

# Dance and the Disabled in the Community

## *Elizabeth McKenzie*

*Elizabeth has worked with creative dance, music and movement and dance therapy, as well having taught as a classroom teacher in a Rudolph Steiner school. Elizabeth is currently a recreation worker with people with alcohol or substance related aquired brain injury. She is currently completing the diploma of dance therapy(I.D.T.I.A.). Elizabeth is also a teacher of yoga and meditation.*



## **Ausdance Workshop, May 2003**

In the large space of the Chunky Move studio, we were led by Mark Brew through an engaging warm-up; a sequence of movements that grew

incrementally with additions after we had repeated the movements already practiced:

Arm swings and circles, side-to-side weight transfers;

Extending into forward bends, down into cobra and lunge stretches on the floor-or adapted by those in wheelchairs-and a roll back up, to repeat with a lunge on the opposite leg.

The large circle in which we stood held the glances and smiles sent across it as we began to loosen up, sharing the group energy and the movement experience. For me, returning to dance movement after some years working in another field, the sense

of inclusion, fun and freedom that movement, within a sense of community, can offer so immediately, made itself clearly felt, as did the sense of interest in the other participants

Now we became involved with the space around us as we took the cardinal points of direction into mind, stretching limbs towards the edges and corners of the room.

Janice Florence then led us into the space:

Weaving through each other; leaning into people we passed; staying in the lean to ask and tell each other our favourite fruits, starting to get to know each other.

We then remained with a partner, taking turns to make a shape which the partner enclosed, extended or mirrored; and we took turns to watch half the group move and shape.

Using movements from earlier in the session, or from each other, we moved in lines or waves down the space, varying our progress with Hold, Continue, Repeat, Rewind, and contrasts in speed.

Such a rich variety of movements and combinations became available through this activity with everyone inspiring each other. A great resource for movement ideas.

Kim Dunphy and Jenny Scott gave us an experience of the containing quality of a circle, props (large elastic band and drum) and rhythms and movements, to engage and hold the focus and participation of groups who have difficulty with attention. We began seated in chairs. We saw the power of the circle to hold this focus in a performance situation, in a video of a group of young people with intellectual disabilities. Attention span was extended by the activities within the close support of the circle.

The audience sat a little outside the circle of the group of performers. This is an effective strategy for

working with limited attention span in a group. It reminds me also that it is often the elemental things with which we work in dance and that they are both simple and effective.

Discussion followed, on ways to involve participants, in groups of mixed abilities. Here are some of the very practical suggestions offered out of the skilled experience of those present:

- Volunteers with an interest in dance, to assist.
- Mirror movements, in a circle, or
- Circulate and communicate (favourite fruits), to get a sense of whom to pair with whom.
- Pass ball-say which fruit you like when ball stops.
- Everyone move at same time-simple, broad enough to accommodate all.

#### **Other tactics for involvement:**

- I'm stuck to you-when you move, I move.
- I'm a puppet-whatever part of me you move will stay where you put it.
- Mirroring activities.
- Acknowledge role of observer; "We need someone to watch....".
- Ask for their help with something.

#### **Beginning to move out from a wheelchair:**

- Place mats on the floor.
- Rolling from side to side.
- Helpers to lean on, and to support the body and movements.
- Large balls-still sitting, but moving.
- Progress to boxes, etc. for movement and for support.