

# 'IN TRANSIT'

Unpicking the narratives of  
a participatory arts project

## The story of the Transit Youth Dance Project May 2010



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## In Transit

### Unpicking the narratives of a participatory arts project

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Transit is the kind of project that occasionally gets made into a television documentary. The narrative would be based on perhaps two or three of the young people involved – a young offender, perhaps, still tagged; a reluctant school attender; a NEET teenager (i.e. not in education, employment or training). It would show them arriving on the first day, sullenness or ebullience masking their nervousness, not knowing each other, unwilling to shed their shoes and socks for the first set of dance exercises. Over the week, something happens to them that allows them to participate, working on their first piece of contemporary dance. Street dance is the closest most have ever come to this experience; the music they are moving to now is classical. By the end of the week, these three along with the rest have turned from a disparate collection of disaffected youth into a dance troupe. The following week's performance at the local professional theatre is a triumph. Parents and carers, along with the youth workers who have been attending the workshops, are visibly moved. These young people have shown what they are capable of, not just to the community around them, but also to themselves.

There is nothing particularly inaccurate – or, for that matter, original – about this emotional rags-to-riches story and Transit, a project created by the Thames Valley Partnership, did indeed succeed in giving new ambition and confidence to a dozen young people undergoing a variety of difficulties about themselves, their abilities and their purpose and place in the world – and a result like that is not to be sniffed at. It is, after all, the point of participatory or community arts practice to, in some measure, transform the non-professionals involved. Although there is much still to be explored, particularly in terms of the specific benefits of different art forms and practices, it is now generally accepted that well-run projects of this kind do produce positive and measurable outcomes in terms of attitude, behaviour and well-being and may also, in some cases, raise levels of attainment as well provide participants with useful and transferable skills.

Yet, in witnessing this project – and reviewing it through the sensitive video record made of it by Linda Mason – I was struck that there were other narratives here, buried beneath the surface, invisible to those not intimately involved in setting the project up and running the workshops. Bringing these to light is vital, in my view, if policy makers and funders are to understand the full significance of what they are seeing on stage, as it were.

### The rest of the iceberg: preparing for participation

It has become something of a mantra of government in recent years that money should go directly to artists and not to bureaucracy. It is a clear and commonsense message but too often the pejorative term 'bureaucracy' seems to be used to question the whole idea of arts administration, as if the artist could function more effectively without all the paperwork and negotiation that goes into promoting – and often commissioning – their work. If they are to reach an audience, even the author in the lonely garret has to have an agent, an editor, a publisher, a printer, a distributor, a bookseller, a reviewer and so on. The industry built around the author is, of course, a commercial one based on profit making, and it is simply concerned

with finding an effective way of linking artist to audience. The picture for the artist working in participatory arts is much more complex.

It is blindingly obvious that the skill, flair and generosity of dance artists Helen Parlor and Maria Ryan were vital to the success of the Transit project. Less obvious is that the art that emerged – along with the personal changes experienced by the participants – was only made possible through the offices of the Thames Valley Partnership, and specifically of Judy Munday, TVP's Arts and Community Safety Officer. What the audience at the Swan Theatre in High Wycombe saw was an impressive evening of dance; what the young participants experienced was seven heady days of workshops and rehearsals; what Judy and her colleagues contributed was nearly two years of thinking and careful preparation.

The thinking bit might easily be forgotten in contemplating the sheer practical and patient slog of bringing together different agencies, with their different agendas and different client groups.

When I began meeting people back in the autumn, I knew that if we wanted ten young people to see it through, we needed to sign up twenty. So, just working through the YOS [Youth Offending Service] would not provide enough bodies. Having worked in Buckinghamshire for some time, I contacted every agency I could think of which dealt with anyone not totally engaged in school – and they, in turn, put me onto other agencies. Each of them was very keen but they did not necessarily have the right young people. We had long discussions about what age group to go for and whether to target those already refusing school or go for those on the verge of not attending.

In the end, Judy says, there were no easy answers but the compromise she came to with several key agencies had worked 'really well' – not just in terms of numbers (12 stayed with the project) but in the spread of individuals that had been recruited. There were in the end, three referrals from the Youth Offending Service, four students from the creative art inclusion centre at a local school, several older teenagers recommended by the Connexions service, which had not worked with TVP previously, and two other young people sent along by a pupil referral unit (for excluded students) and by social care services respectively. The implications of having such a mix of young people on the project were wider than achieving, albeit temporarily, the holy grail of 'joined-up services'. There were also social benefits for the participants themselves, in meeting others outside their peer group and from different backgrounds and learning to get along and work together.

Yesterday I was thinking that Denzil and me hadn't got on since the start – I wanted to kill him most of the week! – but I'm glad you put us together in a duet, 'cos, even though neither of us knew the lifts perfectly, we tried to compromise and we did.

It was clear from what the participants said and wrote about the project that one of the pleasures of the project was making new friends – including, as one commented, 'a lot of people I wouldn't have talked to before'. Maria congratulated them on this at the final morning workshop:

On day one, I was very aware that we all came from different places and we didn't know each other. It's been impressive to see that, even if you are not best buddies, everyone's starting to pull together to make it happen – because we are all going for one goal.

This would have good consequences, of course, for the artistry of the final performance, which depended for its impact on effective collaboration and smooth teamwork, but it also represents a validation of the *thinking* behind the project.

### **Use *and* ornament: achieving social and artistic aims**

The philosophy driving Transit is crystallised by Judy Munday in her outline of the project:

Transit is about raising aspirations, enhancing confidence and providing a pathway towards a more rewarding life for young people. The project is based on the discipline of a professional contemporary dancer and the process of developing dance and life skills in a safe, creative and positive environment.

