

SHADOW AND DANCE

While sharing a healthy meal at the Droomtheater kitchen table, I decided to write an article about the experiences I had with them collaborating in the project 'Shadow and Dance'.

Some readers are no doubt already familiar with 'Droomtheater', their exciting innovative activities and productions stimulating our imagination, and invariably encouraging audiences to play an active role in the performance. In this article I would like to focus on shadowpuppetry, dance and ms.

background informaton

Founded in 1990 by Joanne Oussoren, master puppeteer Frans Hakkemars joined some years later. Together – as well as frequently collaborating with other professional artists – they have worked on a wide range of projects. Their attraction to shadow puppetry was stimulated upon visiting the UNIMA International Puppetry Festival and Congress in China, 2012. After having witnessed some beautiful examples of ancient traditional shadow puppetry they were hooked! Joanne and Frans invited Annie Katsura Rollins, a specialist in the ancient art of Chinese shadow play – to come to the Netherlands, in order to share and transfer her knowledge of – and skills in – this ancient form of community art. Another major step in Droomtheater's shadow puppetry theatre happened at the 'Figurentheaterkolleg' in Bochum, Germany when Joanne and Frans discovered the Swiss expert Hansüeli Trüb, yet another master with whom they worked. Under his expert guidance they created and launched in 2014 their successful 'dream suitcase'. This mobile 'mini theater' has since carried on to become a widely travelled valuable tool in the theatrical world, and can be seen in action throughout the Netherlands and beyond. In just a few years Droomtheater have dynamically re-launched this ancient form of puppetry – which originated in 2000 BC – when it served to hold Chinese agricultural communities together, and have brought it into an appropriate and contemporary existence. Something that brings diverse groups of society together and that stimulates these groups to share their communal experiences.

about us & ms

Earlier this year, I was given the wonderful opportunity to take part in a special event, the 33rd Annual International Dream Conference. A group of 'dancers', including myself, were invited by Joanne and Frans to work together on a presentation wherein two creative worlds would be brought together, the worlds of shadow puppetry and dance. Dance as such only became part of my life in 2015, I had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2001 and for years I was told – and accepted – what I could NO longer do! However, I eventually found strength and 'salvation' in dance. My physiotherapist talked to me about an organization called 'Dance for Health' whose core mission is to promote and improve the quality of life for its target groups, people affected by MS and with Parkinson's disease. I had always been slightly reticent to join any 'MS groups', but when I heard that these classes were a mix of ballet (had a childhood dream of being a ballet-dancer!) and modern dance – and that they were held at the splendid opera house in the centre of Amsterdam, where I regularly went to watch dance performances – my curiosity was aroused.

Through the MS dance classes hosted by 'het Nationale Opera & Ballet', I had the good fortune to meet Joanne Oussoren and Frans Hakkemars. Having recently developed a programme combining shadow puppetry and dance, they wanted to open it up to physically impaired participants and thus invited our MS group to partake in this multi-disciplinary project - and we were more than keen to be involved. Joanne, like myself, has MS and over a period of time we met regularly – occasionally inviting Frans to join us! We danced, drank lots of coffee in a number of cafes, visited each other and shared our experiences along the way. We would discuss our feelings, thoughts, different reactions, what we liked disliked, found helpful, unhelpful, difficult, problematic uncomfortable etc. All aspects were covered. For example the fact that we both enjoyed playing with light and colour, and that we found it fascinating and fun to experiment with light, darkness and shadow.

Supposedly light is an important factor to MS patients and it is believed that sunlight can determine the course of the illness. However we are not sure whether it is a true fact or not, but interestingly we found out that while Joanne has a great affinity with the sun; in contrast, I have a great affinity with – and am drawn toward – the shade.

interdisciplinarity and interactivity

We particularly liked the cooperation of the various disciplines and entering into this experimental new area of dance and shadow theatre. Here we had a specific form that enabled us to show more of ourselves to the public and thus inspire them to get involved as well. Gradually we became aware of the potential of combining shadow theatre and dance, and of the power of this combination. Fired by our enthusiasm we started to find ways in which to transmit our shared experiences and discoveries... we were in the process of seeking new routes for the future. I was thrilled to have been introduced to this new territory of shadow puppetry. It added another dimension and allowed me to take the next step in my healing process. Back to the early summer, when we took to the stage during the ASD congress that was being held in Limburg. With the live puppet theatrical as a backdrop and an eager audience in front of us, we were joined by Andrew Greenwood – professional ballet-dancer/master and 'people mover' – who guided us on this inner journey.

experience of dance

What followed was a synergetic mix, where the shadow puppets acted as the catalyst. Participants were dancing and moving to the stirring music of Stravinsky's Firebird and the projected firebird images of the shadow puppetry. The music and the puppets aroused our senses, evoked our emotions, and in turn stimulated our movements and minds and encouraged expansion of our creativity. While the dramatic developments and transformations took place in 'Firebird' – which we could empathize and identify with – we were undergoing a similar experience. The music and the shadow puppets supported this 'journey', the energy flowed and our inner imagery was set in motion, becoming a powerful means of expression and letting our imaginations run free. There was a wordless communication between all involved and, as Joanne poetically put it: "there is so much that can be said with the body and *without* words".

benefits

Prior to our inter-active performance I had become increasingly aware of the health benefits of this project, on both a physical and mental level. It works on balance, coordination and mobility, furthermore it stimulates imagination and communication and at the same time helps build confidence, and allows us to find back our (often) lost self-esteem. It also made me very conscious of the strength and potential of art and visuals. The shadow puppet imagery inspired me to delve further into my inner imagination and express myself via dance.

This was further enhanced by an introduction to classical music, which I never before fully appreciated. Now I am a huge fan of it, having felt its power and influence on my emotions and creative output. To have been introduced to these cultural stimulants was an unexpected discovery. All of the above are very important factors for people with chronic disabilities. It turns out to be a valuable lesson for everyone involved, it shows the world what we are capable of and it allows us to move beyond the stigma of being labelled 'disabled' or 'sick'. And, it is such fun! Despite my years as a journalist, I find it difficult to put into words the power and value of such a creative unifying, activity. It can only be fully appreciated when one has been physically there and has witnessed – or better – played a part in it. Whether it can be proven medically or scientifically that dance aids MS – that remains to be seen – the precious 'feel good' effect is incontestable. And ultimately this positive aspect helps our condition, which inevitably has a great effect on our condition. What a joy it was – to be able to experience this and most importantly – and to realise that we have the power and capability to return to that magical state of being. It was not a dream... but a reality made possible through dream circumstances.

future plans

Although the project is still in the early stages for Droomtheater, Joanne already enthusiastically talks about future collaborations with Andrew Greenwood and perhaps adding poetry to the creative mix of shadows, puppetry, music, dance and health. And "why not even combine it with cooking activities! And how about introducing fall prevention activities for the elderly?"

Droomtheater offers plenty of opportunities for all the age groups, different tastes and states of health... so keep watching this space www.droomtheater.com !

videolinks bij 'Shadow and Dance'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx6HIFBGetU> Shadow and Dance

https://youtu.be/D_QOTRmqDnA The firebird shadows

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmnCAPRyAYo> MS-Dance

Christine Gravemaker-Scott: Scottish, designer / journalist, now ms dancer

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