



CREATIVITY IN CONFLICT:

PERFORMING ARTS FOR
SUSTAINED DIALOGUE,
JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION

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The performing arts are uniquely equipped to create order out of the chaos of conflicted societies. The arts are comfortable in that otherwise tumultuous space between justice and reconciliation, and have the potential to stimulate changes in attitudes and behaviours in the service of more balanced and inclusive societies. As the justice and peacebuilding fields continue to search for answers about how best to address widespread trauma in the midst of violent conflict, the arts, whether drawn from indigenous practice or external art forms modified for the cultural context, offer a few possible solutions. As one perspective of many on this topic, this paper seeks to, first, display some of the current approaches of how the performing arts are used to address the causes and consequences of conflict; second, present the findings of a pilot project carried out under the auspices of the IJR that tested the use of dance as a means of promoting dialogue in Cape Town, Western Cape; and third, compare how these same approaches were then modified and applied in Warrenton, Northern Cape. Lessons for practitioners are also culled from these experiences to support continued practice.

Building on the IJR's programmes – Memory, Arts, and Culture, Gender Justice and Reconciliation, and the Ashley Kriel Youth Leadership Development – this pilot project explored how the performing arts can be utilised to support efforts toward dialogue, understanding, and community-level reconciliation. This project developed out of a unique partnership between the IJR and the University of Cape Town (UCT) School of Dance. Taking place over a six-month period from July to December 2016, the pilot project entailed preliminary research, consultation with South African artists, dance companies, historians, and international dance practitioners, project design, and eight improvisational dance workshops. These activities culminated in public performances at the 2016 Baxter Dance Festival Fringe Programme in Cape Town and a performance at the 2016 IJR Reconciliation Award event. Preliminary findings suggest that dance movement and performance, if designed to reflect stories from the audience's lived experiences, have the potential to catalyze key moments of increased understanding between historically disparate groups.¹

Given the success of the initial pilot, movement-based approaches were then applied in a two-day IJR intervention in Warrenton, Northern Cape that worked with a group of 20 cisgender and transgender women. Although not formally evaluated, this experience

anecdotally revealed lessons about the utility of the arts in transforming attitudes and behaviours. In general, the application of a variety of artistic mediums allowed the women to increase their own self-esteem, improve their communication with family and neighbours, and feel motivated to work for change in their own communities. Additional findings and lessons for practitioners are discussed within.

EXISTING USES OF THE PERFORMING ARTS IN THE DIALOGUE, JUSTICE, AND RECONCILIATION FIELDS

There are countless examples of practitioners and communities using the performing arts in conflict-affected contexts around the world in both indigenous and syncretistic ways. The arts frequently make up for the shortcomings of punitive justice systems, unmotivated and corrupt governance, and lack of moral leadership. These approaches are as diverse as the artists and community members who design them, yet some commonalities exist.²

To frame the presentation of the IJR pilot project and subsequent community intervention, this section outlines seven areas within which the performing arts have been used to directly address the drivers and consequences of violent conflict. These areas are: 1) psychosocial support, 2) education, 3) diplomacy, 4) mediation and dialogue, 5) human rights and civil resistance, 6) advocacy and civic participation, and 7) justice, mourning, reconciliation, memorialisation, and celebration. Although far from exhaustive, this section documents a few illustrative examples of what has been done in recent history in order to situate the pilot with the UCT students in Cape Town and the intervention with the women's group in Warrenton within a global context of practice. It also invites practitioners in the dialogue, justice, and reconciliation space to consider the myriad ways in which the arts, specifically dance and drama, can be used in their own work or are already being used in ways that merit increased support.

² Theories that support the use of the performing arts in conflict management can be drawn from neuroscience, sociology, psychology, communications, political science, anthropology, creativity studies, and scholarship on justice and reconciliation. These theories lay a vital foundation for the programmatic work done in this area. One possible theoretical framework for conceptualizing how the arts affect conflict will be presented in a forthcoming paper titled, "The 'Strategic How' of the Performing Arts in Conflict-Affected Contexts." For more information, please contact the author.

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¹ This initiative will be further evaluated by an on-going research project being conducted by Dr. Kim Wale, post-doctoral fellow at Stellenbosch University's Historical Trauma and Transformation Department.

Psychosocial Support

Although not widely discussed in the justice, reconciliation, and conflict management fields, Dance Movement Therapy is perhaps one of the most thoroughly researched applications of the performing arts to trauma healing. Based on the interpersonal, small group level, the fields of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) (Chace 1993; Lange 1975; Berroll 1992) and Drama Therapy (James & Johnson 1996) use movement-based approaches to serve the needs of people suffering the well-documented psychological and physical effects of violence, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, emotional detachment, decreased functionality, severed limbs, and varying degrees of paralysis (DSM-IV 2000; ADTA 2016; NADTA 2016). Such practices have been developed based on non-Western, “traditional modes of healing” that use music and dance (Dunphy, Elton & Jordan 2014: 189).

DMT in a group setting tends to involve a combination of body-based exercises to increase self-awareness, regulate breath, attune to one’s surroundings and past and present experiences, collaborative movement, games, physical relaxation, and emulation of another’s movements (mirroring or following) (Dunphy et. al. 2014). DMT has been used to support many different constituencies: ex-child soldiers, former combatants, survivors of sexual violence, torture, and intimate partner violence, young people with challenging home lives, patients overcoming substance abuse, refugees, among others.

Evidence shows that DMT decreases feelings of loneliness and increases trust among participants (Gilbert & Rossano 2006). “Non-verbal body cues and mirroring are intervention tools that [can be used] to support attunement, understanding, and communication among children, their families, and the therapist” (Levy, Ranjbar & Dean 2006: 5). People who experience physical detachment as a result of violence found performance as one way to begin to return to themselves. DMT practitioners further argue that movement can shape cognitive processes. Speaking from years of experience as a dance therapist in Haiti working with homeless, special needs children, foremost DMT expert, Amber Elizabeth Lynn Gray, writes:

“There is relevance in this theoretical underpinning to clinical work with survivors of trauma, and in particular, trauma that involves physical abuse to the body such as child abuse, sexual abuse, and human rights abuses related to war, civil violence, and torture. These abuses are a direct attack [on] the physical human structure, and [on] one’s humanity. The emotions and excitations, or arousal and fear, that this attack produces are often necessarily repressed as a means to survive, and can sometimes safely be expressed through dance and movement, given the appropriate context.” (Gray 2008: 226)

As an example of this practice, Gibney Dance outreach component, “Community Action,” works internationally with survivors of intimate partner violence to regain self-efficacy by reflecting, expressing themselves through movement, collaborating with others to create, and practising self-care (Gibney Dance 2016). Output results from their FY2015 programs showed that “95.8% of clients reported...improved physical health and well-being,” 94.4 percent reported reduced stress, and over “90% said that the workshops gave them the confidence to try things they thought they couldn’t do” (Gibney Dance 2016). Moreover, a 12-week dance therapy program involving socialization, problem-solving skills, and creative expression effectively reduced aggressive behaviour among children who had experienced prolonged violence in their communities in the United States (Koshland & Wittaker 2004). The program addressed a gap that elementary school children had “limited ability...to deal with relationship conflicts.” The participants’ group, while not necessarily exhibiting fully pro-social behaviour by the conclusion, had decreased the frequency with which they acted aggressively when compared to the control group (Koshland & Wittaker 2004). This finding is also supported by evidence on the use of physical fitness activities as an effective tool for violence prevention (Eddy 1998), and Karen Callaghan’s work in the United Kingdom applying movement psychotherapy with asylum seekers, refugees, and torture survivors (Callaghan 1996 & 1998; Gray 2001).

Education

Research from the field of education in conflict-affected areas indicates that learning outcomes and well-being improve among students who participate in dance-based approaches. Education-based interventions tend to implement their activities within the existing school infrastructure, or are studio-based when schools are not available.

