

Being and writing in collaboration with a dancer

Shamshad Khan

I want to tell you about 'Dancing with Words', a poetry dance collaboration I took part in. The process encouraged me into new territories as a writer and creative. It has been a reminder to me to say yes more often when opportunities come out of the blue.

I was invited by Sarah Tyson of Books Up North to be part of a collaboration of poets and dancers. The project was an opportunity for three poets to spend time matched up with a dancer and inspire each other in new ways of creating. This felt like a luxury. There was going to be a public presentation, but with less emphasis on showing a finished piece and more focus on our process of discovery.

The offer from Sarah, the producer of 'Dancing with Words', arrived unexpectedly in my mailbox and was followed up with a phone call. Sarah spoke of her love of the arts and her desire to create and experiment with her two cherished art forms. This was an embryo idea, it would need to be funded, artists selected and matched. The invitation was sensitively and passionately imagined. It was open and alluring enough to attract me, and so I said yes.

The first meeting with four of the six artists was exciting. It was easy to spot which of us were poets, we were the ones who watched closely. The dancers' poise and fluidity in moving set them apart. But, of course, these distinctions are artificial and these abilities not totally exclusive. We were all encouraged to use the performance space to move around. I enjoyed the chance to be physical and recite in response to the other moving and speaking bodies in the room.

The selected dancers' trainings were diverse: one trained in Kathak dance as a child – by a guru, instilled with a sense of devotion for the divine – another trained in ballet. These dancers drew on their first dance forms, transitioning to jazz or adding and blending in contemporary dance training to their repertoires. They were chosen because of excelling within a form and for their conscious breaking out and embracing of new forms and their interest in collaboration.

It was fascinating to hear how, for all of us, the journeys to and within our chosen art forms required discipline and how we had all chosen in some way to break with these forms and expectations.

We recognised how just as dance is innately familiar to poets, so poetry and words for dancers is equally a part of their everyday lives. They, like most of us, have suckled on poetry from being babies, have fallen asleep listening to lullabies, been soothed and charmed by poems at times of celebration and loss. As toddlers we sway and spin in circles until we fall laughing and dizzy to the ground.

This project was a space where we could come together to reclaim these nascent abilities and develop our specialist crafts. Ultimately, to experiment and create from beyond the differences, and within the overlaps, between poetry and dance.

'Dancing with Words' was launched on National Poetry Day 2019 and had 'Truth' as the theme. Watching the progress of each pair creating and responding to the theme was really interesting. There was generous and supportive feedback and encouragement between all six of us. We appreciated the different routes we were navigating within each pairing. We shared techniques for moving away from clichéd interpretations and literal translations from one form to the other.

Poet Lucy Barnett shared an exercise where we responded to a set piece from a range of perspectives, holding a colour, memory or feeling

in mind. In our pairs we experimented further, superimposing the various drafts of writing onto new versions of dance movement. In another approach, I placed a selection of images on the floor around the room. Whilst I read a poem, the dancer improvised to the poem responding to the images as she came upon them. I used the images as prompts to take a metaphorical shift in direction as I improvised a poem to the dance.

There were subconscious and conscious resonances as we began to work in earnest in our pairs.

Sophie Hutchinson, the dancer I was paired with, describes herself as a movement practitioner. Based in Leeds – by way of Waterford, Ireland – she graduated from the Northern College of Contemporary Dance and has studied yoga in South India. Sophie is ‘deeply inspired by and believes strongly in the nourishing and connecting power of people gathering in order to move, dance, breathe and be still’.

My practice as a poet is to use stillness and the breath to allow words to descend or ascend. If I am working on a commission, I like to have time to contemplate the subject, to research and to blend this with existing long-term personal intuitions and observations.

The creative collaboration between myself and Sophie revealed, challenged, and encouraged both of us to play in the stillness and silent space we both create from.

It was wonderful for me to work with an artist who expresses the depth of her soul by making shapes with her body as she flies through the air. Exciting to dip my toe into the charged energy a dancer creates as they move. I took photos of Sophie swathed in long strands of pink wool; we rearranged the wool into a net wall. I tried to speak poetry as I wove myself through it. We fell back into silence.

In collaborations, I love giving voice to other artists' personal stories and feelings. Sophie's first response on hearing that the theme was truth was immediate and unequivocal – 'it's love' she said. Sophie went on to talk about '*anam cara*' – she explained it was the Irish concept of the 'soul friend'. There was already a strong sense of understanding and intuition between us, a quality of being soul friends. It was this that set the tone for our piece.

Sophie mentioned in passing that she is often labelled as naïve. I appreciated this label as the precious quality of 'the fool'. The fool, depicted in tarot cards and revered in mystical traditions from both Western and Eastern cultures. The fool, who loves and longs for the beloved. I brought in a copy of Cecil Collins' book *The Vision of the Fool and other writings*. This book has essays on the vital role of the artist and poet in society. It has images of the artist's work, reflective of a deeply spiritual practice. We read sections from the book, pored over the images, our eyes shining in recognition. 'The artist is a fool, and Art is a cosmic folly by which purity of consciousness can be attained.'

