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Dance in the light and heal: Embodied performance practice as connection

Nicola Forshaw and Morag Galloway

Beginning

Standing in the light being seen, on our terms, our research being seen. – Morag

We closed our eyes, began to notice our breath and began absorbing our surroundings, bathing in the pleasure of being back in the studio where creative collaborations had been happening for the past 52 years. The act of standing still in that space, alone and together, was part of us reclaiming our place as female performers and researchers. It felt full of possibilities and excitement in the newness of the situation, knowing that we had no submission deadline, no fixed agenda and no designated output. – Nicola

In July 2021, we came into the studio after eighteen months of online teaching. We were exhausted, demoralized, drained. Having met only through online revalidation meetings for a new Musical Theatre degree, we were relative strangers, and the initial motivation for coming together was to form a working relationship, share practice and support our values in performance-making methods and pedagogy. As string players and dancers, we both had common ground and understood the potential of creative, interdisciplinary relationships between performance researchers.

A desire to commit to daily practice and performance-making initiated our collaboration, and to begin with this was all we had as a research intention. Questions arose along the way, after we allowed space for dancing, musicking, listening and reflecting. This was our performance ethnography method, which facilitated embodied experience of 'fleeting, sensory, emotional and affective dimensions of being' (Borovica 2019: 1). Somatic practice – embodied and

wholly subjective – resided centrally in our collaboration, with exploration and attunement as guiding principles. Each research session, which prioritized core time for moving, playing and improvising in the dance studio, involved a ‘becoming’, where we related to our bodies and our instruments. Rothfield states:

To be in movement is to generate a series of shifts or changes, manifested through the flow of sensible becomings. Dancing is the movement from state to state, body to body, the passage of the passing moment. The dancer’s body, like posture itself, must be conceived as a mobile state of affairs, a plurality of bodies that make and re-make themselves through the passage of time. (2011: 215)

Being of similar ages, we brought histories of technical training embedded in our bodies and our instruments. As well as socio-cultural commonalities, there were also marked differences in pedagogical approaches, tastes, repertoire, and gendered and societal programming. Collaborative performance making, created through intensive time together in the studio, is key to our existence as artists, academics and teachers. Our process that week brought new understandings of our positions as female collaborators, performers and researchers. Our work supported exploration of Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding’s (2022: 516) assertion ‘that artistic improvisation centres upon a process of oscillating agency’, how each ‘I’ – with our separate histories, techniques, knowledges and experiences – becomes an embodied ‘we’ ‘closely connected to the oscillatory process of assuming and relinquishing agency’ (2022: 534). It is this oscillating agency, fuelled by trust, that we discovered through our collaboration and it continues to power our relationship, informing our performance-making as well as our teaching. It offers ways to negotiate difference and understand other through a process of becoming.

Three years into our collaboration, this chapter details these becomings and sets out to explain in words what we have come to understand through our embodied practices. The inclusion of dance and music, two bodies and two instruments, creates a mutually dynamic collaboration (John-Steiner 2000) enabling us to create performative and artistic artefacts evidencing embodied understanding and thinking in movement (Sheets-Johnstone 2011). From the beginning we have resisted writing an academic paper as, being musicians and dancers, we inherently understand nonverbal communication as a nuanced form of creative expression. We also align ourselves with ‘the recognition that written language could never fully represent or convey lived experience’ (Barbour 2011: 48). The irony of co-writing a chapter about our research for this publication is not lost on us. Attempting to put physical practice into words

places it into the head space, removing our experience from the body, the visceral (Van der Kolk 2014). So, here we word our practice research; mixing sensorial and embodied understandings with relevant academic frameworks, transferring multidimensional learning into two-dimensional textual analysis.

Working

To start, a main inspiration was Karen Barbour's (2011: 119) intention to present dance 'more as a site of embodied knowing, rather than solely as a means of demonstrating mastery, regulation and control'. This, being a central tenet of our desire to be together, led us to source an appropriate methodology for our work. Performance duoethnography provided the autoethnographic framework we needed.