As examples, an organisation called MindLeaps that operates in post-conflict Rwanda, Guinea, and Bosnia uses a dance program to channel participants into vocational schools and trainings that set them up for gainful employment. A recent study found that after just six months of structured dance training, street children show, on average, a minimum of 35 percent improvement in cognitive and non-cognitive skills that regulate emotions, contribute to healing, and motivate them to return to school (MindLeaps 2016). In Rwanda, “preliminary data analysis shows that all students improve their scores between 85-125% within 3 months of joining the program” (Junkin 2016). A related study by Carnegie Mellon University, Drexel University, and MindLeaps found that the children in the MindLeaps program improved most significantly after 7-10 weeks of practice then maintained this new ability level over time. Moreover, children aged 10-12 showed the most improvement when compared to any other age group (McSharry & Davis 2015). Researchers went on to train four young boys, also MindLeap beneficiaries,

who successfully collected survey data from almost 200 children from a control group and 90 who were involved in the MindLeaps programmes (Junkin 2016). These children and adolescents would not have had the opportunity or skills to enter vocational training absent their participation in a dance-based intervention (MindLeaps 2016).³

Anecdotal evidence from other schools-based programs confirms the finding that education-based programs that use dance, and the arts more broadly, can have a significant effect on behaviour. Move This World, formerly called Dance 4 Peace, used “creative movement to address and transform conflict, violence, and bullying in communities” in Colombia and the United States (Move This World, 2016). The program applied a four-pronged approach to 1) build emotional awareness, 2) encourage active communication and dialogue, 3) promote diversity, cooperation and empathy, and 4) teach anger management and mediation. Nancy Beardall’s work in United States’ schools with programs such as the “Creative Dance Program,” “Dance the Dream” and “Making Connections” also serve as models for the application of dance and drama to improve dialogue and reduce bullying among teenagers (Beardall 2005; Beardall et al. 2007). Beardall’s study, recognizing the link between bullying and school shootings, suggests that this movement-based approach helped students become “active bystanders,” rather than passive onlookers to instances of bullying and sexual harassment.⁴

The National Center for Conflict Resolution Education in the United States, commissioned by the National Endowment of the Arts, the United States Department of Justice, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, has created a guide for integrating conflict resolution techniques into arts programming (Bruson, Conte & Masar 2002). Approaches focus on using the arts to develop emotional intelligence⁵ and problem-solving skills based on interest-based, rather than positional bargaining. Stanford University Professor Shirley Brice Heath found that “youth who are engaged in ongoing arts programs showed improvement in attitude toward school, self-respect, self-efficacy, positive peer associations, and resistance to peer pressure” (Bruson, Conte & Masar 2002). One peace education program in Mindanao, Dance It Out (DIO), that relied heavily upon mirroring as a technique found that “over 90% of the interviewees expressed a change in their view of people

3 MindLeaps is now exploring whether their dance program can be applied as a form of emergency education in refugee camps. See also Lernyerd’s (2016) account of Annos Africa and One Fine Days ballet classes in Kibera, Kenya.

4 See the drama groups that Beardall (2007) mentions: Urban Improv Troupe of Boston, ENACT in New York, the Interactive Pedagogical Drama approach, Activism with a Heart: The Voices Against Violence Project in Austin, Hope is Vital, The Intervention Theatre Project.

5 Goleman (1995) suggests that emotional intelligence is comprised of self-awareness, managing of self, empathy, and the ability to interact socially. See also Gardner’s (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences.

different from themselves due to participating in DIO” (Jeffrey 2015).

Similarly, the American Ballroom Theatre’s Program, “Dancing Classrooms,” brings social dance instruction to inner-city school children in the United States and Jaffa, Israel. After the 9/11 attacks on the United States World Trade Center buildings, the New York regional “Dancing Classrooms” program became a critical avenue for helping children address feelings of anxiety, fear, lack of belonging, oppositional defiance, lack of cognitive concentration, and frustration. In dealing with these emotional responses to acute violence, the dance program was able to shape behaviour and likely prevent certain children from lashing out against others (Levy et al. 2006). “Dancing Classrooms” has also been applied as a means of drawing together the Israeli and Palestinian communities in Jaffa, Israel (Dulaine 2013). Such dance programs appear to reduce the risk that young people will emulate the violent behaviour that they see in their communities because they have witnessed alternative behaviour types and practice using more pro-social outlets for expression.

Diplomacy

The performing arts have been used for decades as a means of cultural exchange to facilitate the achievement of diplomatic goals. While worth interrogating as a means of exerting state power in harmful ways (Prevots 1999), the performing arts also have the capacity to draw people together across political and cultural lines, if designed with this intention.

Battery Dance Company runs a program called “Dancing to Connect,” which uses modern dance workshops to build bridges across seemingly disparate constituencies. They address issue areas such as inclusivity, conflict resolution and prevention, empowerment, gender-based violence and trafficking, and special needs youth. The program has been implemented in 68 countries. An impact evaluation of “Dancing to Connect” showed results from Vyska, Russia, for example, that “the number of students who strongly agreed that they had the ability to create positive change in their community” saw a statistically significant increase “from 9.38% before the program to 31.25% after the program” (Battery Dance Company 2015). Participants’ positive perceptions of Americans increased by 50% or more in Guinea and Singapore in 2011, Laos and Thailand in 2013, and Poland and China in 2014. In Thailand, “the number of students who had a very positive perception of the United States [saw a statistically significant] increase from 40% before the [Dancing to Connect] program to 85% after the program” (Battery Dance Company 2015). Moreover, participants’ desire to work with Americans increased by 50% or more in Guinea in 2011 and in France in 2013. Participants’ abilities to resolve disagreements or conflicts in a peaceful way increased by 50% or more in Malta and Thailand in 2013, Belfast and Poland in 2014, and Korea and South Africa (Cape Town) in 2015 (Battery

Dance Company 2016). Their Cultural Diplomacy Toolkit also captures lessons from each country intervention.

“Dancing to Connect” hosted a performance in Rabat, Morocco in 2004 that showcased a group of young Moroccan hip-hop dancers that left a profound impact on the audience (Satloff 2004). After watching the performance, one high-level policy advisor reflected,

“Thanks to the power of art, dance, and music, the young Moroccans connected to America and to the Americans who helped bring alive their natural talent. And the hundreds of people in the audience—admittedly, hundreds of upper-class Moroccans, ministers, diplomats, entrepreneurs, the sort who would spend an evening devoted to modern dance—connected too. Perhaps their most important connection was [with] the dancers themselves, those very same “angry young men” usually viewed in elite circles as a “problem” or a “burden,” people to be “handled” or “managed,” but rarely as people brimming with promise” (Satloff 2004).

Mediation and Dialogue

Mediation and dialogue are other key areas in which the performing arts have proven useful for resolving or shifting interpersonal conflict. While not yet widely applied to high-level negotiations, there are promising efforts to apply movement to mid- and community-level dialogue processes. Much of this work emanates from existing research on non-verbal communication. In contrast to body language literature that focuses solely on static body positions, Warren Lamb’s Movement Pattern Analysis predicts behaviour by observing and analyzing bodily *movement* and dynamics (Lamb 1965). His work has been applied to executive management and in therapy contexts. The Dancing at the Crossroads Project from 2009 to 2013 led by attorney Michelle LeBaron highlights the example of a set of physical exercises created by modern dancer Margie Gillis intended to create the conditions for productive dialogue:

“The exercises maximize the potential of dance to enhance sensory awareness, empathy, receptivity, reflection, and communication, yet are accessible to all levels of movers. By offering physical forms for exploring conflict, these exercises help mediators notice where and how they can pivot when stuck, find space when squeezed, and literally shift dynamics through physical movement. Participating mediators reported that they were more attuned to nuances, subtle shifts, intuition, and creative possibilities following the project” (Beausoleil & LeBaron 2013: 151)

This functions similarly to the use of recreational

breaks during extended, years-long peace talks to allow negotiators to “clear their heads.” Yet, instead of returning to a similarly constrained place, conflict parties use movement to create new insights to break their stalemate.

Human Rights and Civil Resistance

The performing arts have also been used to resist limitations on freedoms of expression and speech in societies characterised by violence, particularly in cases of state-led oppression against civilians. Under certain circumstances, the performing arts create and redistribute power that differs from the power used by repressive regimes or armed groups. There are countless examples of the use of the arts in such contexts (Jackson & Shapiro-Lee 2008). In South Korea, dance was used as a means for resisting abuses of power relations in an unequal society. South Korean dance used humour in its movements as a way for performers and audiences to feel empowered against political oppression. “The mockery of officialdom is a standard feature of Korean popular folk theater [sic], song, and dance” (Abelmaa 1996: 266). This characteristic allowed social activists to take advantage of existing norms of satirical dance to undermine the regime’s credibility. Dance also allowed the Koreans to create a “culture of dissent,” when the farmers gathered on three days of the week, their protests included a dance that was organically a part of their daily life, not implanted from the urban centres from which most powers emanated (Ibid. 1996: 61).

Anthony Shay highlights how the banning of dance in parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa created space for those same movements to be used as resistance to oppression (Shay 2005). Shay highlights how varying applications of jurisprudence across the region have resulted in differing levels of restrictions, including the banning of wedding dances by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Ayatollah Khomeini’s blanket prohibition of all forms of dance in Iran in 1979, and that those restrictions also change over time. Other restrictions on dance in the Middle East have been documented in Egypt where artists need “a government -approved certificate or license to perform and there are restrictions concerning costume and movement” (Dance Gazette 2011). Shay argues:

“Any cultural production such as dance that can raise such powerful negative reactions that religious and civil authorities make periodic attempts to ban its performance in its various forms...can be conceived of as an activity that is also saturated with potential subversive power” (Shay 1999).

“...Dance in many parts of the Middle East now provides a space for political resistance to oppressive regimes” (Shay 2005).

