

# The Moving Stories of Women (MSOW) – a Retrospective

*Donna Hamilton*

*Donna has been involved in dance at some level, all her life. She started dancing at Living Dance with Rebecca Byrne 6 years ago and loves the power of movement and story to transform peoples lives. She was the project manager for Moving Stories of Women, squeezing in a bit of parenting of her two young children while fulfilling that role.*

*Rebecca Byrne is a teacher and movement artist with over twelve years of experience teaching movement in the studio and landscape. She is renowned for providing a safe, fun and adventurous atmosphere in class, and is committed to the development and practice of Expressive Dance and Movement Therapy. She was the creative director of MSOW, and has a beautiful fourteen year old son.*



*"There are all these stories that I think I'm keeping to myself, without realising that they are written all over my body, and all over my dance."*

**Take one expressive dance movement therapist, one writer and one photographer. Add twelve other women, fifteen journals, several reams of paper, four boxes of crayons, forty-five metres of fabric and ten dye buckets. Mix all together over nine months then sift out the best bits. Exhibit.**

In early 2002, Rebecca Byrne and I ‘hatched’ an idea to document a contemporary dance therapy group, raise the profile of the work taking place in Western Australia.

There was also an experimental slant to the idea – could the work itself be used as an artistic medium? As facilitators, Rebecca and I were fully aware of the significance and beauty of the authentic expression of human beings in motion. Reflective writing and even drawings in normal sessions at Living Dance had powerful potential to touch a much wider audience than just the rest of the group.

What if we photographed a group of women, candidly, and collected up their drawings and

writing. What if we took the reflection stage a step further, and allowed the women to develop and create individual pieces of fabric that helped to tell their stories?

So, a book? Perhaps later, we thought, not wanting the financial risk of self-publishing, nor the journey of finding a publisher. My partner is an exhibition designer, and we had already joined forces with Marie Foster, friend, fellow dancer and professional photographer. Marie had exhibited her work several times before, and then before we knew it, we had an exhibition on our hands.

Almost a year after we dreamed it all up, we got together a funding application and submitted it to the Community Arts Network through ArtsWA,

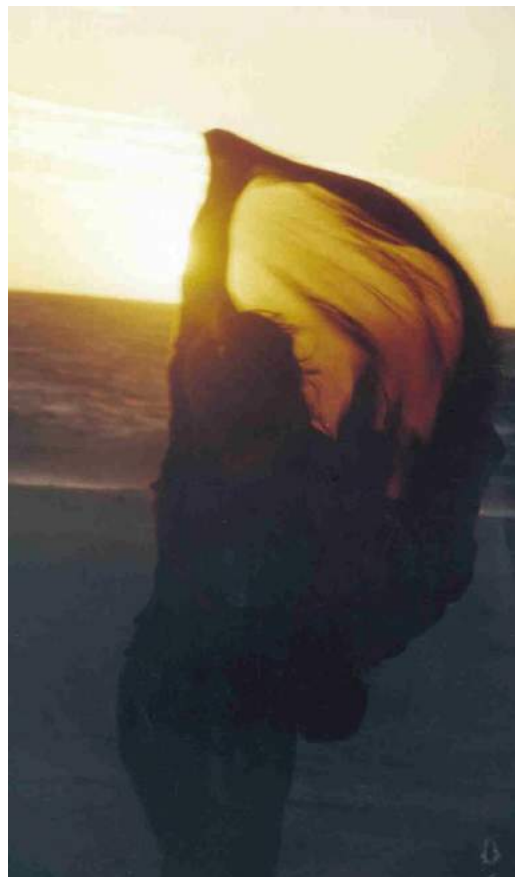
and then within three weeks fired off another to the City of Fremantle. It was a perfect match – CANWA gave us money for our wages, and the City of Fremantle paid for our materials and helped us to secure the Moores Building as our venue for the exhibition.

