

Conference Reports and Reflections

“Weaving the Threads”

3rd Australian Dance Movement Therapy Conference
November 2007

At the historic convent in Abbotsford, Melbourne

Presented by the Dance Therapy Association of Australia (DTAA), in collaboration
with Hanny Exiner Memorial Foundation (HEMF).

Conference Report



Hanny Exiner Memorial Foundation and organized by a small committee; myself, Jane Guthrie and Kim Peel from DTAA and Naomi Aitchison and Di Albiston from HEMF. Support was also provided by other DTAA and HEMF committee members and friends.

The conference title ‘Weaving the Threads’ was coined by longtime DTAA member and supporter Linda Murrow, who suggested this as a catalyst for drawing out different threads of the tapestry that is dance-movement therapy practice in Australia. The conference themes were developed by the conference committee, as topics of interest and concern in our profession today;

- How can dance and dance-movement therapy contribute to well-being and personal growth?
- How can dance and dance-movement therapy be employed as tools for health and healing?
- How can dance and dance-movement therapy contribute to the development of communities?
- For dance-movement therapy to be considered more seriously as a profession, what do we need to do?

‘Weaving the Threads’, the third Australian dance-movement therapy conference, was held over the weekend of November 8-9 2007, in the delightful ambient environment of Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne. This venue had its own significance for many delegates and organizers, as the building and grounds were the venue of much early dance-movement therapy training in Australia. My own very first dance therapy experiences occurred in Rosina Hall at the Convent (when much of it was still a convent!) back in 1982, in workshops led by US visitor, Wynelle Delaney and US visitor-turned Australian resident, Karen Bond.

‘Weaving The Threads’ was quite some time in the making; with the last Australian conference being held at Melbourne University in 2000 and prior to that, in 1997, at Vision Australia conference centre in Waverley. The conference provided a positive rallying point for the DTAA during the year of program development, and the clear and achievable goals were a very useful focus for the Committee. Certainly the tangible outcomes of hosting a meeting of 90 dance movement therapy practitioners and enthusiasts from all over Australia, NZ, and the US, Germany and Japan, seemed very rewarding - a highlight amongst the ongoing administrative work of our professional association.

The conference was presented jointly by the Dance-Movement Therapy Association of Australia and the

Conference streams

- Skill development in dance-movement therapy
- Therapeutic applications of dance for specific populations and communities
- Professional issues and supervision
- Research and evaluation

We were delighted with the response we had for presentations, and felt that our intention to draw together the differing methods and approaches to dance and dance-movement therapy was realised in the rich and diverse program. We felt privileged to have had overseas keynote presenters Sharon Chaiklin and Peggy Hackney with us. Sharon is a dance therapy pioneer and founding member of the American Dance Therapy Association, who began her career in dance-movement therapy studying with

eminent dance-movement therapist Marian Chace. Peggy is a well known international presenter in Laban/Bartenieff work, and was a colleague of pioneering movement analyst Irmgard Bartenieff for nearly fifteen years. The Movement Choir led by Peggy was a first in Australia, led by an expert renowned for conducting them all over the world, and definitely was a conference highlight. (Other) Participants commented on how pleased they were to have met Sharon and enjoyed her warm wisdom and inspiring leadership skills.

Comments during the weekend indicated how much the dance-movement therapy community valued this opportunity to get together, and how important it was for the development of our profession. Responses to the evaluation survey confirm that delegates were very inspired and motivated by their participation. Comments included:

"All of it was such a high quality, I loved it all."
".....enriching; inspiring....", "....excellent international standard - a gift....", "....helped move DT profession forward....", "....intelligent, expressive passionate speakers.", "....conference had great heart, great spirit."

Almost all survey respondents rated the quality of the event as *"Excellent"* and *"Very Good"*; with new learnings, new skills and the opportunity to get together with like minded people being highly valued aspects of the event. Overall, presenters were very positive of their experiences too, valuing the chance to speak formally about their work to a dedicated audience. Conference administrator Annette Dunphy enjoyed the experience because of all the wonderful people she met; *"a lovely bunch"* she proclaimed, once the stress of receiving and processing payments and registration details had been overcome.

Delegates enjoyed the different activities; the mix of formal presentations, workshops, performances and informal networking opportunities. These offerings by local, national and international guests provided wonderful inspiration for delegates. The final session included a very lively discussion about professional issues, especially those related to the future of our profession. These will be reported in a coming edition of the DTAA Quarterly, and will also inform DTAA's future strategic planning.

We also managed (just) to make ends meet financially, thanks to the generous sponsorship of Ron Exiner for Sharon Chaiklin's airfare from the US. The workshops associated with the conference generated a decent surplus, because of the generosity of presenters and the enthusiasm with which our community took up the opportunity to work intensively with our special guests. These extra funds will be used for good purpose; with current

plans including the automating of the DTAA membership system, in an effort to reduce the admin load for the committee.

There were a few comments about areas for possible improvement for the conference. These especially related to the perennial challenges of time-keeping. The 15 minute sessions seemed a particularly unpopular format, and although we included those only out of programming necessity, they seemed so unsatisfactory that perhaps we would not consider this possibility in future events. Other feedback and suggestions were appreciated, and comments and ideas have been noted to inform planning of future events.

A small sub-committee is just beginning to develop conference proceedings. Most presenters have obligingly shouldered the wheel again long enough to turn presentations into publishable papers. Even workshop leaders have taken up the opportunity to document their work and it is looking like we will have a good selection of writings to edit into a high quality publication. The format of this is as yet undecided but one suggested option is the development of another *Dance Therapy Collections* - similar to the one published with writings from the '97 conference. This has functioned as a valued and well used reference about the diversity of dance-movement therapy practice in Australia and is still being sold across the world ten years on.

There are no immediate plans for another conference. Without a host, supporting institution or any funded staff, the workload for volunteer organizers was very substantial. From my own perspective, however, the experience was very enjoyable, especially when the event was being created for such passionate and appreciative participants.

Our strong sense is that the dance-movement therapy community in Australia and New Zealand has been newly invigorated as a result of the conference, with new connections made and skills shared, inspired by the excellent leadership of our presenters. The call from participants was certainly strong; more conferences would be welcomed. Perhaps you might like to lead the next charge?

Kim Dunphy
Conference Coordinator

Kim, BA, GMD, M.Ed. Ass. Member/Vice-President DTAA, lecturer RMIT (2003-2006) DMT program, has extensive experience in DMT with people with intellectual disabilities/ children with special needs. She co-authored **Freedom to Move: movement and dance for people with intellectual disabilities** (pub. 2003) with Jenny Scott, has published numerous articles on dance in community, educational and therapeutic contexts.