

'Being'

Combined Arts Director Rebecca Swift describes moments in "Untitled" research and development project in March 1997

It is hard to think that anything of creative, social and artistic value might be happening when two people are sitting very still for 30 minutes, sometimes doing a hand dance with one hand and a few fingers each.

Half way through the dance the participant held my hand and wrist and didn't let go. Through her fingers she could pick up my pulse. She was blind and deaf, she communicated non-verbally and this was her first movement and music workshop with new people.

As trained dancers and theatre practitioners we are supposedly used to communication on a 'deeper' level, within a public context. We are taught, I hope, to relate to and tap into the undercurrents of communication: emotional, physical, non-verbal, atmospheric, the invisible energies that transfer between audience and performer. Beyond technique, my own training included ways of letting your vulnerabilities show and listening physically and sensorially to the world around you to become receptive vessels of communication. Simply an extension of the physical and emotional intelligence we all use, matter of factly, as part of our every day lives.

Even so, the simple non-verbal and kinaesthetic communication of this hand dance was a challenge. We were strangers and there is always a bit of unease when getting to know someone new. In everyday life when meeting a new person the verbal communication operates as an etiquette to establish a connection, whereas any physical and emotional reactions in our bodies to this ordinary occurrence are often ignored and bordered off. But here there was no verbal communication and it was a creative context, what was the etiquette here? I had no idea how to use her language, she had no idea about mine. There were no landmarks.

The participant's key worker said that she would often want to know what was really going through her mind. Even with someone

who knew her well, communication (the threshold between the outside world and the experience of life and oneself, the innerworld) could be a chasm where no-one knows what you might be thinking and feeling, where you can't reach or be reached.

Moments of paranoia washed over me, wondering how much she would pick up from me, since holding my pulse meant she had an intimate knowledge of my state of mind however well I could hide it on the surface.

Could she tell how I was really feeling, my fears, strengths, weaknesses, was I able to express an appropriate openness which would allow her to get to know me?

At times she let go of my hand. I kept it in the same place because by this time I didn't know what to do, except work with details and allow the sense of territory without landmarks to continue. When she chose to, she would return to find my hand in the same place up in the air and would hold it in a different way. We sat like this, perfectly still, me self consciously aware of my breathing and pulse for what seemed a long time.

The impulse for me to do something (or at least to be seen to be doing something), to be in a position of knowing, to be the facilitator again, was strong.

Was there anything happening anyway? Was I doing the right thing? Were support staff in the workshop judging the situation? She is probably bored stiff and not interested in this workshop? Is this of value to anyone? We aren't being seen to be doing amazing acrobatic dance pieces.

All these thoughts were like little distractions which stopped me from focusing for a second. There was a lot to concentrate on in just being still, moving a hand, breathing, and the qualities within this. Every time I got caught up with these thoughts I stopped being present, my breathing changed, my energy went into my head.

Her support worker was surprised to see her so calm and focused in a new environment. But for me the challenge here were the moments of equality that surfaced between the two of us through a hand dance, despite our differences, and then fell out of equilibrium again.