

Dancing into Communities: Creativity and Collaboration through Dance Using the International Schools Theatre Association Model

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Abstract

Creative play might be the ultimate community-creator and boundary-breaker, and dance creation is a form of play that can foster both the sense of shared humanity and the celebration of difference. When young people of diverse backgrounds come together to create dance in a way that respects individual ideas and ways of moving, and nurtures openness to those of others, they also co-create community. Through a collaborative process and creative problem solving, they are able to share their voices individually and as one.

The International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) runs creative theatre “festivals”, using a model through which young people already move, speak, dance, act, and music themselves into communities. This paper uses a phenomenological approach to show how this model works so effectively, and how it could be replicated for dance.

5 keywords: Community; Creativity; Collaboration; Ensemble; Workshop

Context

Creative play may be considered the ultimate community-builder and boundary-breaker. When we collaborate and play together, we can open ourselves to cultural diversity and inclusivity. Dance creation is a form of play that potentially fosters both the sense of shared humanity and the celebration of difference. When young people of diverse backgrounds gather to create dance in a way that respects individual ideas and ways of moving, while nurturing openness to those of others, they also co-create community. Through a collaborative process and creative problem solving, they are able to share their individual and collective voices. On numerous occasions I have had the privilege of seeing young people for communities through speaking, dancing, acting and music making in my roles as a theater teacher, an artist in the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA), and ensemble leader through collaborative theater making workshops.

ISTA was formed in 1978 and is now a global community of over 250 schools. ISTA offers teacher and student theater training sessions. However, its most magical offerings are its “festivals”, which are held in person and now also online around the world throughout the year. While ISTA is a theater company, its festival model could easily be applied to creating original dance work. The work of artists such as Crystal Pite who creates “hybrids” of dance and theatre (Kidd Pivot. Retrieved 5th September 2023. <https://kiddpivot.org/crystal-pite/>) and Pina Bausch, who changed the name of her company from “ballet” to the “Tanztheater” (dance theatre) (Pina Bausch Foundation.

Retrieved 5th September 2023. <https://www.pinabausch.org/>) have already shown how fluid the boundaries are between these forms of performance.

Imagine the scene as 50, 100, or 150 young people enter a room. Some of them know one another as they may come from the same school or perhaps have met at a previous event, but most of them are strangers. This group of young people probably come from half a dozen or more different schools; some may have traveled from another city or country, they may speak different languages, or come from different cultures, but at the end of three days they will be more than friends as they will form bonds and stay in touch long into their future. This is the magic of creative collaboration. This is the magic xxx have seen repeatedly through ISTA.

ISTA and the “Ensemble” Method

The ensemble model is at the heart of the ISTA method. “Ensemble” literally means “together”, and it is this process of coming together, creating together, shared input, shared responsibility, shared outcome, that makes the ISTA method so special. There is a loss of ego, a diminished sense of “I”, and very quickly one notices how the individuals become invested in the collective group, in the process and project. As Dinos Aristidou ISTA’s Executive Director said, there is a “Sense of ensemble as [...] a unit of connection, a place of safety and creativity, often felt at an ISTA event when all the participants [...] experience a shared sense of journey, exploration, joy and purpose” (2020, p. 22). Furthermore, developing on the idea of creating connection, according to educationist Rebecca Fox, “Connectedness [is] a sense of oneness towards people, self and things” (1999, in Aristidou 2020, p. 22), while curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud stated that “The conviviality of strangers ...partly results from ‘contact, tactility and immediacy’” (2006, in Aristidou 2020, p. 22). In the ISTA model, connectedness comes from the oneness of the ensemble, created through a shared experience as described; while contact happens in meeting, working, exploring and playing with new people; tactility in creating together, again through games and exploration; and immediacy in being present in the now and working to a defined goal. In other words, the ISTA Festival model seems ideal in creating community among strangers.

According to ISTA:

The ISTA Ensemble Method is a unique approach to collaboration, learning and non-competitive theatre making. Making use of a wide range of practical, creative approaches and activities, the ISTA Ensemble Method creates strong communities of learning while also recognising the power of each participant.