The South African Gumboot dance developed

during colonization at a time when black, coloured, and Indian⁶ South Africans were forced to work in mines and were not allowed to speak to one another. In defiance, the mine workers developed a percussive, stomping dance using the work boots they wore as a means of communicating non-verbally. This dance was practised years later during apartheid. Similarly, Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch highlight the example of the *toyi-toyi* dance, originally developed in Zimbabwe, which was used to non-violently intimidate apartheid era police officers who were enforcing brutal laws against the black, coloured, and Indian populations (Shank & Schirch 2008). Under the apartheid Amenities Act, the South African Performance Arts Council was segregated according to race category; only white South Africans could participate, while any other forms of dance or arts were prohibited. Gumboot dancing, *toyi-toyi*, and other forms of traditional Zulu, Xhosa, and Tswana dances served to uphold morale and dignity at a time of deep-seated race-based oppression and abuse. *Toyi-toyi* is still used today as a protest technique in southern Africa, and was even banned by Zimbabwean dictator, Robert Mugabe, in 2008 prior to an election as part of a country-wide crack-down on civil liberties (Karimakwenda 2008). Mugabe’s security infrastructure monitored other dance forms, sending his police forces to the rehearsals of a prominent South African choreographer whose work was interpreted as a critique of the regime in 2007, as an example (Kweyama 2016).

Efforts have also been applied to protecting artists who are attempting to voice human rights concerns or critiques of abusive regimes or groups. David Alan Harris worked in the aftermath of the 2008 crack-down to train civil society through movement-based practices to support civil society members in resisting violence. Networks of artists are actively working to shed light on instances of state oppression of artists, as well as train artists on their exercise of rights. Such networks include Artwatch Africa of the Arterial Network that is based in South Africa and highlights cases from all over the continent (Artwatch Africa 2016).

Advocacy and Civic Participation

Dance or theatre performed publicly by survivors of violence and their supporters has been used in many programs to inform and galvanise a broader public base to press for political action. “One Billion Rising” is an international campaign that plans “flash mobs” – attention-grabbing outbreaks of coordinated dancing performed in unconventional, public places – to raise awareness about violence against women and girls worldwide. The campaign’s slogan is: “One in

⁶ Due to centuries of exclusion sparked by British and Dutch colonists, the terms used to describe race in South Africa carry additional meaning beyond appearance. Terms such as “black,” “coloured,” “Indian,” and “white” can be problematised and critiqued as schemas used to maintain a sense of difference among all South Africans (Campbell 2016).

three women on the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime. One billion women violated is an atrocity. One billion women dancing is a revolution” (One Billion Rising 2013). The campaign has featured the work of commercial dance artists who teach a simple piece of choreography via YouTube, which is then disseminated by the campaign and learned by anyone who wants to participate. In some instances, local organisations or dance companies step in to teach participants. This campaign is a means of unifying diverse groups of people in solidarity through dance to increase public understanding of sexual violence by “disrupting” the typical urban space.

Other recent examples of such advocacy are the music and dance videos produced to promote the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. One video features young girls from around the world dancing with background messages that focus on women and girls – calls to eliminate sexual violence, increase educational opportunities, and create gender-equal conditions for employment (Project Everyone 2016).⁷ The other video features Japanese artists who are in support of the SDGs (United Nations 2016). Flash mobs have also been used in support of political candidates, such as the 2016 Pantsuit Power performance by 170 New York City-based dancers in support of Hillary Clinton’s bid for the United States’ presidency as means of resisting the hate speech used by her opponent (Kaufman 2016), who is widely considered to have racist, sexist, and xenophobic views.

Also in the realm of elections, in Afghanistan, Bond Street Theater uses drama productions to educate voters about voter fraud ahead of key elections in which violence is predicted, to promote youth volunteerism and community betterment, work in prisons to educate women about their rights, and support survivors of sexual violence, among other activities (Bond Street Theater 2016).⁸

The performing arts’ capacity to send messages has also been applied to military management. In the 1970s, for every one person killed in combat in the United States military, there were 10 pre-combat deaths among teenagers and young adults in and around U.S. training bases (Hitt 2015). In response, after failing to capture the youth’s attention through safety briefings, the United States Department of Defense commissioned Fort Bragg’s “Soldier Safety Show” from the 1970-1990s

⁷ See also: Global Water Dances, an artistic initiative that uses a similar advocacy approach of creating dances in various countries to raise awareness about unequal access to clean drinking water and to garner support for local and national efforts to address water shortages, pollution of waterways, fracking, and climate change (Global Water Dances 2016); Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, which uses the arts and culture to promote civic engagement (Americans for the Arts 2016); Dancing Without Borders, a company that focuses on advocacy on a variety of topics (Dancing Without Borders 2016); and Theatre of Transformation founded by Rama Mani (Graduate Institute Geneva 2016).

⁸ This work is funded by the United Nations, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, International Organization on Migration (IOM), and several international theatre conglomerates.

to reduce fatal off-duty accidents (Ibid. 2015). The show combined Broadway show tunes and dances by enlisted soldiers and professional actors and dancers with screen projections of images and testimonies relating to accidental deaths to convince young soldiers not to drive under the influence of alcohol, among other risky behaviours (Ibid. 2015). This program was created by theatre director, Lee Yop, and effectively captured the emotion behind the consequences of such behaviour (Ibid. 2015). It was an emotional plea to soldiers to temper their aggression and feelings of youthful invincibility. After the performance was introduced, the average number of deaths among trainees at Fort Bragg decreased by one-third. Given its effectiveness, the United States Department of Defense continued to finance the show for several more decades.

The advent of social media has also helped to highlight examples of how the performing arts in conflict-affected countries humanise the civilians affected and keep the conflict in the international lime light when it would otherwise be overtaken by other news. One example of many is the video of Ahmad Joudeh, a dancer in Damascus, Syria who teaches dance to children, many of them orphaned by the war, despite the on-going violence (Kaboly 2016). He is able to address responses to trauma elicited in the moment and to bring a sense of light heartedness to an otherwise challenging situation. This particular video went “viral” reaching millions of people.

Another example is that of Adil Al-Jaf,⁹ an Iraqi dancer and rapper who resisted the Iraqi government’s restrictions on dance in public places by learning instead from online videos and remote instruction by the Battery Dance Company (Stahl 2016). The accounts chronicled that “police officers and others beat him when they saw him practicing [dance] in a park” (Stahl 2016). Al-Jaf had performed professionally in Jordan with Battery Dance Company, had set up his own dance academy in the city to teach street dance, and uploaded many of his performances to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (BBC 2015). His life was precipitously cut short when Al-Jaf was killed in an ISIS suicide bombing in a market in Baghdad in July 2016. The tribute to his death attracted overwhelming international attention – more than any of the other civilian fatalities from that attack (Scroll.in 2016; WNYC 2016; Agerholm 2016; Al Arabiya 2015). His death put a human face on the conflict that had gotten lost in international media coverage (WNYC 2016; Hollander 2016; Battery Dance Staff 2016).

Dance forms can also productively channel social capital from historically marginalised locations and serve as forms of non-violent competition or cooperation, particularly among youth. A few examples include Brazilian *passinho* which originated in the *favelas* and is now featured in widely popular *passinho* competitions (BBC 2016), krumping in urban areas in the United States, hip-hop dance “battles” in Kinshasa, DRC (War Child 2016), and the dance marathons of the 1920s that kept unemployed, idle men and women occupied and

entertained for days on end (Berroll 1992). These dance forms created civil society engagement in areas with little access to arts institutions.

A similar example is Storycatchers, located in Chicago, Illinois, United States, which works with high-school level youth to increase civic engagement and engages incarcerated youth on an exploration of the root causes of their own destructive behaviours through theatre (Storycatchers 2016). Shakespeare Behind Bars does the same for incarcerated adults (Shank & Schirch 2008). Keshet Dance Company in Albuquerque, New Mexico and the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network in Los Angeles, California are two other organisations working in youth detention centres (Keshet Dance 2016; AIYN 2016). These organisations generate social capital that serves an important violence prevention function among constituencies affected by and, in some cases, using violence as a means of expression.

Justice, Mourning, Reconciliation, Memorialisation, and Celebration

Currently, the debate around the role and effectiveness of transitional justice practices and institutions is gaining momentum. This debate problematises the existing models for post-conflict justice. Given the shortcomings of conventional approaches, Cynthia Cohen, a prominent scholar on the topic of the arts in peacebuilding, has outlined several creative approaches to reconciliation¹⁰ as alternatives. She notes that the arts are very well-placed to address “the challenges of reconstructing... lives and adapting to change” because they engage people in sensory experiences that capture attention for a fixed period of time and space, and they “mediate tensions” that create reciprocity among people where there was none before (Cohen 2005: 6). She cites the Sangwe Festival of Burundi that incorporated over 800 performers in dance, drumming, visual arts, and music to reunite communities torn apart by violence and the Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan’s Theater Arts Group in Sri Lanka which acts out traumatic events as a way of reconciling.

Jonathan Fox’s work in Playback Theater that began in 1975 features prominently in Cohen’s discussion. Playback Theatre¹¹ is a practice by which a facilitator asks the audience for a story; the audience member is invited up to tell his or her story; the drama ensemble then acts out the story as the storyteller

¹⁰ Cohen defines reconciliation as “a set of deep processes designed to transform relationships of hatred and mistrust into relationships of trust and trustworthiness. These processes involve former enemies acknowledging each other’s humanity, empathizing with each other’s suffering, addressing and redressing past injustice, and sometimes expressing remorse, granting forgiveness, and offering reparations. Reconciliation reflects a shift in attention from blaming the other to taking responsibility for the attitudes and actions of one’s self and one’s own community” (Cohen 2005: 10).