Theatre critic Lyn Gardner once talked to me of ‘art’s accidental social work’ – an apt phrase that alerts one to the great tension that exists in projects like Transit, between the making of art and the desire to harness it for social good – variously coded as a dialectic between excellence and access or art’s intrinsic and extrinsic values or art-for-art’s-sake and instrumentalism.

On another project I evaluated recently, where several artists were working with young people with mental health issues, I was struck by how one – a visual artist – distinguished her own practice from that of the workshop leader:

James uses drama as a tool to deal with issues, whereas I think that everyone should just make art, because doing that would, by itself, make them politically autonomous and socially mobile.

Judy Munday is avowedly at the ‘social good’ end of the spectrum, saying towards the end of the workshops:

A major part of this project for me is seeing how dance promotes better behaviour – and thoughtfulness and discussion about behaviour. There has not been quite enough time to do that, because the dancers want to get on with it – there’s going to be a performance and they are committed to it. For me, the balance is more the other way. I have had to argue in our debriefs against excluding some participants and to explain that this is why they are here: we need to work on their behaviour with them through what we are doing. If someone is kicking off, rather than getting rid of her because she’s disruptive and we can’t make a nice piece with her there, we need to look at how we are structuring the sessions and how we are leading the work.

Originally envisaged as at least a two-week project, Transit was undoubtedly limited by its funding only stretching to seven days (which included a taster day and a day spent on teambuilding at an outdoor pursuits centre, prior to the full week of workshops). What was sacrificed was not the dance but the chance to spend more time on ‘life skills’. Participants were encouraged to contribute their own ideas, choose props and devise movements within a piece that was then given overall choreographic shape by Helen and Maria, but – it seemed – not helped to fully comprehend or articulate the implications of what they were learning through this process that they could use in their lives outside the dance.

For example, one young woman had difficulty in controlling her anger but realised that storming out of the room would mean that the other participants in her particular dance sequence could not carry on. With more time for reflection and perhaps using video footage of the workshop, the learning from this could have been teased out and reinforced for her and everyone else: that you cannot always do what you want to do, that you are part of a team and have to be responsible.

Yet, my impression was that many of them had intuitively grasped the metaphorical 'lessons' these activities provided. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this was their frequent reference, in conversation and in their written evaluations, to how much they enjoyed the 'lifts'. This was an aspect of dance that most were not familiar with and that to a few at the start looked suspiciously like ballet. However, even by Day Two of the workshops, several were asking for 'more lifts please' and, by the end of the week, a third of the group independently stated that 'doing the lifts' was the best thing about the project (with as many again identifying being 'part of a team').

The lifts are so graceful. You don't have to be perfect in street dance but here everything has to be in the right place. In street dance you can compromise if you make a mistake but here – well, it has to be a ...*perfect* compromise.

In reflecting on the project on the final day of workshops, Maria Ryan explained that the original idea had been to give the young people choices and to pass on transferable skills like teamwork, communicating effectively, confidence:

But, hopefully, also to show them how they can transfer making choices here to making choices out there, based on the practical things they have tried and which have worked well – how to make a lift work, for example.

The lifts seem to evoke several things: taking on the challenge of a new kind of activity you haven't tried before and finding it well worth the risk; the sheer exhilaration of physical achievement and the sense of well-being it engenders; the trust you find rewarded by the people who are lifting and supporting you; the demonstration of your grace and nerve to others. The list could go on. However, there is one final hidden narrative I want to reveal and it begins in Maria's comment above, which shows that, for the dance artists themselves, the dance can do bigger things than move limbs; it is a discipline for life.

### **More landscape: the artistic possibilities of participatory work**

What our television documentary won't show is the impact Transit and projects like it have on the professional artists facilitating them – nor is it likely to explain very clearly why an artist gets drawn into something like this. Too often, the artist is portrayed either as some kind of charismatic guru or a fancy kind of do-gooder. The truth is that there are real artistic arguments for professionals doing this. Dancers like Helen Parlor and Maria Ryan could be in professional dance companies, as dancers or as choreographers – and, indeed, both have been – but they choose now to work with non-professionals because it is, for them, more challenging artistically, as Helen explains:

I prefer to work with people with more *landscape* in what they can do. You get surprises that way, whereas in the professional world you don't get that many surprises,

simply because a trained dancer can probably do anything you ask them to. Our work here is not so concerned with 'line'. It's more about the imperfections – you are trying to draw out and make beautiful the raw energy they have. Their arms might be in the wrong place, but the essence of what they are trying to do is true.

This notion of 'truth' is picked up on by Maria:

In drama, you have to tell a story. So, if a scene is not helping in getting to the point, the director cuts it. That's not always the case in dance – 'Oh, it looks lovely, let's jump over here'. I'm more interested in finding out the true intentions, even if you are using more formal vocabulary like [choreographer] Matthew Bourne, who can do this great emotive storytelling still using classical movement. This kind of dance comes from a place of great integrity. And that's true of these young people – they are not thinking about flowery stuff in making this piece. The dance is coming from them, from their feelings and intentions.

What lies within the conventional narrative, then, of young people discovering new possibilities of themselves through dance is a bigger creative scenario, where the professional artist works this raw human material to create new art.

We created a new space for them and gave them some physical things – exercises, props – so they had somewhere to start a narrative from. We wanted it 'the sooner the better' and we gave them a goal. We showed them what was expected of them and their energy has boosted the piece. We choreographed some of it, but right from the beginning they had ideas. We wanted to build their stamina and give them some technique, so that they had a real foundation to create movement from. We wanted them to have the opportunity to express themselves creatively but also to take away the regime of class every day. We wanted them to focus, to get stronger, to eat more healthily. We homed in on the discipline of the performer.

The result was that everyone in the room became a performer, able to solo and willing to lift.

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Watch the performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo16fy0zmL0>

