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**IN TIME OF DAFFODILS – PAUL CHANTRY**

**Report**

**In Time of Daffodils – the goal of living is to grow**

**INTRODUCTION**

After having undergone spinal surgery in January 2023 for an injury that had left me unable to dance or feel connected to my choreography for 8months, thanks to the generous support of the St. Hugh’s Foundation, I was able to undertake the project ‘In Time of Daffodils’. During the project, I worked on re-discovering and investigating my choreographic/dance practice in the changed body I have, and also explored how to relate to and create for artists who have undergone severe changes in their physical circumstances.

**WHAT HAPPENED**

‘In Time of Daffodils’ is a poem written by ee cummings poem. Over the course of two weeks, I worked with two dancers and a co-director/choreographer to create a dance trio inspired by this poem. One of the dancers was an older dancer (45years old) who had undergone multiple surgeries and was living with several movement limiting injuries. The other dancer was a young dancer (23 years old) with no injuries or surgeries. The piece was created in an extremely collaborative fashion, with all 3 dancers and director having input into the process. It was performed at our local theatre. Following creation, the team reflected together to discuss what we had learnt and how this affected us as artists going forward.

**CREDITS**

The team comprised of:

* Paul Chantry (dancer/choreographer)
* Rae Piper (dancer/choreographer)
* Andrea Valongo (dancer/choreographer)
* Kristian Cunningham (director/choreographer)

**PROJECT AIMS**

I chose ‘In Time of Daffodils’ as my inspiration for this piece, as the key message within it is that ‘the goal of living is to grow’. All too often when dancers/choreographers sustain a severe injury that in some way limits/restricts them from obtaining full movement, they feel that they have ‘lost it all’ and their future practice can only be a hollow echo of their former practice. I am opposed to this view and I sort to challenge it by embracing the notion that injury had *changed* me, it hadn’t *limited* me. Thus, I still sought to grow in my practice – not to see it diminish.

My aims with this project were to learn how to choreograph/dance with the body I have today; to be able to relate to, create for, and inspire artists in similar situations; and to express myself in previously unknown ways as a co-creator/performer. I hoped to discover new modes of performance creation, diving deeply into and acquiring a new creative process, uncovering my performative/choreographic voice in my changed body, and transform my confidence in working choreographically with changed bodies in general.

**METHODS OF MEETING AIMS**

There were several key methods used to meet these aims. The first was open and transparent communication between the team about our bodies. We each discussed our physical restrictions, what were counter-indicated movements, and where we were in terms of optimal training duration and intensity (i.e. how long we could rehearse for before over-tiring certain body areas, how many repetitions our bodies could handle etc). This was all informed with guidance from our respective physiotherapists/specialists. This discussion meant we were all on the same page when it came to understanding choreographically what would be possible for us.

The second method was co-creation. When we were devising the piece, rather than having one ‘lead’ choreographer, all three dancers and our director worked together to develop material. This meant that we listened to each other’s voices and gained inspiration from each other. Additionally, it reinforced to me that as a choreographer, you do not need to have all the answers yourself – drawing on other people’s perspectives, imagination and perception strengthened the creative process.

The third method was having a member of the team who was not one of the performers. Our director/choreographer Kristian, sat ‘outside’ the process in so much as he provided creative input whilst being able to view the work entirely from the outside, gaining valuable visual and emotional feedback. This would have been impossible for me as a dancer also in the piece – one can never view a work one is in as if you were the audience – one always will need an outside human eye (a video camera is never as good as it can’t tell you how the piece makes it feel!). This did two things for us – 1) lead to a more developed and interesting piece; 2) built confidence in all the dancers that what we were doing was good – Kristian was able to let us know when things worked, or when they didn’t, so we could feel confident in the choices we made.

The fourth method was choosing to work with one other dancer who was also in a changed, older body and one who was younger with no injuries. As all three of us worked together, despite our very different physical conditions, we found common ground by discussing how to modify movement so it could work for us all. We discovered that our perceived ‘weaknesses’ could be bolstered by another’s ‘strengths’ and in fact, sometimes the ‘weaknesses’ were not as limiting as we initially believed. The piece started to become far more about the artistry rather than the technical accomplishment which dancers cling to and are so fearful of.

**KEY LESSONS LEARNT**

Following the creation of the piece and the reflection period with the team, I learnt many valuable lessons:

1. A changed body is not a useless body – it is capable of a great deal.
2. Co-creation and collaboration is a powerful way of finding new methods of working
3. Communication between dancers/choreographers/directors is key.
4. Physical limitations do not have to impact artistic expression.
5. Dance is more than just technique – without artistry it is simply meaningless physical movement.
6. Confidence is inspired by competence. Because I felt competent to perform all the movements that were in the choreography (as opposed to being asked to do things that made me anxious in light of not having the necessary strength, mobility etc), this raised my confidence level hugely. As a result I went into performance with no anxiety and no pain. I only felt joy and excitement at being able to perform a piece I knew I could do. This meant I was able to focus entirely on performing for the audience – rather than worrying about my body.
7. When worry is removed from dancers in regards to ‘I’m worried if I do this move it may hurt/may worsen my injury/may not happen’, they become happier, more productive artists.
8. There is room in the dance industry for dancers with changed/older bodies who have physical limitations – all that is required is sensitivity and awareness to the individual and their needs.

**CHALLENGES**

The biggest challenge I experience was believing this could work. Having been so disconnected from my practice for so long due to injury, I was worried there may be no way back. However, I’m delighted to report that this whole project has proved this worry unfounded. The confidence I’ve gained from this process has been immeasurable and invaluable, alongside learning new methods of creation.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

I would like to make a note about point 8 in the “Key Lessons Learnt” section. The dance industry is challenging, hard work and, at times, brutal. I’m fully aware that choreographers will often need fully fit, young bodies to realise their choreographic vision. However, I believe there is room for a discussion about the level of representation of older dancers and dancers with changed bodies, and how choreographers can create work for/with them. Instead of casting these people (myself being one) aside once they can no longer do the incredible physical feats that they once could, perhaps we can consider widening our industry to make room for everyone. The key point is that artistry is not necessarily purely dictated by physical ability. We know this already from the brilliant disabled dance artists that work in the industry (one only needs to look at Candoco Dance Company for an example of this). However, dancers who have been injured/got older almost seem to fall through a crack– we don’t quite have a category that we fit into, so no-one is really making work for us, or working with us. I hope in the future this is something that will change, and I hope to be part of that change, as we still have much to contribute as artists.

We are still growing.