

Playfulness and Performance

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Anna has completed a Dip Ed (Movement and Dance), Graduate Diploma of Movement and Dance, Master of Ed. (Advanced Studies of Movement and Dance), and currently works as a movement, dance and drama facilitator. Her recent research focuses on how the performing arts offer disabled artists the opportunity to express themselves and articulate in ways they wouldn't do otherwise. The research shows the benefits and strategies of developing improvisational performance skills with intellectually disabled artists and draws on dance therapy for tools for non-verbal understanding and psychophysical movement processes.

'Playfulness is nurtured as an essential ingredient of creativity and Stretch's essentially playful approach to performance empowers participation and creativity'.

A long interest in early childhood dance education brought

me in touch with research that sought the voices of the persons being studied (Stinson 1990, 1993; Bond 1991, 1994b). Bond's (1991, 1994b). Research with nonverbal deaf-blind children was of special interest because it addressed the possibilities of creating knowledge and understanding where verbalisation cannot be a source of evidence. I came to see how the frequently overlooked multi-modal and nonverbal expression of dance and movement were valuable sources of information and knowledge about the whole person. I made the link between researching children who spontaneously interweave modes of expression and researching artists with intellectual disabilities who perform improvisational theatre, many of whom, in my experience, rely largely on nonverbal communication. Even for artists who are verbally articulate, the nonverbal aspect of their expression seems integral to understanding individual perceptions of performance.

Stretch Physical Theatre is an improvisational performance group who work out of Footscray Community Arts Centre in the western suburb of Footscray, Melbourne. I was first introduced to Stretch Physical Theatre when my personal path led me to volunteer as an assistant in Stretch workshops. I was drawn to stay and participate in Stretch by the openness of an ethos that valued and nurtured creativity and not only accepted but also recognised the creative possibilities offered by "difference" in performing theatre. I was intrigued by the way Stretch artists embraced improvisational performance in a non-judgemental way.

Each week Stretch members perform for their group of peers, facilitators and care-persons that accompany some members. These weekly performance situations form the major part of the Stretch experience, sometimes being influenced by the preparations for and flow on from public performances.

Here I outline the overall structure and content of a two-hour weekly session at Stretch Physical Theatre. Each session has two parts of one hour each. The first part is devoted to warm-up activities and skills development and refinement, the second section to improvisational performances. Stretch is indebted to Al Wunder and the improvisational performance programme he conducts at Theatre of the Ordinary in Melbourne, Australia for this structure. The warm-up consists of physical exercises and movement awareness activities, the goal being for participants to tune into their own energy and to that of others. Laban's concepts of body, space, and energy inform the session and are used to prepare, review and refine the content of sessions (Laban 1974). Participants are encouraged to develop their movement vocabulary. We do a vigorous warm-up including movements and exercises drawing on my experience and the experience of the group in various disciplines such as movement and dance (based on LMA), creative dance, dance therapy, Contact Improvisation, theatre games and improvisational theatre.

Playfulness is nurtured as an essential ingredient of creativity.

Participants are encouraged to begin their own warm-up as soon as they enter the space. Conversation is an accepted part of the start of the evening. This seems a natural and easy transition from everyday life to the session and the physical gestures that accompany conversation make participants aware of how their movement is connected to themselves. Stretch participants constantly keep each other informed about their life situations. In this way the person, the performer, the product and the process are kept in balance.

Movement scores frequently develop spontaneously from participants' warm-up conversations. When everyone is moving the focus shifts more towards body level awareness. A systematic and person-oriented score of leading movement with each body part is often used to get participants moving through the space in their own way. This is particularly useful for a group that has such a wide range of physical differences. Copying one person's movement either in a circle or crossing the space tunes participants into others' energy and movement styles. We take turns to lead and follow which supports group awareness. Leading and following frequently take the group into playful exchanges of movement or voice. Movements, words or sounds may be passed around, copied, varied, given particular emphasis, or taken into a different direction. The playful interaction of the group becomes a melting pot of possibilities and developments on all levels. Such a play opens up opportunities for instantaneous changes of status, content, context, artistic conflict and cooperation.

A specific physical skill is introduced or practiced such as rolling while holding both hands with a partner. We frequently draw on some of the more simple forms of Contact Improvisation. The group responds well to working with a partner and with activities oriented towards shifting or sharing weight. We practice a more subtle connection to self and a partner with the classic mirroring exercise. This has a centring effect on both partners and a balanced awareness of internal and external movement and energy.

Once our bodies are warmed up we do some stretching, using yoga poses with engaging names such as frog, hare or candle. The names activate movement and experienced participants are able to model for newcomers. These activities enliven participants' movement imagination. We also stimulate our linguistic imagination by a playful use of words, phrases or metaphor to refer to particular movement phrases or body shapes. Acting draws on emotional states and moods so we practice and refine our skills of articulating moods of for example sad, happy, angry or triumphant in movement and/or sound. Confidence is built by responding individually and in a small group to these moods in sequence. The group enjoys doing active relaxation such as leaning on a partner and then moving to lean on another partner. If we

want to watch a video that is relevant to our performance work, which we occasionally do, we do so in the first part of the evening for half the session.

The playfulness of the group warm-up carries over into the second half of the session, during which we concentrate on improvisational performances. Improvisation is often accepted as a part of an artist's creative process leading to performance. However, in the present context, improvisation is the performance. We frequently start with everyone sitting on the floor in a circle. We might decide at this stage on who wants to solo or duet. Sometimes as group leader I stipulate whether we will do solos, duets or small group improvisations. This might be because we are preparing for a performance and I want to give certain artists experience of working together or it might simply be a time consideration. At the end of each person's performance he or she sits in the middle of the performing space and tells the viewers what he or she liked about what he or she has just performed. This is the feedback process. After this, viewers are invited to tell the performer what they liked. We call this outside feedback. Feedback is designed to build participants' confidence in their own aesthetic choices. This model of performance and feedback is an essential part of Al Wunder's work and was already in place when I joined Stretch, then under the leadership of Sue Mullane.

The model is adapted to meet the needs of this group in that feedback is both non-verbal and verbal. The interaction of verbal and non-verbal, performer and audience allows different forms of entry into a shared experience, and assists participants to fuller levels of integrated knowing.

The clearly structured format is designed to support the artists' confidence, anticipation and commitment. Everyone knows what the rhythm of the evening is going to be. We have found there is sufficient flexibility within this structure to introduce new movement material, ideas or activities or refine existing ones. Stretch's essentially playful approach to performance empowers participation and creativity.

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**Anna's article is based on her thesis for her M.Ed,
"Perceptions of Improvisation from a Group of Artists
with Intellectual Disabilities" completed in December
2000. The full thesis can be found in the library at
University of Melbourne.**
