

War & Peace 2010

Dance in the Community to promote social change



Personal reflections of the Project:

Over the months of July and August 2010 I took part in the third phase of the project War and Feast in the city of Bucaramanga, Colombia, (South America). War and Feast 2010 worked alongside the existing project Zona Afecto, which for the past two years has been working with children, adolescents and families affected by sexual exploitation.

The purpose of the project was to use dance as a sustainable means for social change with a population of children and adults affected by sexual exploitation in the region of Santander, Colombia. We aimed to do this through developing existing methodology created in previous years and by working closely with occupational therapists, psychologists and social workers of Zona Afecto.

It is difficult to know so soon after the project has ended just how sustainable our intervention was. However, some of the immediate benefits of the nature of our work was evident, not only to us through our observations but also from the feedback the project received from participants and those working directly with us. The partner organisation, Zona Afecto, was keen to include the thoughts and approaches of our multi disciplinary team. Zona Afecto has since employed a member of the War and Feast team who will continue working into 2011. We see this as an achievement of the project in securing a more sustainable approach.

‘...a building in the centre of the city with a rustic charm’

I arrived in Bucaramanga not quite feeling my best, having suffered from Altitude sickness in Bogotá, and itching from a human flea which seemed not to want to leave me when I got off the bus from the airport. I was collected by a colleague and driven directly to the place I was going to be working for the next two months. A building in the centre of the city with a rustic charm, the house of Zona Afecto on this day was empty and unusually quiet. It was Sunday, and only a handful of staff were there for the meeting/workshop to initiate the project. The meeting was long, but productive and I felt quite drained, realising I had not “worked” speaking in Spanish for a while.

The following day, I met the children and teenagers with whom we would be working. I was struck by how young they were, yet how their movement characteristics, topics of conversation and clothing contradicted their age. It seemed they were living the lives of adults, trapped inside the bodies of adolescents. I learned very quickly that some of the individuals were under the influence of drugs, some were a little hung over from very little sleep, and others on the contrary were well rested and energetic. The first session with the partici-

pants, admittedly did not go well. It seemed all previous experience of working with teenagers had gone out the window and most of the participants sat down complaining that it was either boring, or stupid. They were right. It was. Although their words felt a little like ice cold water thrown in my face-it was a wake up call to myself. I would need to incorporate their interests, music and be constantly on my toes to both encouraging the participants, and also be aware of what they really needed. This was one of the most crucial things I learned.

“...In amongst the new surroundings I took comfort in some familiar faces, sights & sounds.”

I had been in Bucaramanga two days, and it had felt like a week. There was so much to take in, the histories of the participants and learning about their situations. They were all from very different circumstances. Some living in fairly acceptable conditions, but in an area notorious for both drugs and sexual exploitation, and therefore were at a high risk. Others who were not quite so fortunate. Who had or were living on the streets and were exposed to sexual exploitation, working late at night in areas known for prostitution. One 15 year old boy had been on and off the streets since he was 10, and had unfortunately contracted HIV. He had come to the dance session with scabies, and was scratching open sores. This was something I had not foreseen, perhaps through not wanting to know or through being naive. Any exercises involving any form of physical contact were for that reason modified. This was a second thing I learned only on my first day, there were very real issues of personal safety to be considered.

It was a lot of new information, some of which felt quite distressing but in amongst the new surroundings I took comfort in some familiar faces sights and sounds, it was a relief to be working with friends and colleagues in a city I knew since I had worked there two years previously.

“.....But Cat, this is not dance movement therapy”

Before leaving for Colombia, I had just completed my first year of my two years training as a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, and although it was very clear in my mind that what we were doing was in no way Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP) I was often confronted by my colleagues saying, “ But Cat, this is not dance movement therapy”. This was because for every decision we made as a team, as to what exercises or games we were planning to do in the sessions, I was thinking and continually asking questions like; Why are we doing this? Is this appropriate? What will they gain from this? What sort of feelings may this evoke? It seemed that although I knew I was not entering into the world of therapy during the project, the world of therapy was very much embedded in my thinking. Thus I felt I was able to add another dimension to the thinking of the work.

