

DanceArts Vancouver Society
Vancouver, B.C.

Meanings, Methods and Messages – Global Connections and Personal Perspectives

A Full-Day Workshop facilitated by Liz Lerman and Elizabeth Johnson of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and presented by DanceArts Vancouver as part of Breaking New Ground – The Earth Symposium

by Douglas D. Durand
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Introduction

Meanings, Methods and Messages – Global Connections and Personal Perspectives was a full-day, experiential workshop, facilitated by Liz Lerman and Elizabeth Johnson of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (LLDE). This workshop took place on April, 28, 2004 as part of the program for Breaking New Ground – The Earth Symposium, a four-day long gathering of artists, community workers, arts organizations, environmentalists, social activists, educators, policy makers and youth from across Canada and around the world. The symposium explored of the relationship between the arts, community, the environment and the development of a civil society. Breaking New Ground was presented by DanceArts Vancouver in association with Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University.

This report presents the author's perspective as rapporteur, based on personal observations of the workshop as well as incorporating comments from participants and facilitators.

Workshop Facilitators

As the founding Artistic Director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Ms. Lerman is recognized as one of the world's leading pioneers in the field of dance and community-building, and recipient of the 2002 MacArthur Fellowship. Ms. Lerman is a gifted teacher, choreographer and performer whose work has redefined where dance takes place and who can dance. Her commitment is both to the art of dance and to the human element in art-making.

Elizabeth Johnson is a choreographer, dancer and director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's Teen Exchange program. As a company member, Ms. Johnson has collaboratively created dances in communities with Vietnam vets; senior citizens; religious leaders of many faiths; high

school teachers and professional dancers. Her work with teens has been featured across the United States.

Workshop Content and Description

The workshop is described in the Breaking New Ground brochure as follows:

Meanings, Methods and Messages – Global Connections and Personal Perspectives: Artists link many worlds and art making is central to that exchange. We create dance using text, research and observations, as well as drawing from personal history and larger political contexts. Using a collaborative process, including physical partnering, we explore ways to develop an individual vision while also strengthening our facilitation skills. How do we partner our content? Our audiences? Each other? These are the underlying questions the all-day workshop given by Liz Lerman and Elizabeth Johnson from Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.

Methodology

Approximately 30 people actively participated in this workshop, with another 5-6 individuals taking part in various degrees of involvement. The majority of participants were delegates from the symposium, with a few dance artists from Vancouver's dance community. Ms. Lerman (Liz) and Ms. Johnson (Elizabeth) first asked the group to gather in a circle. They introduced themselves and invited everyone to make introductions. People were asked to keep the introductions brief and to think of them as a type of 'haiku', revealing something personal but not a life's story. The introductions uncovered a great diversity of people, experiences and backgrounds that typified the symposium's attendees.

The day was to unfold through a series of participatory and experiential exercises. These exercises were meant to offer participants various options or tools that they could use in their own working situations. These were processes that the LLDE artists have honed and developed over the years through their work in varied community and professional settings. The workshop was "team taught" with Liz and Elizabeth alternating in leading exercises for the workshop participants.

Because this was going to be a movement-based workshop, the group participants were led through a series of warm-up exercises which followed the introductions. Participants were asked to remain in place, close their eyes and follow movement directions given by Liz. The directions are more like questions. "What parts of our bodies can we move in circles?" Individuals decide which parts to move. This is a type of improvisation, a key element in her company's work which allows the participants to direct the movement from their own bodies.

A series of exercises followed with participants working with partners and alternating between having their eyes closed and open, moving through the space, making shapes with their bodies, all the while following directions from Liz. These exercises challenged notions of leader and follower.

The afternoon was devoted to what Liz and Elizabeth refer to as "Equivalent's"; a tool used by members of the LLDE to generate movement material for choreographies. Elizabeth led an

exercise that involved participants telling a story about companionship moving across the room. The number of times each person crossed the room was used as the editing tool to refine the story to its essential components. Each person's story was further edited to its essence and shared with the group as a "headline" version. Personal meaning is revealed through the physical metaphors of gestures generated by the natural movement of people's hands as they recount their story. Choreographic ideas and movement material can emerge from these animated and oftentimes, very graceful "spontaneous gestures". Liz and her company's artists use this as a powerful choreographic tool.