¹¹ Playback for Change in Chicago, United States is another organisation practicing this technique (Cohen 2005).

watches; finally, the “conductor” checks back in with the storyteller for his or her reaction (Cohen 2005: 19). Cohen documents the transformative power of this practice as the storyteller feels heard, the audience and cast listen intently, and the actors become the story. She writes:

“PT [Playback Theater] holds great promise for the work of coexistence and reconciliation because both its formal structures and the educational processes through which its practitioners are mentored allow painful stories to be both told and received in their full complexity. Oppressive dynamics can be acknowledged, but within a framework that focuses more on the potential for transformation than on blame” (Cohen 2005: 25).

Cohen makes the important point that the arts “can be crafted to fully honor the experiences of people on all sides of a conflict without presuming an equality of suffering or responsibility” (Cohen 2005: 36). Moreover, Howard Zehr suggests:

“For many, [restorative justice] models may appear to be micro-oriented in application, but therein lies their genius. The impetus that drives restorative approaches is not one that awaits the policy and decision from the highest level...Rather these efforts paint a different canvas of social change, which depends on the practices of accessibility, reconnecting people in actual relationships, and local responsibility” (Lederach, 2004: 145, quoting Zehr).

David Alan Harris’ work in Sierra Leone with 12 ex-child soldiers who fought in rebel armies reveals how movement can help release trauma that is held in the body of young people coerced into perpetrating violence (Harris 2007). Movement practices improved personal well-being, increased their self-awareness and group cohesion. While the child ex-soldiers were not able to speak about their traumatic experiences, as is a well-documented effect of trauma, they could communicate it and “let it go” through physical movement (Harris 2009; Harris 2010). Group dance also served a ritualistic function that eventually convinced the neighbours to accept the children back into their community despite their perceived wrongdoing. Movement practices that align with culturally significant rituals were “transformative” (Harris 2007: 203). Dance in the Sierra Leone context served as an access point to a coming of age ritual, which helped the young men regain a sense of self and belonging in their communities that was not defined by violence, and assisted the violence-affected neighbours to accept them back (Harris 2010).

While Harris’ intervention in Sierra Leone deliberately combined Western trauma recovery practices and local movement practices, dance rituals that are deeply embedded into the cultural fabric of a context often precede and are better suited than

Western-derived justice mechanisms to address trauma. Another example from after the conflict in Sierra Leone, the Kpaa Mende people practiced a traditional Wonde ceremony:

“During a ceremonial dance, done in a circle, a battle scene is enacted. The initial single group of dancers breaks into two concentric circles, representing the parties to the conflict. Later the peacemakers arrive. These are men dressed as women making characteristically feminine movements and gestures (symbolizing the important role of women in peacemaking). They come between the combatants and eventually all the dancers form a single circle again. The values reinforced in this ceremony reflect indigenous beliefs about complementarity and the importance of all segments of society in efforts to re-establish harmony and restore continuity.” (Huyse & Salter 2008: 139, citing Alie & Gaima 2000)

Dance has also been cited as a reconciliation activity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Sanguma 2012), and serves to create a sense of shared, rather than individual, suffering.

Also in the DRC, Search for Common Ground runs a roving participatory theatre program that has performed more than 10,000 shows all over the country since 2005. The public performances enable local people to tell stories about how the conflicts have affected them. Audiences and performers gain perspective by seeing that they are “not the only ones suffering” (SFCG 2016). The shows also provide a platform for views to be shared. A similar example from the Central African Republic shows how dance serves as an unlikely point of connection under tense circumstances. Search for Common Ground invited two youth groups who had historic animosity toward each other – youth living on the streets and youth from the Bangui neighbourhood – to participate in a dance performance and singing competition, supported by the local mayor’s office. A cross-section of Muslims and Christian neighbours were also invited to watch. The performance included messages of nonviolence as the dancers told the story of a father whose son had been killed in the local conflict, then provided the youth with the opportunity to compete with one another in singing. The talented, young singers united the crowd instantaneously with their performance (Kulick 2016).

Also under Cynthia Cohen’s direction, Brandeis University’s “Acting Together on the World Stage: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict” explores how theatre can be applied to resist, re-humanise, and reconcile during and after episodes of violent conflict (Cohen 2011). The project highlighted the example of choreography used in Peru during a public presentation that involved men dressed as militants and women dressed in white indigenous clothing in a performance commemorating state-led violence. The

⁹ Also known by his stage name, Adel Euro.

performance itself re-enacted scenes of rape through dance. The dance concluded with the men pulling a red sash out from underneath the women's white dresses. Entirely non-verbal, the choreography was used as a mechanism to increase awareness among the public about what had happened, thereby increasing collective memory, listening, and shattering of taboo (Cohen 2011). Choreography, for both the dancer and audience, can help groups and individuals begin to respond to questions of identity following acts of violence. Members of the community bear witness to the crime that the individual suffered through performance, which can contribute to a sense of collective responsibility.

In the South African case, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's projects on Memory, Arts, and Culture and Schools Oral Histories speak to the importance of "democratising the narrative" after centuries of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid (IJR 2017). Reconciliation at the local level involves writing new histories from the perspective of historically marginalised populations and reinvigorating interest in indigenous performing arts. This work does not seek to erase the dominant history in favour of the other, but rather demonstrates the interconnectedness of stories from marginalised and dominant histories in order to humanise. Stories like these are often converted into authentic, cathartic, if not restorative, performances. As examples, the Baxter Theatre's timely run of the production "The Fall" performed by University of Cape Town alumni viscerally depicted the diverse views and actions around the #RhodesMustFall and by association, #FeesMustFall, student movements that were pushing for the decolonisation of higher education (UCT 2016). The production efficiently captured many sides of the same debate.

Other examples include the on-going partnership between the Royal Winnipeg Ballet of Canada with aboriginal musicians to create "Going Home Star," a storied dance piece in conjunction with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that will go on a national tour (Ko Din 2016). In the same vein, Liz Lerman create a seminal work commissioned by Harvard University professor Martha Minnow in 2005 to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials (Lerman 2011). Lerman also collaborated with Yale University to do a performance that questioned formal justice mechanisms after mass atrocities, drawing on several important historical examples (Lerman 2011:57). Such productions serve to creatively disrupt what exists and reintroduce nuanced narratives.

Site-specific dances have also been used to problematise the neglect of key political and social issues following a political transition. Jay Panther of Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre created a work that involved a group of dancers who were of different races. The dancers were painted in white-face and performed on the steps of the new South African Constitutional Court and in the Awaiting Trial jail blockhouse in Durban¹². It effectively juxtaposed the newest symbol of

democracy and vestiges of the imprisonment of political dissidents while incorporating video footage of poverty, unemployment, and disease that continued to effect the majority of South Africans (Maree 2008). The dance piece presented the past, present, and warned of the future if action was not taken. Flatfoot Dance, Phenduka Dance Theatre, and the Fantastic Flying Fish Dance Company are several other prominent Durban-based dance companies that create politically-aware pieces and work on the topic of race, as well as KZN DanceLink which serves as a network of dance organisations for social change (Maree 2008).

Site-specific dances that draw crowds of people and invite them to consider the space in new or different ways have the capacity to enliven static monuments or sites of memory otherwise forgotten. Claudia Bernardi, a world-renowned Argentine muralist who guides mural projects with descendants of the disappeared (*desaparecidos*) of Argentina and El Salvador has commented that monuments lose their meaning over time because they are permanent fixtures in the post-conflict landscape. People pass by them every day and through this constant exposure, the meaning of the landmarks also disappear (Bernardi 2016). The performing arts have a role to play in conjunction with sites of memory, museums of conscience, and other physical infrastructure that commemorate the suffering during war to renew and maintain the meaning behind such sites. Performance that stimulates social capital can ensure that static symbols do not fade into the background with time.

Preserving performing arts forms that have been historically marginalised or prohibited also contributes to the rebuilding of a sense of dignity and strength, especially when political transitions fall short of their promises for change. Globalization, urbanization, and forced migration also threaten certain art forms that serve an important identity-creation function for conflict-affected populations. As examples, in northern Uganda, centuries-old dance forms of the Acholi tribe, such as the *bwola*, a royal dance to celebrate visitors, *otole*, a war dance, and *lukeme* dance which included political and social commentary, were threatened and sometimes prohibited by the Ugandan government and armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (Dolan 2009:174). As a result, the Acholi significantly modified their art forms or ceased practicing them all together (Ibid. 2009). While not all dance forms were equally threatened, the conflict changed the landscape of the art form. Teaching traditional performing arts, then, becomes a form of "post-conflict" resistance, as the wounds of conflict can last for decades after a negotiated settlement or military victory. Because the performing arts are often fleeting, teaching the art form in-person is one of the only ways to ensure its continuity. Such teaching depends on educational systems and intergenerational ties that link elders who are skilled in the arts form and experienced direct violence with the younger generations who are grappling with structural

violence that is often left after a conflict and lack such artistic knowledge (IJR 2017).