And so began our pact to be as foolish together as we could allow ourselves to be. To keep breathing the brightness between us. In collaboration we grew to appreciate each other's presence and articulations. We kept in touch beyond the scheduled meetings via video link. I wrote poetic email notes, Sophie placed her phone so I could see her dance as I read her my latest draft.

I checked out the poet John O'Donohue's book *Anam Cara: spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world*. I absorbed the notion of 'the body as sacrament'. In Sophie, I saw 'a visible sign of invisible grace'. As artists we shared an attraction to the unsayable, the ineffable.

This connection and desire to connect had us finding each other over again, seeing ourselves in the mirrors we held up for each other. Glimpsing our habits of being and expression, showing each other where we could stretch ourselves to go deeper in our understanding of truth and foolishness.

It is rare to be given time to commune so deeply with someone as part of a creative project. It was heartwarming to meet an artist who shares the desire to do so. We allowed the process to be as slow and intimate as we wanted. Losing as much of our sense of our separate selves as was achievable. Keeping connected whilst sensing the presence of the producer's expectant eye.

With our plot reference 'the fool', we honoured the space where there is no thought, no words, no movement. Gratefully, the producer Sarah accepted our process and waited and waited for us to articulate. Sporadically, she nudged and encouraged us to share more tangibly. We agreed, pulled out of our silent communion by a desire to share this soul friendship with a wider audience.

The decision to cut or edit is described by Ann Bogart, in *A director prepares*, as a necessary act of violence. She describes seven key aspects of the creative process. The aspect of 'embarrassment', we unashamedly went beyond. We revelled in the sensual energy of 'eroticism' which draws us in our search for completeness and which we hoped to extend to the audience.

We opened our performance with the line: 'The fool longs for the fool of you.'

Sophie translated these words into guttural gesture. An intuitive rendering of feeling into form. I sat to one side, reading as Sophie danced. There were many reworkings before I, too, stood centre stage, hidden behind

Sophie's tall, languid body. The fool folding forwards to reveal the fool of me.

The fish of inspiration flashing. Sophie moves as though boneless. Her movement inspires the lines: 'the fool is forever tumbling towards you'.

And when I am invited to dance, how unexpected the weight of physical inertia. In this organic process, we emerged speaking and moving with each other's languages in our bodies and on our tongues. The inspiration fed backwards and forwards between us. Sophie created a few lines of song in *Gaeilge* (pronounced 'gwailga') or, as most people know it, Irish Gaelic. I performed simple gestures and movements to go with the song. We kept blending deeper truths, knowing that most of what we had shared and created was not visible, except of course to the heart of a fool.

'The floating see-through *sharara* of a jellyfish.'

The producer Sarah pops her head in hopefully; strands of our process curl like sea water around her hair.

We discard more words, the skein of pink organic wool which was part of our set is abandoned just before the dress rehearsal. In search of true beauty, we still ourselves and find new ways to show what we are becoming.

Things that could not be said in words, shown by movement. Shapes shown in silence or set against the backdrop of a phrase.

On show night, the presence of a receptive audience lifted the energy for all of us. The lighting added mystery and focus. The final performance peeled off another layer, exposing us further to 'the shimmering ultraviolet between us'.

What would I have written if I had not created with a dancer, or had worked with a different dancer? I do not know. What I do know, is that I loved spending creative time with a kindred spirit and that in itself was

transformative. As a result, what I write next has got to be different.

There may be other opportunities to perform. Who knows if I will take them. I know from dancing with words that if we hold an unexpected offer with the love it is born from, it will love us back.

I'd like to leave you with the image of two fools dancing on the edge of an imaginary cliff wearing matching corduroy dungarees. Above our up-stretched arms, beautiful collaborative components are forming '*Me fein, tu fein, me fein, Ag damhsa ar an aill*' (myself, yourself, myself, dancing on the cliff).

'The fool is not a fool
he makes real what he makes believe.'

Shamshad Khan

Shamshad Khan is a poet and resilience coach. She works with individuals and organisations using writing and coaching techniques to empower and engage. Her poetry collection *Megalomaniac*, published by Salt (2007) has been studied on the Lancaster University English Literature degree course. Her work has been featured on BBC Radio 3 and 4.

Shamshad has collaborated with artists and theatres including Horse and Bamboo Puppet Theatre as co-writer/director of the multi-media show *The Moonwatcher* (2018). She worked with Olympias Music on *Making Manchester*, a show combining physical theatre, music and poetry (RNCM, 2019), and on 'Dancing with Words' (Books UpNorth, 2019).

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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