Autoethnography places the author's experience centrally in the narrative, as observer and critic, and is not a definitive methodology. As Stacy Holman Jones states:

Autoethnography is a blurred genre ... a response to the call It is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art ... making a text present ... refusing categorization ... believing the words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (2005: 765)

For our purposes, it facilitated a non-linguistic process that set out to challenge patriarchal vocabularies in academia. When using language, we deliberately substituted terms such as interrogation with curiosity and acknowledged that the criticality of our thinking was rooted in embodied ways of knowing. This actively and consciously placed experiential learning and creativity centrally in our method, resulting in new understanding of the body's ways of knowing.

Norris et al. (2012: 9) articulate duoethnography as 'a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers juxtapose their life histories in order to provide multiple understandings of a social phenomenon'. As authors our biographies became sites of inquiry and encounters occurred through movement, music, drawing and sometimes through spoken reflections. No form of dialogue was deemed superior, all contributed equally to the collaborative collage. This co-production of meaning-making came with an empowering level of connectedness and ability to co-construct, deconstruct and reconstruct meaning as we worked. The act of coming together – clearing time for creating,

observing, responding, listening, attuning, moving, playing, empathizing – brought revelations through processing whatever came up each day, and this reflexively shaped the strategies we used moving forward.

Duoethnographies, like reflexive ethnographies, are disruptive, emergent, dialogic, transformative narratives. They are truthful fictions, critiquing the relationship between the personal, the political, and the historical. They embody a communitarian ethics of care, a relational ethics that values mutual respect, dignity, connectedness, a world-making ethic that begins with the self in relation with others. (Denzin 2014: 27–8)

Criticisms of autoethnography from traditional positivist perspectives dismiss the methodology as insufficiently rigorous, analytical or theoretical (Denzin 2014). These judgements are very real for performance researchers and artists and are often apparent at conferences, research events and when applying for funding. We wanted our work (encompassing a continuous cycle of practice, process, performance, reflection, understanding, knowledge) to manifest upholding the value and immense potential of embodied knowledge. For us it carries validity both for ourselves and future audiences. For Denzin '[v]alidity means that a work has verisimilitude. It evokes a feeling that the experience described is true, coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer's world' (2014: 70).

We believe performance duoethnography brings accountability and integrity to our work by allowing our ethnographies to become combined, visible and audible, through our bodies and instruments. It is a method which supports improvisational practices, facilitating the freedom and sensibility we wanted to access through movement.

Becoming

Through the body – Nicola

Our histories, in movement, in marriage, in academia, in music, our cultural portraits, our travels, our injuries, our bodies in time. We restored our confidence, our creative practice, our physicality, our musicality, our wounds – the wounds of Covid onlineness, a hand operation, spine injuries, immobile joints, our ability to relate to another human outside our bubble. – Nicola

After experiencing lockdown restrictions that impacted greatly on my movement range, physical strength and articulation, I found a welcome oasis in the dance

studio with Morag. The first cycle of studio practice was a time of restoration, not to a previous body but to new ways of inhabiting soma and understanding what was within and around us. The notion of becoming through connection with one another was particularly evident when we began the day as individuals led by the needs of our bodies but then picked up on physical messages transmitted through dynamics, tensions and the spatial range between us. By moving we sensed each other's mood and energy and were able to use this to initiate and develop movement phrases. Through repetition and performance, these movement phrases became expressions of the connection we experienced, a readable response for ourselves to trace and observe details of a relationship forming and transforming us.

Deleuze refers to how a body is not just being but becoming through its interconnections with multiple and diverse things and is never separable from its relations with the world (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). For Deleuze, the body is an entity in the process of becoming, through relations with other humans, culture and environment, with multiple possibilities for variation and transformation. However, Coleman notes that a consequence 'in Deleuze's shift from a philosophy of being to becoming is that subjects and objects become replaced with *bodies*' (2008: 168). So, although a valuable perspective allowing for the body to be viewed as a site of and participant in meaning-making, Deleuze still separates the body from the materiality of being: the corporeality that involves proprioception and sensibility. Somatic practices have offered a more embodied discourse in understanding becoming, and it is from this perspective that we entered the project.