If practiced even after direct violence has ended, certain performing arts can take on even deeper historical meaning and serve as cultural pillars of resistance. During colonization and apartheid rule in South Africa, black African dance forms were subjugated by Eurocentric art forms as a means of oppression. Classical ballet performed by white South Africans was deemed one of the only legitimate forms of dance. Colonial education attempted to systematically remove reflection and self-reflection from black South Africans by disallowing certain types of dance and music associated with the black community (Rani 2016). While many black, coloured, Indian, and indigenous South Africans are still dealing both with the trauma of past oppression and the trauma of everyday discrimination and socioeconomic immobility, dance is one way that communities are taking back their dignity. Today, there is a push within the South African dance community and the racially-integrated Ministry of Arts and Culture, founded after the negotiated settlement in 1994, to revive black and Indian South African dance forms (Maree 2008, Ndlovu 2016, Rani 2016) and combine their movements with other African dance forms and contemporary dance (Maree 2008, quoting Maquoma 2005). As the history of violent oppression and segregation continues to play out, the debates about whether to fuse African and European styles and which arts forms should receive funding and institutional support are still on-going.¹³

The same kind of resurgence of previously prohibited dance forms is seen in India as dance companies that practice traditional dances and music prohibited in the past by the British occupation. One such company is Kalamandalam, established in the 1930s in the southern, coastal state of Kerala by a dancer who defied societal derision in order to practice. The company practices *mohiniyattam* and *kathakali*, dances which were originally developed in the 16th century. As a result of this practice, there is newfound interest among middle-class Indians and foreigners in investing in and watching Indian dance (Howard 2012). China is another country example of cultural revival following a repressive political period. The National Ballet of China is seeking to establish itself with a uniquely Chinese form of ballet that can compete on the world stage, following the suppression of the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976.

"China's flagship dance company was charged with spreading ideology to the masses. Founded in 1959, the company's earliest dancers studied Soviet technique under visiting scholars, but by 1961, the Russo-Sino relationship was permanently ruptured and the teachers packed their bags. This coincided with Mao Zedong's disastrous economic experiment, the Great Leap

Forward, that left upwards of 30 million dead from starvation" (Pellegrini 2011:37).

The company now performs in the same theatre space that was used for "regular class struggle meetings where suspect persons were denounced and abused," yet is working to develop its own identity (Pellegrini 2011). They unite traditional Chinese dance and music forms with Eurasian balletic influences – a kind of fusion that seems characteristic of post-conflict artistic development and a wedding of the past and present.

In addition to preserving traditional dance forms in the aftermath of armed conflict, there is also a need to use the experiences garnered from war to educate the public about its realities. While political narratives, media outlets, and propaganda are often used to convince the general public that war is a proper course of action, the performing arts has a role to play in counteracting and warning against misguided and manipulative narratives. Performances can also uphold the dignity of rank-and-file soldiers who fight unpopular wars and tell the untold stories of how war affects everyday people. Along these lines, EXIT 12 Dance Company in the United States, founded by Iraq War (2003) veteran from the U.S. Marine Corps, Roman Baca works to:

"Inspire conversations about world differences and the lasting effects of violence and conflict on communities, families, and individuals. Through movement, [Exit 12] educate[s] audiences about the reality of war, advocate diversity and mutual understanding through cultural exchange, and champion the humanity and dignity of all persons. EXIT12 supports and advances the notion that art heals, and is devoted to serving those who have been touched by conflict by expressing their stories" (Exit 12 2016).

EXIT 12 uses what they call "experiential journalistic choreography" to explore themes related to violence (Ibid. 2016). In so doing, EXIT 12 heightens public awareness and contributes to shaping public opinion on warfare. Similarly, Natalia Duong's dance work with survivors of Agent Orange attacks during the American-Vietnam War is also notable. Individuals share their stories of survival through movement and have it mirrored by their peers (Duong 2016). The storytellers raise awareness about how the main chemical in Agent Orange – dioxin – continues to negatively affect the offspring of survivors and people who continue to come in contact with it through their water sources (Duong 2016). Duong's efforts highlight the injustices that have yet to be addressed as a result of this war.

These examples illustrate the wide range of applications of the performing arts to stimulate conversations and interaction that may lead toward more harmonious coexistence in the aftermath of segregation, armed conflict, and political turmoil.

13 As an example, see the discussion around the Cape Town City Ballet company's departure from their rehearsal space on the University of Cape Town campus in the wake of student protests in November 2016.

12 One of several locations where Nelson Mandela and his

fellow activists were detained during apartheid (Maree 2008)

PILOT PROJECT: DANCE FOR DIALOGUE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Building on the work of many practitioners already applying the arts in conflict-affected countries, the IJR developed a pilot project to explore how the performing arts, specifically dance, could be used to stimulate dialogue around justice and reconciliation in the case of South Africa. As a proof of concept, the pilot engaged students from the University of Cape Town School of Dance who were part of the African Dance History II course in 2016.¹⁴ Upon a call for interested students, four expressed enthusiasm in further exploring how improvisational dance could be used to tell emotionally resonant stories and volunteered outside of their coursework time to be part of the initiative.

Workshops took place in dance studios and outdoor settings and included both formal dance and movement exercises, as well as practical experience in improvisation, storytelling, teamwork, and embodiment. Most of the students' prior experience was in learning and performing pre-planned choreography, rather than creating their own movements on the spot as a team. These sessions expanded the students' purview, as they had never trained in these kinds of approaches to improvisation and performance before.



Figure 1: Dancers perform a story from Women on Farms Project at IJR's 15th Annual Reconciliation Award event.
(Photo by Lesley Mark, Photofuzion)

Improvisation requires quick decision-making on the part of the dancers, a sense of shared responsibility for producing a compelling work, channelling one's own lived experiences, and critical thinking. These dynamics created a listening feedback loop between the dancers in which they have watch for and feel how their fellow dancers are moving in space then respond with their own movements. Such techniques increased the dancers' in-group cohesion, and encouraged them to question and improve their own artistic choices and expression. One of the main techniques used was called "playback" in

which the choreographer acted as a facilitator to elicit a storyline from one of the dancers, an observer, or audience member.¹⁵ The dancers then had to play the story back through their own movements, speech, and sounds and work together to build the plot. Afterwards, the person who offered up the story had the opportunity to reflect on the performance, which almost always resulted in new insights, points of connection, or at the very least, deep appreciation for how the artists could succinctly capture the person's story.

Other techniques applied in the workshops included embodiment and listening exercises. Embodiment is a simple exercise in which the dancers lie on the floor with eyes closed and are asked to become aware of their own bodies in connection with the floor, the ambient sounds in the room, and to check in emotionally with themselves. Sometimes the facilitator will ask the dancers to mimic the sounds they hear in the room, which, with people trained in musicality, inevitably leads to a rhythmic euphony between all the people in the room. These exercises serve a very specific purpose of getting the dancers into the mindset of working creatively as a team, being open to their surroundings (mindfulness), and being aware of their bodies in ways that make for meaningful connections with the audience.

Two other important techniques used in the workshop format included mirroring and contact improvisation. Mirroring started with two dancers facing each other. One would begin to move an arm or leg, while the other followed along without making contact with that person. The purpose was to increase engagement between the dancers and have them hone their synchronization and proprioception, which is an individual's sense of their body in relation to another. Both proprioception and synchronization of movements, especially with music, has been studied by neuroscientists as key factors that generate social bonding. It has also been documented that mirroring exercises increase empathy between participants.

Contact improvisation, as another tool, is a practice in which the dancers begin with a point of physical contact and attempt to maintain this point throughout their movements. This kind of improvisation lends itself to spectacular lifts and intimate moments that reflect both the athletic and artistic abilities of the dancers, but also truly human moments of touch. Contact improvisation builds trust between the performers, as they are physically taking on each other's body weight, and quickens the feedback loop of non-verbal, physical communication among the group members.

Workshops often concluded with a guided reflection that prompted the dancers to quietly process what they had created that day, and take stock of new emotions that may have surfaced as a result of engagement with a particular subject matter. This was critical for artistic development, but also as a mechanism of self-care when

¹⁵ The technique has not been widely applied to dance performance, though this pilot found that it was a very successful means of increasing audience engagement in dance and of challenging dancers to broaden their own artistic scope.

dealing with often challenging storylines that included topics such as bullying in schools, suicide, racism, decolonised education, truth and reconciliation, and so on. The facilitator used this as a way to put parameters around the emotive components of performance, and to ensure that the dancers did not delve too far into a trauma in which that the facilitator was not equipped to support.