The ISTA Ensemble Method develops collaborative, internationally minded, empathetic and compassionate global learners. Driven by creative inquiry, it is a method that uniquely responds directly to the participants, their experiences, needs and perspectives. It encourages friendships, celebrates diversity and explores the interconnected nature of our world. (Retrieved April 21, 2022, from

<https://ista.co.uk/>)

The Festival Format

Starting Points

The festival follows an inquiry-based model, and as such, is driven by a theme or an idea which is the focus of the exploration, typically in the form of a statement, quote or question. Perhaps more importantly, each festival's inquiry begins with a story, chosen for the themes it suggests. The story isn't necessarily or even typically staged, but rather, it provides a starting point and the artistic group will develop an idea of how this will be explored.

These stories can be from real life, from fiction, from myth, legend, fairy-tale, from a narrative poem or song, from a news item, or even a local community member story. Collecting, sharing, creating and presenting stories of who we are and of our world, and sharing stories from particular settings and cultures is a powerful approach to global learning. Story also provides a more concrete focus for young people and artists.

Another important feature of the festival model is the cultural experience, which relates to the focus and story in some way, and in which groups engage with the local area and/or community of the festival. In this way, students are encouraged to view the theme through a local lens. Figures 1 and 2 below show xxx ensemble groups at the Shanghai Middle School Festival in 2019. The title and starting point for the festival was "The architecture of dreams", and at this festival xxx explored how cultural identity is communicated through architecture and the effect our built surroundings have on our own identity. Cultural excursion was an exploration of the Yu Gardens and The Bund area in Shanghai, and one can see how students interpreted the traditional Chinese rooftops into their dreamscapes in their ensemble work.



Fig. 1: Ensemble group at the Yu Gardens, Shanghai

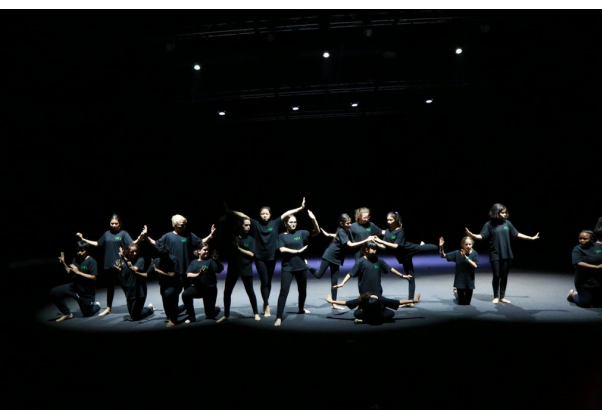


Fig. 2: The architecture translated into performance

At a festival in Manila, the theme was “Pa-kiki-pag-kai-bigan” – Tagalog for “The art of friendship”. Young people explored the nature of friendship, the way we make friends and the role friendship plays in bringing change to our communities and in our lives. For their cultural experience, participants went with disadvantaged local young people to various locations, played together, and created together. They reflected on this process and experience, and used this reflection to inspire parts of their final sharing of creative work.

The Creative Process

The ISTA Festival is a three-day creative gathering in which young people make artistic performance work through the collaborative ensemble model under the guidance of a professional artist, culminating in a sharing of creative outcomes.

The first day begins by gathering the whole group together, and it often starts with the circle. The ISTA artists and ensemble leaders typically randomly disperse themselves in the circle, diffusing any sense of focal point. Everyone then introduces themselves, maybe with a name game; or with a statement of hope for, purpose in, or intended contribution to the festival, the ISTA professionals taking turns along with the young people. Through this introductory activity, already there is a sense of shared and equal responsibility in the creative process. The circle is returned to almost every session, and is fundamental to the spirit and values of the ensemble model. The theme or “starting point” can be introduced during the first whole group session, or games chosen that might connect with it, but this isn’t always the case, and the primary role of the full group is large scale play that is useful for the process of creating drama and dance.

