AS IF what you are doing is real. And what you do is real – even if it has no "consequences" even in a game. But it is real in movement and action, and so it is real in self-development and expression.

When we are playing we make free choices: we reveal what we choose to do, not what we have to do. In the absence of habit and boredom we can surprise ourselves and get a stronger identity, because we become more flexible in our reactions and we are not too much impressed by difficult or unexpected situations. Play is also powerful because it works by giving the person many chances to rebalance. In all cases the conditions that make it possible to play are having a safe place and temporal suspension of future plans.

In our western society play is not enough respected. Play is most of the time seen as trivial, a time out or an indulgence, but in my opinion it is not. Play reflects the brains we actually have. Located in the frontal lobe of our brain is the ludic center. It is proven that when the brain operates on a playful level, it can find more solutions, increase flexibility and overcome fear or anxiety. One has to enter a certain state of flow in order to play. When a person is in his/her flow it means that All his/her systems are available to respond, interact, open/close etc. It works by engaging the person in a different state of being. In play people may recline, stretch, turn around and jump, or splash and explore, just for the intrinsic fun of it. And as I said before, play reveals what we choose to do, not what we have to do. In this it provides an antidote (with laughter) to the compulsive obsessive tendencies in individuals and in our culture.

The power of play is that it can recharge us and restore optimism. Sometimes it changes our perspective and

stimulates creativity. It is temporarily an alternative way of being in the world.

**Ed. Note (HH):**

Readers might also be interested in reading the works of psychologist, M.Csikszentmihalyi who has investigated "flow" experiences, linking them to psychological health and wellbeing. Some of the characteristics of flow experiences which he identifies are: total concentration on what one is doing; involvement which removes awareness of everyday worries and frustration; sense of control; strengthening of the self (though actual concern with the self disappears during such activities); and changed sense of time. Most importantly, flow activities are done for their own sake, not with a view to achieving a particular goal. Activities such as dance promote such flow experiences.

Some of his books are:

- *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*
  - *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*
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