The dancers shared the same process of "playback" improvisational dance at the 2016 Baxter Dance Festival in the Fringe Programme on October 15 and had the opportunity to interact with the audience using one of their stories. About 200 audience members were prompted by the facilitator to compare their lives in 1994 to the present year, 2016, and asked how things had changed. A simple reflection of comparing the past and present yielded a storyline from an audience member that the dancers then interpreted. Their improvisation elicited genuine laughter from on-lookers, which is atypical for a dance performance, because the performers were able to use culturally-relevant humor. There was also an element of thrill for the audience, as they were informed in the introduction that the dancers were un-rehearsed, so were held in suspense to see if the performers would be capable of producing a cohesive, entertaining performance. While time did not permit for a full dialogue, the dancers brought up key themes of the story that could have been discussed, including the tumultuous transition from childhood to adulthood, conformity or departure from the routine of modern life, boredom as a common emotion, and much more. Moreover, the power of "playback" techniques is the ability for audience stories to be mirrored in a poignant way.

Finally, the group performed at the 2016 IJR Reconciliation Award event at the historic District 6 Museum Homecoming Centre¹⁶ on November 23 that honoured the Women on Farms Project and several young, rising leaders for their significant contributions to on-going reconciliation in South Africa. To prepare, the dancers listened to audio recordings of the IJR's events on the TRC at 20 years and reflected on the current debates around the TRC, land restitution, race, and gender. The event itself included two 10-minute performances. The first called upon the audience to consider to what extent they had seen moments or examples of reconciliation in their own communities. The second asked a beneficiary of the Women on Farms Project to tell her story of how the project has shaped her life and experience (Cape Town TV 2016). The dancers then shaped their improvisational performances around these prompts.

¹⁶ District 6 is an area of Cape Town from which 60,000 people from the black, coloured, and Indian communities were forcibly removed by apartheid-era authorities over an approximately 20 year period. Most people were moved to the Cape Flats in racially segregated neighborhoods. In addition to District 6, there were 42 other areas of removal around the city, and others throughout South Africa.



Figure 2: Audience member telling his story for "playback" at the Baxter Dance Festival, Cape Town
(Photo by Oscar O'Ryan)

Main Findings

The performing arts in formal theatre spaces can breach contentious issues related to reconciliation because they have entertainment value and effectively capture audience attention. Performance is often more "efficient" than verbal communication in that it conveys a variety of storylines in a memorable way and in short amount of time. The theatre space is designed specifically to facilitate positive audio-visual experiences that involve listening and observation. There is a power dynamic present in which performers control the content. Audiences are, in a sense, consenting to be captivated for a period of time, and they often expect to be entertained. This is useful when performers present material that challenges the perspective of audience members. In the context of the workshops, for example, dancers stepped into roles such as of the perpetrator of violence, as well as that of the survivor of violence, they were able to effectively show that being oppressed is one reason that people turn around and oppress others. The audio-visual depiction of this phenomenon seemed much more efficient in creating shared understanding than other forms of expression. Audience members noted that there was a "rawness" that came with watching bodies perform such stories. The visceral nature of dance helps to convey meaning in quick, poignant, and memorable ways.

Improvisational movement and speech have the requisite level of honesty and transparency needed to stimulate reconciliation. As Senior Project Leader for the IJR Memory, Arts, and Culture Programme at IJR, Nosindiso Mtimkulu reflected after watching the students perform, "Reconciliation, at its core, is about honesty." Honesty with oneself about past and current injustices, as well as recognition of one's own biases toward others, is essential to being able to change an antagonistic view into a neutral or positive view. Such honesty is part of breaking down prejudices. Improvisational dance is honest in that performers are drawing on their own lived experiences and have the attention of audiences to say whatever comes to

¹⁴ This bachelor-level course was taught by lecturer Maxwell Xolani Rani.

mind in relation to the prompt. This often leads to very frank characterizations of a specific issue. “Playback” techniques have a keen ability to “mirror” reality and say what many people may be afraid to say. It involves a freedom of expression that is oftentimes lost if theatre productions or dance performances are over-rehearsed.



Figure 3: Three UCT School of Dance students performing a story at the Baxter Dance Festival, Cape Town
(Photo by Betalife Productions)

As an audience member, seeing one's story performed creates new insights, catalyzes reflection, and can even motivate behavioural change. “Playback” techniques are indirect ways of seeing oneself. Because performers rarely receive the full information of any given story, they are challenged to fill in the gaps using their imagination. This can lead performers to explore an aspect of a plot given by an audience member in ways that did not occur in reality, thereby suggesting options that the audience member had not yet considered. Some improvisation sessions resulted in the dancers resolving the very conflict in the plot that was given to them, at times accidentally, as they were unaware of many of the details of that story in the mind of the person who shared it. While this resolution may or may not have been applicable to the storyteller, it helped them imagine the possibilities and perhaps hope for a change. Such points of departure can either be adopted by the audience member who provided the story as a new way of dealing with their own conflict, or ignored in self-defence.

Moreover, performers often change the role or character they are playing in the middle of a performance as the improvisation flows, contributing to the creation of new insights. This kind of role reversal can provide the audience-storyteller with new insights about how to “step into the other person's shoes” and see it from a different perspective. This occurred several times throughout the workshops and even resulted in some of the dancers reflecting on their own behaviours that they wished to change after seeing it performed by their peers in a light-hearted way. In conflict situations when people often bargain using their positions and stances, watching or performing a story of that conflict may reveal underlying interests that have not been expressed, or that the storyteller has not stopped to consider. Performers can also use humour to bring light to difficult or confusing circumstances, causing audience members to laugh

at themselves or at the human condition in general. Audience members reacted to the workshops saying that they “couldn't switch off thinking about what they had experienced.”

Improvisation, unlike other more structured performing arts, has the capacity to immediately respond to the current events of the day. When the #FeesMustFall student protests broke out in September 2016 in Cape Town and other major South African cities, the four students in the workshops were guided to draw on their personal experiences as students to tell compelling storylines. Dancers were extremely successful in capturing nearly all sides of the multi-faceted debate around decolonized, free education in a 5-7 minute improvisation piece, in part because they were living it in that moment. Localised performing arts, in this sense, are highly efficient tools for communicating nuance, especially in moments of crisis when emotions are running high.

“Playback” work creates both a nearness and farness between the performers and the audience that can facilitate reflection. In contrast to formal theatre or dance, the facilitator and performers “break the fourth wall” by addressing the audience directly when they draw stories from the audience and inquire about their reactions. Eleanor du Plooy, IJR Project Leader for the Ashley Kriel Youth Leadership Development Programme suggested that this quality of “playback” can make the audience feel as if they are either “near” to the story as part of the performance, or “far” away, left to reflect silently on what they are watching. This paradox is unique to performances that involve the audience directly on socially relevant subject-matter, and helps to accommodate the diverse needs of people potentially affected by violence and conflict.

As an example, audience members from the Women on Farms Project during the Reconciliation Award reacted during the performance of their story in ways that demonstrated the resonance of the dancers' actions, but did not choose to speak about it immediately afterwards. In contrast, another audience member who provided his story approached and spoke to the dancers afterwards about how moved he was, and how important it was for him to see his story listened to and played out truthfully. It is also noteworthy that this conversation between youth and an older man would not have happened otherwise; “playback” is useful in bridging the divide between age groups that conflict and political repression often generate. In terms of broader application, the capacity of “playback” techniques to help people feel heard after a conflict could serve the demands of reconciliation processes, possibly leading to better psychosocial outcomes for survivors than formal truth telling in prosecutorial settings.

Structured improvisation that touches on real life experiences, especially of challenging topics, can have a therapeutic effect for the performers. While not the aim of this project, one of the unintended consequences of these workshops was that some of the dancers felt that the experience was “like therapy” in that they could “get out what was inside.” One of them

explained that “as dancers, we are often asked to check everything at the door,” in other words, leave certain emotions or experiences behind before one enters the studio or stage. In contrast, these workshops invited the dancers to bring more of themselves into the room and to draw strategically from their wealth of experience to contribute to storylines. As a result, some found that they could process their experiences through the workshops and that it was both a surprising and freeing experience.

Delving into one's own experiences prompted a discussion about where performers should “draw the line” for themselves emotionally, especially when depicting quite intense stories. In the long run, this contributes to the professionalization of the dancers, as they are able to better command their own emotions and be able to identify when certain experiences are either matured enough or too raw to use on stage. This kind of work appears to help in the development of the performers' emotional intelligence and their own reconciliation with self and past experiences. Engaging the dancers on the choreographic elements of their emotionally-charged improvisations also played an important role. In switching between the “chaos” of the emotions elicited during improvisation and the “order” of discussing the technical sides of the artistic process afterwards, there appears to be immense potential for working through both event-based and structural traumas, such as racism. The same could be said about the alternation between the fiction of what happens on stage and the reality of everyday life that performers practice regularly.



Figure 3: UCT School of Dance students performing improvisation at the Baxter Dance Festival, Cape Town
(Photo by Betalife Productions)

Key Lessons for Practitioners

- Because the facilitator cannot entirely control how an audience member may feel after viewing a poignant performance, the facilitator's role is to both spark creativity, as well as be able to hold the process. First, the facilitator must set the parameters of the subject matter, adequately framing the performance. The outcome of any improvised work depends on how the “ask” is presented. Moreover, facilitators should make clear that the storyteller may share as much or as little as they want, and that it is on a purely voluntary basis. They do not, however, have to take responsibility for what the

performers have done with the story. The facilitator can also play a role in recognizing how audience member's attitudes have shifted over the course of a workshop or performance; this contributes to a feeling of progress when realisations from performances, particularly in reconciliation and justice work, may be quite jarring and thus require follow-up.

