



NEROLI ALLISON RELAXING
AFTER THE SHOW

Precious Memories

By Suzanne Cowan

Suzanne Cowan discusses her work in Dunedin as a recipient of The Caroline Plummer Fellowship, which resulted in *House of Memories*



When I made my application for the Caroline Plummer Community Dance Fellowship I wanted to explore the unique perspectives of people with visual impairments through dance, photography and film, and then on arriving in Dunedin in mid February my idea crystallised into a *House of Memories*, each room in the house representing the precious memory of someone with a sight impairment.

The idea became a show, which was performed on 2nd and 3rd July at a house in Castle St North, a 1920s villa on the edge of the Otago University campus. The theme was home and I wanted to know what this represented to the community of people I chose to work with – was it a place, a passion, a moment, a poignant memory? And how did their vision, or absence of it, shape that sense of home?

House of Memories contained 12 performers, five guides, a stage manager, a production manager and me. We took over the empty house and transformed it into a myriad of experiences, each room being a world in itself. We had a sound and textural maze where audience members were blindfolded and given the opportunity to sharpen their aural and kinaesthetic senses. Simon Fogarty and Hahna Briggs performed a dance duet inspired by guiding techniques for blind people (Simon is blind and Hahna is sighted).

The sound track was a cacophony of sound adaptive equipment from the home of Dave Allen, also blind, and included a Braille printer, high speed talking computer and a Morse Code machine. The sound track was collated by Peter Adams, a well-known composer in the university's music department, who also happens to have a visual impairment. Neroli Allison danced a solo born out of her kinaesthetic passion for wool sorting on her mother's farm in north Canterbury. Then there was the Ballroom, by far the loudest and most raucous room, bringing to life Peter Neville's memories of social dances in the 1950s and 60s. While Aerengaroa Ruvi played the ukulele and Glory Regan played the piano, Joseph Taukamo, Peter and Aileen O'Connell danced with each of the audience members who visited the room.

The performers were either blind or partially sighted. A very intimate dance solo took place in a tiny room that was once used as a servery in the house. The solo was shared by two Masters students from the Otago university dance programme, Claudia Ungericht and Sophia Kalogeropoulou. They interpreted, beautifully, a soundtrack by Kris Bennett, who spoke eloquently about the process of gradually losing her sight.

The kitchen was transformed into a potential hazard zone as an exaggerated illustration of some of the daily difficulties faced by people with visual impairments. Littered with household paraphernalia and forbidding warning signs - like Keep Out, Stop, and Mind Your Step - and cloaked in a thick haze generated by a smoke machine, visitors navigated their way with a torch to make a cup of tea.

Another room featured a narrated slideshow depicting the unique perspectives of two women without peripheral vision. Elizabeth Dolan presented us with her view of the precious places and moments in her home while Nicki Wooton took us on a retrospective journey through some of the key places that defined her experience of surviving a near fatal car accident.

Six shows or viewings were staged over the two evenings and we also invited audiences to three rehearsals as a work in progress. The shows were booked out and sadly we had to turn many people away as space in the house was limited. Audience feedback was very positive and many people said they found it a moving experience that gave them some insight into the world of visual impairment. They enjoyed the participatory aspect - dancing in the ballroom, feeling their way through the sound and textural maze and they liked the variety of performance.



CLAUDIA UNGERIGHT IN 'SMALL THINGS ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL'

A highlight of the fellowship for me was an opportunity to collaborate with some very generous and talented people in the Dunedin community. There was the visually impaired community, and the university - the theatre department, the technical crew at the School of Physical Education, the dance programme, the music department - the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind and various individuals such as a local filmmaker. The joy of being based at the university in Dunedin was I only had to roll out my door to find these people, usually within about five minutes of my office - the advantages of a university town!

One of the most rewarding aspects of the process was watching performers grow and thrive in their various roles. People came to the project with a wide range of experience: Neroli was new to dance and performance, Peter and Joseph were both veterans of social dancing; Hahna and Simon had worked together on previous dance projects; while Ann Tipa, one of our guides, was completely new to theatre. Everyone involved enjoyed the camaraderie of our small performance community and the anticipation of a show created an edge of excitement.

HAHNA BRIGGS AND SIMON FOGARTY IN 'DAVE'S WORLD'



My next project is to create a short film from the filmed footage of the show, complete with interviews that I hope will take it to a wider audience. I also want to reflect on what the partially sighted and blind community bring to the sighted community - perhaps a particular way of being at home in their bodies, an embodiment less defined by the visual and more connected with the aural and the kinaesthetic. ■

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