In the field of somatics, the human body is viewed from within, namely first person internally perceived observations of soma. Soma is categorically distinct from viewing a body, which is a third-person perspective and the one of onlooker or medical professional. Soma is a more immediate sensory mode that provides factual data from the proprioceptive centre and gives a rich display of somatic information (Hanna 1986). Seeing the process of becoming through the lens of somatic practice offers a more reflexive and attuned approach especially when major changes occur. Fleckenstein calls this the somatic mind:

[A] permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity which is (re)formed by the constantly shifting boundaries of discursive and corporeal intertextualities. By fusing materiality and discourse without totalizing or essentializing identity and meaning, somatic mind offers the hope of transforming lives, cultures and meanings. (1999: 286)

With our somatic minds, we move through each research phase, open to new directions and channels for curiosity. This combined state helps us find meaning in fleeting moments of practice and reflection. By integrating cello, viola and body, this collaborative research practice found its own way of articulating new embodied becomings.

And with every physical change, a new soma, a new time of adjustment, recovery, compensation and becoming. – Nicola

Becoming

Through collaborative relationship – Morag

I came to this partnership as a lecturer with a PhD in collaborative composition, and a broad diversity and wealth of professional experience across music, theatre and movement. I am most comfortable when creating collaborative and person-centred pieces of contemporary music theatre and my PhD portfolio explored this. My approach helps support arguments for long-term creative practices, something that I am a passionate advocate for. Since July 2021, Nicola and I have built a relationship which is collaborative in fluid and complex ways and has been fascinating to be fully embedded within and to subjectively consider.

Our relationship was born in the dance studio, in summer light and heat, with bodies and instruments made of earth's materials: metal, wood, horsehair, rosin. We moved: stretching and deliberately lying on the floor in the sun. At times it was like being a seed in warm earth. The environment was fertile and encouraging. – Morag

It was impossible to articulate our practices without exploring how we got there through who we were and are. What we explored was actively discussed as much through embodied practice as verbal exchange. Reflecting, musicking and dancing were intertwined and seamlessly shifted from one to the other. Researching – decision making for generating tasks and prompts, finding provocations, looking externally for inspiration and ideas – was a part of each practice. This process very much continued my PhD methodology, outlined below:

My personality-focussed approach directly inspired the research aim of creating pieces which authenticate themselves as they unfold within both the process of creation and the moment of performance. In creating work in a way that balances

emotional and intellectual responses to people, ideas and material the process becomes very akin to that of Method acting. With ownership over the material created, the performers do not relate to the score or material solely as an object to conquer or own, dominate or master. Instead they fully inhabit every moment of the performance. They are able to do this because the preceding creative process has enabled them to decide on how exposed and vulnerable they will be in the moment of performance. This autonomy enables emotional commitment from the performer; something essential for a live event that I intend to resonate with that performer, first and foremost. (Galloway 2016: 10)

The beauty of this method is its capacity to grow an ‘organism’ totally unique to the collaboration (environment) within which it germinates. Playing our instruments and moving together, we quickly realized our main consideration was the need to reconnect physically with ourselves and each other after the isolating effects of the pandemic’s multiple lockdowns. Coaxing work back into the studio felt essential. It was scary how quickly we had retreated, had become still.

We quickly developed a supportive partnership (John-Steiner 2000) and did not edit ourselves or shut anything out. The pandemic had stripped us, but we dove straight into our holistic approach. Whilst John-Steiner states ‘[e]motional aspects of collaboration are most likely to emerge among intimates’ (2000: 75), we were initially virtual strangers. However, our age, situation, gender and experience facilitated a working relationship foregrounding emotional connection and vulnerability. It is our commitment to this that situates us as willing to face ‘[t]he challenge of effectively integrating intellectual, aesthetic and emotional aspects of creativity’ (John-Steiner 2000: 76).