The importance of games cannot be underestimated. Games have common and transparent rules, which reinforces the equality of the circle. Furthermore, in playing games we automatically embody the principles of the ensemble: coming together, creating together, shared input, shared responsibility, shared outcome. In social games, we learn to be less self-conscious, to participate in the game as a social actor. Since the rules of the game take precedence, and these are held in common, other differences fall into secondary place, creating both equity and inclusivity as young people can get out of their heads and into their bodies in the moment unselfconsciously.

At the end of the whole group session the young people disperse into groups typically of about 12-20. It is in these groups that sense of the ensemble becomes all the more apparent, since this is where the students will spend most of the festival working together to create something to be shared at the end. The group dynamic is crucial to the experience of each member, as well as to the creative process, and the leader will spend the first session building a sense of ensemble through team building through trust exercises and games designed to encourage the young people to work together. This can include creative problem solving, physical exercises that require collaborative creation, sharing ideas, and so on. They get their bodies to work together as a group, an excellent precursor to movement and dance.

These activities are designed to help students begin to consider and explore the theme of the festival. They will introduce, explore, and work with these in different ways and from different angles. They may also use writing prompts related to the theme to promote ideas flowing or generate more text. Writing may be used to inspire movement, or be used to create audio or visual accompaniment to the dance in ways such as those employed by Crystal Pite. Another typical starting point is the generation of still images and simple movements that can be representational or abstract, created individually or in small or large groups, which can be easily applied to dance making. Throughout the process, the ensemble leader observes how students respond, what sparks, what sticks, what resonates. Leaders allow room for the young people to take ownership of the creative process, while nurturing their ideas, and guiding them. In this way, over the course of the three-day process, ideas and activities are returned to, explored further, refined, developed, and shaped into something meaningful in relation to the student's take on the theme.

Each group session usually ends in a reflection to explore what was successful, what ideas they want to explore, what questions they have, and so on. While the group may not have time to explore all ideas and questions, they have all been shared and everyone's voice was heard.

As the festival is process driven, it is important that it culminates in a sharing rather than a performance. Towards the end of the second day of the festival the ensemble groups begin to consider what they wish to share with the others. They have played together, inquired, explored, and created, being mindful of the framing theme or starting point. Under the guidance of the ensemble leader, they begin to decide what has been their most interesting moments of creativity, the moments that sparked, that resonated, that inspired them. Collectively, they begin to consider how to best shape these moments into something that they wish to share in order to communicate how the starting point has evolved for them; what they have learnt and discovered. This may include elements of games and play, pieces of movement, music, or text. Figure 2 illustrates how lifts practiced in the initial ensemble building became part of a final piece. Students look at the creative possibilities in how these moments and elements can intersect and come together to make something meaningful.

The work shared at the conclusion is work that has been created together. The young people have progressed from a diverse group of individuals to a creative ensemble in which each has played an active and important role. A community has been built, and the young people's innate human skills for building a community have been tapped into. They have seen how creative collaboration has connected them to form a community.

Conclusion

What has been described here is not only a workshop model, but also a philosophy and pedagogy. While the three-day event provides a unique and immersive experience that

can also have all the benefits of a retreat, aspects of this can also be used in the regular classroom. In my own teaching of both dance and drama I utilize elements of the ensemble model, from the circle, through game playing, to building collaborative choreographed or devised work. As educators, it is often necessary to take the lead when delivering elements of theory and technique, though these can also be explored through a different type of shared practice. However, the creative process that takes the form of guided and supported student led work from initial ideas, through exploration, development and problem solving to performance, enables students to find their voice in exciting and innovative ways. I find that adopting this approach in regular classroom pedagogy empowers the students on a daily basis, giving a sense of agency that can extend into the wider world.

References

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Biography

Juliette completed her PhD in Musicology at the University of Hong Kong looking at dance as a form of musicality. She has a Masters in Performance Studies from the University of Manchester. An experienced dancer, she uses phenomenology and ethnography to develop descriptive methods to study dance phenomena, viewing dance forms as global trans-local and historical matrices. She is a high school dance, drama, and literature teacher, and an ISTA artist, artistic director, and writer. She has presented papers at conferences of the WDA, DaCI, the ICTM and IMS.

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