The project was crucial in my understanding as to exactly what is the difference between giving Dance Movement Psychotherapy and providing therapeutic dance sessions: Detailed planning. War and Feast, as part of it's objectives had detailed plans of each session. With almost every minute planned and accounted for. DMP has a structure, but no session plans, and you encourage participants to move authentically, using their movement to come up with exercises and games on the spot. When some sessions, for one reason or another did not go according to plan, I was able to call upon my experiences of my first year in training as a dance movement therapist. For example, an argument broke out between two of the male participants, and tensions were high. It felt highly inappropriate to continue with what we (the team) had planned, it was a moment of make or break. Either the aggressive energy would come out against someone, or a member of the group would leave. I introduced a game, which involved both running around (expelling much pent up energy), but also stopping or getting stuck. It was like a complex version of stuck in the mud. Some having the power to freeze, others having the power to unfreeze, and another having the power to fast forward. What at the time seemed to come out of panic, in hindsight came from being very used to using instincts in dance movement therapy sessions to gauge where the participants were at.

“...there was a constant exchange of knowledge and experience”

An outcome I had not been expecting was the enthusiasm and hunger for my opinion as a trainee Dance Movement Psychotherapist. Although our project War and Feast is in no way using a form of therapy, it shares many therapeutic aims. The Psychology department of Zona Afecto were keen to understand how DMP works, and how it could benefit the work of Zona Afecto in the foreseeable future. For me personally, this was one of the most rewarding things of the project. Although, I am in no way more experienced than those at Zona Afecto, neither am I fully qualified, I had some valuable knowledge to give. If anything I think it was

important for them to have “fresh eyes”, but also some different theoretical thinking. I met with both social workers and the psychologists to discuss my observations of the individuals. I was able to use my knowledge of Laban Movement Analysis to explain my observations in details which seemed to shed some light onto some unknown areas of the individual’s personalities.

A particular difficulty I raised with the Psychology Department was that of physical contact. The participants were mostly adolescent at an age of sexual exploration and were either at a high risk of or had already been exposed to sexual exploitation. In the context of Colombia’s culture, it is acceptable to greet someone with one or two kisses on the cheeks. It is not uncommon for this to be done between pupil and adult. Notably, touch is viewed quite differently to that of the UK. It is not uncommon for the caress of an arm or back to be done between adult and child, child to child, or adult to adult. For these reasons I felt it difficult to know how and where to put in firm physical boundaries but respecting what is within a culture. Asking, was it ok to greet a participant with a kiss on the cheek? It was an issue I raised with the staff at Zona Afecto and it seemed to be a divided opinion. Some believed there was nothing wrong with hugging the participants or kissing them on the cheek saying that at Zona Afecto it was sometimes the only place they received appropriate affection. Others took the view that I did, asking; how do you put firm boundaries in place, and, what is appropriate affection for this population? Though It is an issue unresolved, it is one of great importance which I have taken away with me and shall be researching further into.

It was because of my relationship with the psychology department that there was a constant exchange of knowledge and experience, and I personally feel that I learned as much from them, as I did in the sessions with the participants.

“.....struggling with time”

I found that I was constantly struggling with time. It was a question of juggling time for the project, and time outside of it to earn money. This was one of my biggest struggles and I feel is very relevant on reflecting personally. Since I received no salary for the work because the project received no financial funding, I could only work alternate days giving sessions to the participants. On the other days and weekends, I was teaching and performing to earn money. Upon reflecting I really feel that this had an affect on the outcome of the project. It was an intense project, with out the intensity it needed, which would require us to work everyday with the participants.

I also felt that for projects or work like this, two months maybe long enough to pass on methodologies and working practise but is NOT enough time to build the relationships with populations required in order to establish successful social interventions.

I feel quite strongly, that if I am to continue this work, I can not “do it for free”, neither for a few months, since it ultimately has an affect on the quality of the outcome.

...To conclude

As a final year student studying for a masters in Dance Movement Psychotherapy, the project was of great value to me and my personal development. I can bring particular issues I have been exposed to whilst working on the project to my training not only sharing them with my peers but other professionals within the field. I am also looking into ways of disseminating the report of the project to highlight the need for, and benefits of, dance amongst vulnerable groups of people. I feel that the project was the first of many stepping stones along the way to expanding my horizons as to how dance can be used not just as an art form, but as a way of helping individuals and groups connect their experiences and express their thoughts and feelings in a way that can for some, be much safer than saying it, or writing it. I hope once qualified, to return to Colombia to continue to apply what I have already learnt.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the LUTSF, it would not have been possible for me to go and participate in this project if I had not received the funding. It has indeed been an invaluable journey for me. Thank you!