July 2021 – research leave collaboration, York St. John University

Dancing

We mirrored, attuned, offered and responded, we reciprocated, we led and followed, we shared creative prompts, we followed our breath, we worked with what came our way, we believed that the world revealed what we needed that day. We didn’t impose a structure and we put aside the final product. – Nicola

Leena Rouhiainen (2008: 242) argues that ‘by learning to listen to the body and by retrieving understanding of the messages it offers with a sense of phenomenological wonder, we can achieve valuable insight into who we are and how we relate to the situations we find ourselves in’. She uses this as the basis for her discussion on how somatic dance might enhance the cultivation of ‘ethical

subjectivity' (2008: 242). In July 2021, we began working with nothing more than the act of noticing. As subjects we came to work together with an ethos of spaciousness and care, and this formed our ethical consideration of each other. We cared for each other from the outset.

Over the past thirty years, embodied practices have been explored through the lenses of phenomenology (Finlay 2011; Todres 2004, 2007; van Manen 2015; Sheets-Johnstone 2015), grounded theory and arts-based research (Leavy 2020; Spatz 2015), feminist and queer theory (Shapiro 2005). Jennifer Tantia (2019: 135) argues that the conceptual frameworks for embodiment have fallen short as 'they explain how we think about embodiment, but miss the very essence of the experience itself: the sensorial experience of the present moment that can offer deep insight into personal (and potentially universal) human truths'. Speaking as a somatic psychologist and dance/movement therapist who understands embodied experience as a valuable healing element in a psychotherapeutic process (Tantia 2019; Van der Kolk 2014; Payne et al. 2019), Tantia states,

Embodiment can be both a state of awareness and a process to be cultivated. ... When one inquires deeper ... a feedback loop of *attention to* and *attention with* the body is created in present time, which cultivates a deeper state of embodiment. The process of embodiment can reveal further information than could not be known by simply 'talking about' an experience. (2019: 137)

As is typical in a somatics-based dance warm-up, we started most days with an individual body scan. Somatic studies include disciplines such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, Bartenieff Fundamentals and Body-Mind Centering (Bainbridge Cohen 1993). Like somatic practitioners, we approached the body from a first person perspective, enhancing bodily awareness to support understanding of a more economical approach to movement (Eddy 2009). This daily scan involved a close check in from contact points of the feet in the floor and working up through the body bringing awareness to the structural elements, as well as internal and external sensations, imprinted from what had happened the day, the week, the year before. These experiences remain in the body and impact on the potential for movement. Some of them we let go of through recognizing them, some of them were ones we wanted to remain and work with, some were shadows of the past that cannot be shaken, are undesirable but part of us, to be used in the creative process. Through a mixture of Pilates, somatic practices, contemporary dance exercises involving floor work and travelling, we gradually regained physical strength that week. We prioritized daily strengthening and stretching and noticed our bodies becoming flexible again.

We drew awareness to pain, physical sensations, remnants of the day before, residues of things lying dormant, tiredness, awakesness. – Nicola

Bringing awareness to the sensations within the body, a changing body, daily, hourly, brought a sense of acceptance and opened the door to other creative approaches. This led us to document our research and practice journey that week without sentences and linear explanations. These fell short when observing ourselves, each other and the amalgam of sensations and feelings present. Instead, drawing with coloured pastels helped express texture, mood, weight and tension more effectively. When they came, words, as verbs, trailed across the page. This approach was particularly well-suited when engaging with Authentic Movement practice. This brought forth much, both in terms of our relationships with ourselves, our work and to the practice itself.

Authentic Movement is a movement meditation widely used by dance/movement therapists to elicit embodied experiences. It was created by Mary Whitehouse (Adler 2002) and has been developed further by Janet Adler (Pallaro 2007), amongst others. Usually done in pairs, one participant is 'mover' and the other 'observer'. The mover waits for an impulse from their body to move them, then follows this movement, allowing it to develop or fade until another impulse arises. The observer (or researcher/therapist) sits, witnessing the mover, often creating doodles or drawings, attempting to capture something of the experience. Mover and observer then reflect back together on their experiences. This can then be analysed as part of a research or therapeutic process, tracing how sensorial experiences arrive from unconsciousness to consciousness through the body (Tantia 2014a, 2014b). The practice is revelatory and transformative. Janet Adler communicates its wonder frequently in her writings on the subject: 'Can she enter the emptiness not knowing, not knowing what will arise within herself, within the other, within their relationship?' (2002: 58)