- In order to generate the full effect of “playback” performances in shifting attitudes or creating new insights, there must be time and space for dialogue between the audience, performers, and facilitator after the improvisation. It often takes some time for the audience to warm to the technique being used, and to process what is happening on stage in relation to the story provided. The dialogue or reflection that follows should serve as a means of positively channelling the emotions that a performance may have evoked. The dialogue or activity to follow the performance helps to increase a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy in the face of injustices that were depicted.

- The strategic use of sounds, words, or dialogue on stage among dancers during improvisation can increase understanding of the subject matter for audience members who are not well-versed in observing and interpreting dance. Both bodily movement and speech are key elements of storytelling, as they have been for centuries of human history. However, dancers are rarely challenged to speak on stage. Most of their communication is non-verbal. As such, speech by dancers has an important role to play in creating politically or socially sensitive works that are geared toward an audience that does not regularly consume dance productions. This is in part the responsibility of the dance community to increase accessibility to its art form when used for the purposes of dialogue, justice, or reconciliation.

- These approaches can be applied by facilitators who are experienced artists or who have had little contact with the arts. As Megan Robertson, IJR Project Leader for Social Dialogue in Agriculture remarked, there is quite a lot of potential, both for dialogue facilitators who are trained in movement and dance, or not. Artists who practice their art form outside of their formal employment do not necessarily have outlets to cross-pollinate their experiences and knowledge from the creative sector. Dialogue practitioners should consider how to draw on their own artistic experience in the service of justice and reconciliation. Moreover, dialogue facilitators who do not have experience with movement techniques can still consider how to stimulate creative thinking among the people they are working with.

APPLYING ARTISTIC TECHNIQUES FOR GENDER-BASED DIALOGUE

Building on the findings and lessons learned from the initial pilot, IJR then applied similar approaches in a dialogue “retreat” with a group of 20 cisgender and transgender women in the Warrenton, Northern Cape area who had little previous experience with structured movement or artistic expression. This allowed for a comparison of how arts-based approaches can be applied with different constituencies, regardless of their level of artistic experience.

As background, before this intervention, IJR had developed a long-standing relationship with both the community leaders and women’s group participants from Warrenvale and Ikhutseng, two areas near Warrenton. Previous dialogue workshops with this group yielded accounts of sexual, psychological, and physical abuse from intimate partners and family members. Many spoke of the challenges facing their community, including violence, substance abuse, and lack of access to resources, psychosocial support, education, and employment opportunities. Most of the women were underemployed or unemployed and had several children. Few had access to safe spaces in which they could engage in self-care and receive psychosocial support.

To begin to address this gap, IJR designed a two-day intergenerational “retreat” as a women-only space, inclusive of transgender and cisgender women who spoke different languages. Activities included embodiment exercises, guided meditation, free writing, crafts, discussions in a circle, stretching, mirroring, painting, active listening exercises, poetry, games, and a final performance that involved spoken word, dance, and an art gallery presentation of the women’s paintings.

The embodiment and mirroring exercises were similar to those mentioned in the previous section. The guided meditations focused on concepts of self-care and appreciation. The meditations, embodiment, and mirroring exercises were vehicles for the women to become aware of and actively use their senses of touch, hearing, vision, smell, taste, and proprioception (sense of one’s own body in space). They would often be asked to alternate their focus between two different senses, thereby helping them shift their focus from concrete thoughts to sensations. This tends to “saturate,” or occupy the mind in a way that allows for participants to reduce the “chatter” in their minds.

The group also did a craft activity in which they created a paper flower and wrote down their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs on the petals as a tool for discussion. Participants were also taught the fundamentals of free writing and provided with a notebook and pen to keep.

The painting exercise called “Creative Conversations”¹⁷ invited the women to pair up and switch off painting the same picture using watercolours

and oil pastels while sitting back-to-back so as to not view the painting while the other was working. This session also included a guided meditation. After the women had completed their paintings, the facilitators asked them to sign and jointly name their painting as a signal of ownership.

Finally, the participants did a poetry exercise in which they wrote their own poem, chose one line from it, and added it to a group poem. The facilitator then asked the women to form four smaller groups to create a movement that explained their line in the poem and teach it to the others in the group. Afterwards, the facilitators arranged the space to look like a theatre stage with audience seating, and set up the final art gallery on the wall with the titles of each painting showcased below. One facilitator read the group poem and each of the four groups performed their prepared dance pieces to music. The retreat concluded with an informal evaluation and discussion.



Figure 4: Dance performance by two transgender and two cisgender women at the intergenerational retreat, Warrenton (Photo by author)

Main Findings¹⁸

Rather than working with people’s trauma directly and explicitly as the objective of a dialogue, utilizing artistic approaches allowed the women to bring to the process what they wanted to, whether that was the expression of traumatic events or a desire to have a break from the stressors of their daily lives. Given the well-documented risks of re-traumatisation through storytelling and truth telling, the facilitators never asked the participants about challenges or traumas in their own lives, and yet, many

of the women spoke of these topics on their own volition. Although IJR was aware that violence was occurring in the community and in some of the homes of the women, the retreat did not force anyone to speak about it. Rather, the facilitators allowed the topic to come up “naturally” as people felt the need to discuss it. One of the reasons why this was possible was because of the ambiguity that artistic approaches allow for. A blank canvas, page, stage, or space is an opportunity – those who wish to take advantage of it to help them process trauma will do so *on their own* without being prompted.

As an example of how this ambiguity works, some of the women interpreted what were designed as secular activities in religious or spiritual terms instead. They used their own faith as their frame of reference for the experience of new sensory activities without being prompted to do so by the facilitators. After an embodiment exercise, one of the elder community leaders expressed that she “felt like [she] needed to touch the people around [her] to share with them what she was experiencing.” Later, another reflected that “this would not have been possible [sic] if God was not in this space with us” and that she painted according to the biblical story of Noah’s Ark as a symbol of hope. Also while reflecting after a painting exercise, another mentioned, “Even if you are not looking into the other person’s eyes, you can still connect spiritually,” and “I found these sessions to be very spiritual because we are all together sharing.” In a sense, artistic approaches allow people to see what they want to see without it being imposed. This contributed to the creation of a “safe space” as people who were religious could engage in that way, and those who were not could still comfortably participate in the activities. It also allowed people to make their own choices about how they wanted to engage, which is an inherently empowering experience.

Some movement-based exercises, particularly those that tapped into kinaesthetic empathy, unexpectedly generated much-needed laughter. Many of the women spoke about “having a lot on their shoulders,” “having to be strong all the time,” “cooking, cleaning, and doing things for the kids,” and always having to look out for other people rather than for themselves. Activities that engaged people’s bodies contributed to a release of stress through humour and physical exercise. Some people even laughed almost uncontrollably in the context of the activities, suggesting the fulfilment of more than just a surface-level need for the expression of joy.

Many of the women returned on the second day and expressed things like: “Ninety (90) percent of us were laughing the whole day! It is nice to be around such happiness,” and “We have been ‘doing fun’...and now my mind is free.” On this topic, others mentioned: “My mind is so clear I can think about other things. [Now I can] dream on!” “My mind is healed,” “I feel like I am floating,” “Speaking is healing,” “I no longer have heavy shoulders, even after doing the wash!” Another woman who had recently undergone an operation expressed that she “finally had a moment to process the operation” and get back in touch with her own body. These

statements are a testament to the need for people who are under immense stress in often loud, over-stimulating environments to have quiet, relaxed, and even playful spaces for reflection and expression with people who will actively listen and affirm them.

It is often assumed that in a dialogue environment, if individuals are not communicating verbally, then they are disengaged and should be coaxed back into conversation. This experience, however, challenged the idea that participation occurs solely through verbal language and showed the myriad ways that people can benefit from listening. In line with existing research about the power of non-verbal communication, this experience showed that listening was as important as speaking. Women who remained silent in discussions on the first day became very verbally expressive on the second day saying that they greatly benefitted from listening to others speak about the challenges in their lives, and that they could relate. Listening became an essential form of participation. After engaging in the craft activity that asked the women to identify their personal needs, one reflected, “Sometimes we are aware of our strengths but not really our weaknesses [sic], and we don’t really want to talk about them. It is difficult to talk about our own needs...I am encouraged that someone shared [so openly] about their own needs. I am leaving stronger having listened to that person and seeing her strength.”

Moreover, there are many different forms of expression beyond the verbal, and different people will be more or less expressive depending on the medium being used. While a simple post-workshop evaluation showed overwhelming satisfaction with the various artistic activities, different people seemed to “light up” when participating in different activities. Referring to the Creative Conversations exercise, one person reflected, “During the quiet meditation session while we were painting, I felt that I was communicating with my partner [even though we weren’t speaking].” Moreover, another said, “She [my partner] added things that I hadn’t thought about,” and “We were communicating with each other...we had a connection.” Purely verbal communication, on the other hand, only engages one or two senses, while non-verbal communication shifts away from the seemingly dominant form into additional ways of experiencing and communicating about one’s own environment.

