

Enlivening shape – A Reflection

Report on the workshop by Sandra Kay Lauffenburger, Danceworks, Prahran July 6th, 2003

Mary Rose Nicol



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The DTAA professional development day provided a wonderful opportunity for an immersion into the LMA component of SHAPE. Sandra Kay Lauffenburger led a varied group, including dancers, experienced dance therapists, educators and students in a day that included theoretical discussion as well as a deep experience of knowing the meaning of shape on a body level. Discussions involved our own experiences as well as reflecting on how our experiences related to working with different client groups. Three ways of changing shape— shape flow, directional shaping and carving, the way in which shaping describes different ways of relating and the way in which modes of shape change show the interplay between internal activity and outer expression were explored. Our experiences were related back to the theory of Laban and also the work of Irmgard Bartenieff, Judith Keesterberg and Bonnie Cohen.

We formed directional shapes of different types – linear, twists and curves - in gesture, whole body and then movement in space, bringing awareness to the transitions in moving from one shape to another. We experimented with shaping in relation to the environment – forming shapes in response to the physical characteristics of the room. The four basic functional shape forms identified by Laban, Pin, Wall, Ball and Screw, were used as a way of

relational / conversational shaping. We also included a category Sandra called ‘blob’ – emphasising the importance of a resting phase. Each person developed a phrase including all elements and in pairs we moved our phrase in different ways –with and without words, in large movements, in posture, in gesture and conversationally, attempting to identify the different shapes the other presented, looking at congruency of statements and shapes.

Discussion included the idea that Shape is seen as the intentional underpinning – the internal working towards outer expression. Also the way in which we all respond to shapes and various sizes of shapes differently, with modes of shape change, awareness of progressions, transitions, pauses and breath are important to consider. In discussing working with others it was emphasised that to know and understand clients we need to practice internally – to know the different shapes from a body / felt sense. People spoke about somatic empathy and kinaesthetic empathy and how this develops out of practice – a way of using the whole body as an information-gathering tool, and the tremendous amount of concentrated energy required to really observe and stay present to another. Sandra spoke of this as being like a meditation practice – watching transitions occur – "feeling how each cell gets there". There was also discussion relating to the difference between taught movement – movement taken on from someone else – and movement that comes from within, with interesting reflections on how internally inspired movement is seen and experienced differently from externally inspired movement – and how much you can or cannot make the movement that has been suggested by someone else your own.

After lunch we focused for some time on our “internal space” – wrapped in blankets we sank to the floor and were guided into an exploration of internal space, space that can be felt as empty space or experienced with reference to the internal structures, organs, and activity. We related the earlier shaping experiences – twist, curve, and linear - to our awareness of the internal space. As we lay on the floor, we connected with the watery cell self, to our cellular respiration, our individual rhythm of growing and opening, shrinking and closing. I found the environment Sandra created allowed a

wonderfully deep inner connection that stayed with me for days afterwards.

Sandra used different images (related to typical events in infancy and early childhood) to help us watch what may happen to this individual rhythm in relation to various stimuli – I was particularly aware of the interruption (the sort of freezing) that occurred in relation to several of the images. We also worked in pairs – one person providing touch in different ways to different parts of the other’s body – the other watching to see how the “cellular self” responds – toward / away, bulging / hollowing, shrinking / growing, lengthening / shortening. As we were sharing the experience with our partner, Sandra suggested we take the words out of the conversation – then introduce them again – we then carried this through into a group experience. I found once words had been taken out it was really difficult to reintroduce them – it had a feeling of artificiality. We spoke about the need for dance therapists to use words – that for people who feel movement as a comfortable place for communication and relationship – bringing in words can sometimes be a challenge.

As a dance therapy student (I am currently enrolled in the dance therapy programme at RMIT) I found the day a wonderful way to review material I have been recently introduced to. During my course I have approached the LMA system in a concentrated way in order to try to understand the concepts, this day gave me a chance to approach shape in a more relaxed way and deepen my understanding (although I am sure there are many deeper levels to go!). Something that I had in my notebook at the end of the day was that the essence of dance therapy is the connecting that includes inner and outer awareness simultaneously – I feel participating in this day has given me a deep experience of how that may be achieved.

I really appreciated the way Sandra made concepts, that at times seem quite complex, very approachable and certainly feel inspired to continue delving into and gaining more understanding of the LMA system and the work of Judith Kesternberg and Bonnie Cohen. **Thank you Sandra and DTAA for this opportunity.**

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Photograph: Peter Parkes