I close my eyes. I am stood up, facing Nicola. She is on the floor, sat up, attentive, pen in hand and paper before her. I breathe and start to move. Being witnessed is something I have consented to, so I am comfortable. But I immediately recognize the desire to perform for my audience of one. How do I resist that? Is it a desire? A need? A contractual response to having an audience? A trained set of actions; I am watched therefore I perform. It is hard to halt the training, the patterning. – Morag

The materiality of our embodied self was made aware to us through Authentic Movement, and we considered it alongside the materiality that is our instruments, played with our hands. Much of our practice involved physical contact. The trust

needed for this was developed in early body-work in the studio and the close, empathetic witnessing of each other during the Authentic Movement sessions.

I am always inclined to use my hands first. I often look to my hands as a link to initiate movement, as if activating the strings attached to them; I am the puppet master of my body-puppet. But here the impetus is from within. I become less of a kit of bones, tendons, muscles, sinews all lined up and interlocking and more of a fluid network of liquids and soft tissues. All bound and ebbing and flowing. A delta, water in sand. I become more aware of my body as a fabric with material properties, actual textile. Folds and pleats, being over-layered and shaken out. I do start with my hands, but they are not out for me to see but close like a coat, wrapping like a snake around me, radiating from the top of my neck. – Morag

To balance the introspection and soloistic nature of Authentic Movement, we found we also needed to experience travelling at speed in space. Elevation, elation, freedom. One morning when we were particularly aware of our depleting stamina, we danced to the African beats of Baaba Maal.

The ageing dancer discovers newly found freedoms, and displays self-knowledge and a depth of understanding and interpretation in performance. The ageing dancer is resilient in the face of unpredictable physical and social changes, and is capable of skilful adaptation. The ageing dancer can express and acknowledge personal loss physically and emotionally, but at the same time can look forward rather than back to new joys, new discoveries, and a new level of creativity in a body that encapsulates a 'lived richness'. (Bolwell 2017: 327)

Other examples of offerings we shared in dance-based sessions were: sequences choreographed using four-breath gestures; the idea of 'A Wrist Dance'; considering chance connections between hip and heel, proximal to distal, the invisible to the observed; asking questions of each other to create connections between us.

Musicking

Healing the gap or wound in my musicianship Acknowledging the pain of the last 18 months. – Morag

Four notated musical melodies were brought by Morag to improvise with on cello (Nicola) and viola (Morag). She knew these small, composed snippets would loop in an interesting way and would provide freedom and constraint. These melodic ideas worked on both instruments and had enough difference between their length to loop irregularly and unpredictably. We used this material

to connect to our instruments and develop the musicking in our relationship. Writing material for improvisation is an act of submission, submission to the notion that other people will define identity and temporality. This acknowledges the complexity of possibility. When these conditions shape the material, then relationship and communication become very influential.

Morag had created something wholly dependent on authentic relationship to realize its potential. This music provided a connection, bringing us together, musically. We practised sitting but also played with how the material made us move: extending the bow movements into dance, allowing musical shape to lift us from our seats, towards, or away, from each other. These snippets became key to the musical landscape of performances we went on to make and worked to bond us; our improvisations indicated – like a weathervane – how embodied we were in each session.

The other sounds we made whilst musically improvising were beneficial as they captured and characterized implicit information from our bodies. The instruments felt the temperature of the day, the air pressure, the tension/release in our fingers and bows. Sometimes we fused with our instruments, and notes and harmonies flowed. At other times the disconnection was audible. What was in the studio, what was present internally, what was present in our relationship with each other and with our instruments was always clear, either sonically or felt. In this way, our responsive, embodied practice created an aesthetic language that could be recorded, repeated, reproduced and performed. Our process worked to capture body memories (Fuchs 2012), histories and fleeting moments. It brought implicit knowledge into conscious awareness so that our experiences could be fully understood and shared with others.