We advertised in the local paper for “women of all ages and fitness levels”. Rebecca is a well known teacher in Fremantle and we were soon overwhelmed with response. We held an information session to go over many issues such as levels of visibility, vulnerability, creative control (ours!), and to explain project limitations and conditions. All writing from the participants (once submitted) would become available for use in the exhibition, and their writing and photos would be used without their names, and even mixed up with other women’s material at our discretion. After this session, thirteen brave women applied and we accepted twelve as this was our capping number. Right from the start, we demanded a very high level of commitment from each woman, not wanting to fall into the community arts trap of losing participants as enthusiasm wanes. We made them sign contracts agreeing to the conditions of letting us use their work. Even so, when it came down to it, in the last few sessions the group members struggled to varying degrees with ownership over their work - how could they not?

We set out to create a collage of femininity, capturing a universal voice through movement, photography, text, drawings and fabric. It was sometimes painful seeing each woman give up a measure of her individuality for the sake of the project, its objectives being beyond her once she’d gone far enough into her own world, which, of course, was where she was indeed, led. Yet it is those moments - of women connecting with deep aspects of themselves, making discoveries and embodying the essential nature of who they are - captured on film and in snippets of the most moving words, that made the project so worthwhile, so beautiful and so touching.

We met once a month for nine months for a whole day, then had three short rehearsals for a performance for the opening. Midway, we were sponsored by Constellation Films, and suddenly we were producing a video as well as the three million other Things to Do on our ever-growing lists. We also decided to print a booklet so for a few weeks before the exhibition Rebecca, Marie and I ate, drank, breathed and dreamed in MSOW.

The Moores Building has four rooms upstairs, and this influenced us to break the exhibition down into bite-sized chunks or themes, which loosely reflected the nine sessions. Curating this show with Rebecca and Marie was one of the most wonderful and difficult jobs I have ever done. The three of us agonised over the selection process – leaving out some great photos and quotes in favour of photos and quotes that worked really well together, telling a story and strengthening connections. We ended up with three rooms of black and white photos and one room of colour photos shot on the beach at sunset. The women’s fabric was also exhibited in that room and brought life and richness to the exhibition.



### **"Renate"**

*"I am hollowed out by the wind. I am the only person in a big world. A world of wind and sand and seaspray. I am playing with the wind, part of it, pushing and being pushed. No resistance. So this is what it feels like to be part of nature. No thought, just existence. Enormous yet just a speck."*

Our opening night was extraordinary. We packed out the Moores Building, with a record crowd of seven hundred people. People were weeping in the galleries, cheering over the performance

(which was very simply done with an organic movement circle) and poring over the photos and stories. I remember one man leaving late in the night, shaking his head, going "Too much, it's just too much." And another friend (after quite a few free wines) going on about "all the feminin-in-ity..." Yep. We soaked them in it. The whole crowd got a big dose of a very raw, powerfully expressed collective contemporary feminine voice. It was oozing from the walls.



**"Amanda"**

*"She was totally immersed, enveloped by the wind, the sand. There was a peace in her that was precious and beautiful. No pain, no extra stuff? Just here and now, in her body, in the fabric, in the sand."*

So, we did it. It's done. Exactly what was it, why it was, what we'll do next, well, I'm still trying to figure that out. There seems to be a very long "making-sense-of-it-all" period, post-community arts projects.

I think it's really worthwhile to find art and mediums that feel good to us. (Like dance, for me.) I think it's even better to get other people involved, if you have the good fortune to be blessed with teaching skills. And I think it's fantastic if you can show it all to the world, make them think (and even FEEL!), and inspire somebody else along the way. It's the only way we can make changes - incrementally, and with a lot of hard work.

Both Rebecca and I feel strongly that the Western Australian landscape, both the imprint of it in us from a young age, and the immediate experience of it for the women in the group, has been a major influence on this project.

**We would love to bring MSOW to you! It's been expertly packed in bubble wrap and lies in two piles in our sheds. Enquiries are welcome to [dance@warp1.net.au](mailto:dance@warp1.net.au)**

**"The Moving Stories of Women", (advertised in our last Quarterly and reported on in 'Aus Moves') was a community dance project by Rebecca Byrne, Donna Hamilton and the Living Dance community, with photos by Marie Foster. It was held in May 2004 at the Moores Building Contemporary Art Gallery, in Fremantle. The exhibition of photos, stories, artwork and fabric, was made possible by The State of Western Australia through ArtsWA and the Community Arts Network - sponsored by The City of Fremantle and Creative Spaces.**