What emerged out of the process?

A common theme to these exercises was an exchange and fluidity of roles between leader and follower, teacher and learner. Perhaps the mechanics of these exercises were familiar to some of the participants. However there were ample opportunities for new experiences to be discovered and the impact of that learning experience shared with others in the group.

Following each exercise, Liz and Elizabeth allowed time for questions and feedback. As experienced facilitators, they encouraged this dialogue by asking questions such as

What did you notice or discover? The answers generated from these questions created a very positive learning environment as participants voiced their opinions as to how they could use some of these exercises in their own situations.

Some individuals felt uncomfortable with some of the exercises but were comfortable enough in the group to express this. Liz was more than willing to explore these issues and as she said, "to turn all your discomforts into inquiry." Through this process, another tool to discovery was learned.

Exercises that involved creating choreography through a particular process in small groups also contained a component for demonstrating and sharing the results with the larger group. A great deal of learning occurred through this process, from observations made and expressed. Both Liz and Elizabeth encouraged specific feedback, asking participants to consider what made things meaningful to them and encouraged people to look at the work with generous eyes.

Another common theme that emerged through the exercises was that of empowering people to tell their stories and move. At one point in the day, Liz said, "It's had for people to learn that they are in charge of their lives. It takes time."

Keynote Speech

Liz Lerman's keynote speech at the symposium's lunchtime break was a valuable opportunity for delegates to learn more about the underlying philosophy that guides the way she and her organization work. As she says, both have been committed to "exploring the relationship between professional artists and community life, and to the principle that each is made better when informed by the other."

Liz spoke about the frustration of her own dance education, perhaps still experienced by many contemporary artists. Dance is divided into many categories; ballet, folk, modern, post-modern,

etc. She told us that when she was living in New York City, there was even a “downtown” post-modern style, not to be confused with the “uptown” post-modern style. All this division was further compounded by strong opinions about what a dance artist could and could not do. At that time in the USA, you couldn’t get a college degree in education and choreography. You had to choose between the two. What happened next was that institutions were built around these definitions, which further dictated the practices of artists, limiting their potential. Liz’s experiences of these institutions influenced her commitment to building a humane institution where everyone gets to learn and grow, not only the person in charge.

While she doesn’t have a problem with definitions or categories per se, they have contributed to a separation and lack of communication between practitioners. They have also led to the construction of a hierarchy which places the concert work done by a dance artist on a higher level than what an artist does in community or educational settings. Her desire is to see a shift from that strong vertical axis to a more equitable horizontal plane. As she said, “This way the cutting edge is much wider.” Liz views her work and that of her company as taking place on a horizontal spectrum that includes work done in studios, on stage and in community settings. She sees herself moving easily between the permeable membranes of these different contexts along this continuum as it curves to eventually form a circle.

Observations

I noticed that Liz spent a considerable amount of time before the workshop’s start to greet participants and later learned that over the years, she has noticed that people generally dance better when they know that their teacher has learned their name.

Based on positive comments from participants attending the entire four-day symposium, this workshop complemented the participatory and experiential nature of other “art practices” workshops as well as most of the youth-oriented sessions.

I think that participants would have benefited from having Liz and Elizabeth spending more time at the beginning of the session contextualizing their work and being more explicit about what the day’s objectives. A number of people commented that Liz Lerman’s keynote address at lunch-time helped them to appreciate the underlying philosophy that drives the work of the LLDE and the direction of the workshop.

Speaking about the impact of her workshop, Ms. Lerman felt that a number of the participants benefited “an enormous amount from it.” While her processes may present challenges and not necessarily be appropriate for some of the contexts that the workshops participants are working in, she was very satisfied that at least, those individuals would gain from the experience. She said, “I prefaced the workshop by saying, ‘I don’t know anything about the people you’re working with...I don’t know that you can...But this is for you, and I expect all of you to do it’.”

The “team teaching” approach was very useful for both facilitators and participants. The facilitators were able to observe the other’s methodology and how the participants reacted to it. The participants appreciated the alternating styles, making for a richer learning experience.

Liz Lerman was very clear to the group as to the place of artists and the role they have to play in our increasingly challenging world. She said “Artists have the tools, whether we know it or not. We have the solutions. All the information we need is around us.”