Over that week our material grew, and we began to shape it. A fixed outcome within the dynamic nature of our evolving performance piece was a musical backing track. This came from the improvisational practice with the composed material. By the time we recorded we were totally comfortable with the music. It was this familiarity with the music, our instruments and the time we had been dancing together in the studio that brought about the magical improvisation. We were recording material solely to listen back to. At the end of the improvisation, we knew we had a five-minute backing track. We both smiled at each other and sighed with contentment before moving on. We realized we had experienced ‘combined flow’ (Hart and Di Blasi 2015).

Hart and Di Blasi’s ‘Combined flow in musical jam sessions: A pilot study’ details young musicians’ experiences of combined flow. Their findings echo our own, particularly experience of ‘the feeling of being both connected and

disconnected to other group members' (Hart and Di Blasi 2015: 281). The paradox of combined embodied connection and a present but clear and separate mind is fascinating, particularly in terms of temporal experience. Musicking as temporal phenomenon subverting normal experience of time passing is understood, but combined flow during improvisation can augment this experience further. Our feelings of satisfaction and well-being at the end of the improvisation were the primary outcome, and realisation that a backing track had also been made was a happy second.

When critiquing the material we were making, Oblique Strategies cards acted as a helpful tool, disrupting, challenging and shaping both movements and music. These cards were developed by artists Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in 1975 to provide provocative, imaginative ways to challenge the creative process, particularly when it feels blocked. We didn't have any creative blocks, but they helped us let go of habit, particularly habitual expectations of our dancing and musicking somas. Oblique Strategy cards that were particularly generative were:

Discard an axiom

From nothing to more than nothing

Do something boring

Display your talents

Disconnect from desire

Ghost Echoes

Discard something that is taken to be true

All these offerings, tasks, techniques and explorations were in relation to our physical states and each other, as primary consideration. We directed our care towards the relationship: to how we hoped to heal, how we invested in our ability to create. Our practice that week served to make us take our time. Some days we lent into slowness, accepting that in this week we could allow time for tired bodies and slowing metabolisms to guide the structure of the day. Through this delicious slowness, we dug into each moment that arose from each provocation – whether movement or music – and mined it for its own worth. Not having a brief, deadline or clear output in mind gave us the freedom to be playful: using body, instruments and each other. Gradually these moments formed more practised improvisations, and they took shape and formed fragments of artistic material. They reflected the energy of the day, our states of being and the growing connection between us as individual sections led to contact, leaning, yielding and pushing off each other.

We had secured funding to have a filmmaker, Dan Tremble, with us that week, and he documented our relationship as it flourished. The film serves as a

beautiful manifestation of our work and our ethos. It can be seen on YouTube (Forshaw and Galloway 2023).

June 2023 – Talking Bodies, University of Chester

Performing

The first major performance moment with the piece we are making together was at Talking Bodies at the University of Chester in 2023, in the plenary session we presented. We started our session with a small amount of context on our relationship and process before launching into the piece. We firmly believe the work needs to speak for itself as research and, therefore, avoided over-explaining before performing. At this stage, the piece had seated musical improvisations at the beginning and end and one silent and one accompanied dance movement in between. The accompanied dance was to the backing track we had made together through improvisation, and this section still forms the heart of the piece. The other, silent section was the moment which drew the audience in the most.

Responses to the piece were profound. In the post-performance discussion, questions about methodology arose, leading us to articulate our embodied approach further but most wholehearted responses came in relation to emotions audience members experienced. Dr Sofia Zettermark's response was particularly moving. She referred to the moment when we spin each other round as being particularly affecting, and when we asked her to elaborate, she admitted, bravely, to our physicality making her feel jealous. As the discussion continued, we unravelled with the audience that we had demonstrated a child-like freedom in this specific moment most of the female-identifying, adult audience did not feel they had access to anymore. This dialogic sharing of a difficult emotional response had a palpable effect on everyone in the room: a powerful moment served to articulate the impact of the piece overall.