In linguistically diverse communities, utilizing the arts allowed for people to express themselves in their native language in ways that did not inhibit communication. The women either spoke Setswana or Afrikaans, as well as English. However, not everyone felt comfortable expressing themselves in English, and most did not understand each other’s native language. Artistic approaches moved the emphasis away from verbal communication into other forms of communication. The women both spoke and wrote in their native languages, or mixed it with English. From the perspective of inclusivity, this is an important finding as sustained dialogues seek to create opportunities for all to participate equally regardless of differences in language. In cultures where

¹⁷ This technique was adapted from back-to-back drawing in which one person describes a picture while the other draws it.

¹⁸ Direct quotations from participants were captured through the facilitators’ written notes and audio recordings of the discussion sessions that are now archived at the IJR. None of the names of participants are included here for confidentiality reasons.

there is a strong tradition of verbally expressing emotions rather than writing, dialogues that use artistic approaches seem to help diffuse “normal” ways of communicating into additional sensory channels. Having many different ways of participating, including listening in silence and writing, becomes essential.

Artistic activities also allowed for a unique kind of intergenerational interaction. The painting activity implicitly required the participants to negotiate and makes choices together; deciding who should paint first manifested and “resolved” some of the unspoken age-based hierarchies in the room. Without being prompted, the group raised this issue and discussed how they each managed this, mentioning how they treated each other respectfully. One elder spoke about how painting with a younger person was a good experience. By allowing the younger person to paint first, she was valuing the young person’s level of education. Another pair decided that the elder would start the painting, rather than the young person, as a sign of respecting the elder’s level of life experience. Yet another pair that had a large age difference were laughing light-heartedly at their attempts to paint what they thought the other person would like; the younger person reflected that “older people like houses, so I painted a house!” which produce an uproar of laughter from the group around this assumption, seemingly bringing them closer together.

The challenges presented by using artistic mediums caused some people with little previous artistic experience to realise that they were talented in ways they had never imagined. When reflecting on painting, one woman said, “It was hard [to paint] at first, not being familiar with painting, but then I thought about what kinds of safe spaces we need. I channelled the need for the home to be a safe place.” Another noted, “It was very difficult at the beginning because not talking to [my partner], or even looking at her eyes, [sic] but then you can get an idea...after a while, I was floating!” After the creative writing and painting exercises, some of the women explained, “I can do it, I can say it!” Another expressed that she had no idea that she could write, but that she discovered she was capable. When others were speaking about the experience of free writing, it also became clear that a low level of literacy was not a stumbling block, contrary to initial expectations; women who had a primary level of education were able to write, and in fact, being challenged to do so was a self-esteem-building experience because they realised their own capabilities. This finding is especially important to consider in a context in which many other influences in their lives may degrade their view of self.

Art that allows for positive symbolic representation of self can motivate and empower. Seeing oneself in artistic products and having it recognised is an important experience. One woman reflected on the craft exercise saying that “comparing ourselves to flowers was a really powerful thing since we often don’t think of ourselves as beautiful.” As another example, once the art gallery was set up, without being prompted by the facilitators, the women began taking photographs of each other by their paintings and

talking about the merits of each work. One woman even reflected on this saying that “having other people see something bigger,” or more important, in her painting “felt good.” During the dance performance that followed, the women clapped and took bows after each of their group’s numbers, increasing the positive energy in the room. The art gallery and dance performance served an important function of affirming the women’s talents and encouraging their peers to do the same. This is also a small example of how the arts support celebration.

There is a connection between an increase in self-care, development of self-esteem, and action at the community level. This experience supported the idea that in order for an individual to be an effective change-maker, they first need to be comfortable with themselves. Building on this, one possible theory of change for working with trauma-affected communities and groups is that through processes of self-care and self-awareness, individuals communicate more calmly with the people in their lives, are able to relinquish the need to control every aspect of their environment, and therefore are better equipped to make incremental changes in their own communities without “burning out.” Self-care and reflection help support community leaders as they take on the burden of addressing various problems.

The women shared reflections such as, “There are lots of opportunities in Warrenton, but none like this one...it gave me new perspectives and was a chance to reflect and think differently,” “Lying on the ground in quiet taught me to give myself time,” “The exercises reminded me of what is happening in my life. I must take everything, accept what I cannot change, and move on,” “We need quiet time,” “I learned that exercise is important to me...I am a new person,” “This was ‘me’ time!” “I wish this [retreat] was for a whole week!” Reflective, artistic activities improved their stamina and will to continue to move forward, despite challenges along the way. Some even spoke about how they could use journaling for goal-setting to “go back in two years to see if I did what I said [I would do].”

By the end of the retreat, the women expressed a collectivisation of their challenges saying things along the lines of: “We all have the challenges,” “We carry a lot of things but we’re not supposed to show it on our faces...[I realised that] we are all the same and have problems and challenges,” “Often we don’t speak out about our problems and challenges and keep quiet because we think that other people are better off than we are, but I realised that we are all facing the same thing,” “I realised that I’m not the only one going through something hard, that my family doesn’t treat me well because I am unemployed. I’m just a ‘nobody,’ but I’m not the only one,” “It motivated me not to depend on government,” “Some people add values to your life... and those differences complement each other. If we unite we can make something together.”

Moreover, women spoke about what they would do with what they learned: “I will share and apply what I learned from the facilitators with my community,” and “I feel motivated.” Another woman shared that she would

“debrief what [she] learned” with a community group that she runs.

Finally, the women’s comments also supported the idea that capacity-building in the arts can help people develop new, positive habits for how to deal with daily stress and communicate more effectively. One reflected, “If I have a problem, I usually don’t talk about...I learned now that I should just sit down and write it!” Two others told similar stories about how they were able to, rather than yelling, interact with their children at home in a much more calm manner. One explained that she could deal with her children differently “because [she] felt inner joy.” One woman said that after one day at the retreat, she felt she could effectively confront her aunt and communicate a problem she had with her, leading to the calm resolution of the problem. She learned through this example that communication is very important.

Key Lessons for Practitioners

- Working in a group of all women with different sexual orientations proved to be a space ripe for the application of artistic approaches. This experience poses the question: How could these artistic approaches be applied to support a male-only group? What elements, if any, would need to be adjusted with gender norms of masculinity in mind in order to have similarly positive effects? What would the same intervention look like with a group of women and men of various sexual orientations?

- It is important not to underestimate a particular group’s desire to move and dance in a workshop or dialogue setting. While people often seem most comfortable in sedentary positions, there is value in breaking the normality and inviting them to use their bodies. Using the element of surprise by not framing a workshop in artistic terms can help interrupt thoughts or feelings of perceived inadequacy as participants move quickly from the instructions into actually doing the activity. Activities can be framed in terms of movement or exercise, rather than dance. To get a group moving, introduce the movement gradually, perhaps in small groups in which they feel comfortable, and build on their own creative abilities, rather than imposing what needs to be performed. Ensure that any performance space encourages the group’s affirmation of those performing.

- Having participants sit in a perfect circle facilitated inclusive discussions, as everyone could see each other clearly. Considering the arrangement of furniture and space is essential for facilitators to generate the desired tone of any dialogue. A circle signals inclusivity, equality, and community, which are principles that tend to encourage frank conversation.

- In order for artistic expression to have a deliberately “healing” effect, practitioners must allow for silence and reflection. If someone remains silent in a dialogue environment, there is usually a valid reason

for it that deserves the facilitator’s respect. Moreover, allowing for silence in a dialogue or workshop tends to invite measured, calm thought processes that lead to new insights or realisations. In a context dominated by verbal communication, silence is an essential tool for reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The performing arts have a deep capacity for contributing to sustained dialogue, justice, and reconciliation. Unlike formal mechanisms, the arts invite all those affected by conflict in a variety of ways to use creativity as a means of transcending everyday challenges. These include using the approaches surveyed in the areas of psychosocial support, education, diplomacy, mediation and dialogue, human rights and civil resistance, advocacy and civic participation, and justice, mourning, reconciliation, memorialisation, and celebration. When done in groups, the performing arts address basic human needs of belonging, safety, empathy, and connection, thereby restoring what is destroyed by violence. Moreover, while some existing approaches to conflict management and peacebuilding struggle with ambiguity, the performing arts instead thrive under this kind of uncertainty. Artists even value strategic ambiguity because it opens minds in new ways that can contribute to improved post-conflict well-being at a person-to-person level.

The pilot project with UCT School of Dance and the subsequent intervention with the women of Warrenton point to the versatility of the performing arts as an important peacebuilding approach. While not without its limits, it can be applied in a variety of locations and adapted to the needs of different demographics. As the dialogue, justice, and reconciliation fields continue to grapple with the challenges presented by violent conflict, the performing arts will likely remain a key asset in the service of creating more balance and inclusive societies.

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