Discussions continued post-performance in the more intimate setting of evening drinks, and talking further with Sofia revealed others had admitted to her afterwards about also feeling jealous. This revelation had a lasting effect on us. The agency – and responsibility – we had, and have, when we perform is something we are now even more acutely aware of. It has made us revere our performance practice as powerful female agency modelling bodily freedom and trust, transcending age and acceptable behaviours for each age.

The Talking Bodies experience served to confirm the efficacy of our methodology and the authenticity of our performance. Alongside our plenary

performance were many other moments of profound connection, often with other adults identifying as women. This formative experience with our work encouraged us to commit to continue a collaborative creative practice governed by the body's lead. Through this felt approach, we continue to make decisions dialogically after sessions together, in response to deeply personal consideration of body-findings in the moment and drawing from our female lived experience.

This duoethnographic method we have developed is both utterly trustworthy and adapts and evolves each time we engage it. We know we can trust it, that it delivers results and that its potency is in its constant evolution. This knowledge is in no small part attributed to the impact our piece had at Talking Bodies, and we are grateful for how the sharing affirmed our research and ethos.

March 2024 – Subject/Object/Practice/Place, University of Malta

Performing

In Spring 2024, we were invited to present a workshop as part of the Subject/Object/Practice/Place conference at the University of Malta. This event was heavily populated with dance professionals, so the audience was very different from that at Talking Bodies. Having embodied practitioners in our audience nurtured an immediate understanding of our duo dynamic. Our performance had grown to include a 'bow dance' as we chose not to take our instruments on the flight; so the seated live music was cut. In this session we did a workshop with participants after the performance, actively modelling our embodied approach with them. This was very successful; we explained methodology through doing. We were very grateful for the positive responses we received, and they fed forward into our work. Marie Hay, from De Montfort University wrote:

Why and how you came to work together is beautiful. This context reveals the embodied experience in the aesthetic of your performance.

Feminine strength. This comes from a commitment to 'be' together. A practice from 'be-ing' together.

Touch, unison, looking.

Continuing ...

Writing this in 2024 leads to viewing our continued collaborative relationship, and commitment to each other, as an 'enterprise' (John-Steiner 2000).

John-Steiner discusses Howard Gruber's use of this 'dynamic concept', in stating it 'includes not only productive projects but also disruption, strategies for dealing with obstacles, and the possibilities of new, related projects when a current project comes to an end' (2000: 66). In the years since our first sessions, the process, and output, has stopped, restarted, has intensely moved on and lain dormant. Different opportunities to perform have provided perfect deadlines to work towards and audiences to anticipate.

Through the merging of ourselves and our instruments, we have created a shared performance space framed around acts of resisting habitual (and trained) ways of moving and playing instruments as well as our refusal to focus on a research output or final performance product when generating material. Actively disrupting past techniques and resisting institutional pressures carved out space for truthfulness, authenticity, care and respect. In putting our relationship first, we have both sustained our longest collaborative projects to date. To this end, the partnership also presents as a collaboration through time.

The very political act of taking time within the output-focused, deadline-pressured academic environment feels both subversive and nourishing. Whilst the collaboration continues to be just two people, the periodic nature of intense interactions with people outside of our partnership at conferences in the last two years confirms embodied creative practice as a profound way to connect with people, and make them feel connected. These transformative connective experiences fuel energy, bring new perspectives and insights and ensure continued professional and personal development which we weave back into the project. Our collaboration, travelling through time and space, affects others in lasting and meaningful ways, models healthy and sustainable creative research and integrates all forms of knowledge generation and understanding into a holistic, rigorous, caring, balanced, performance practice.

A relationship that stands the test of time is one where there is flexibility and adaptability. This aligns with the experience of our collaborative practice and method. Our relationship's dynamic and energy is accurately described using the term 'oscillating agency' (Ravn and Høffding 2022). This is due in no small part to our overlapping expertise and how it dissolves notions of power in a duo. Our working *modus operandi* is democratic, a flat hierarchy and our dynamic is in perpetuum with no one holding control for long enough to break the flow. Our relationship continues to further our belief – and trust – in collaborative processes promoting embodied knowing and in collaborative relationships supporting ways to become, be in the light and be seen.

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