

This report from Jayne Thompson associate artist and core member of the MMDTCo comprises an extract from a series of case studies/forthcoming article intended for publication.

'Digital Humanities' has become, certainly over the past few years, the buzz word within academia. New forums, research centres and staff posts have emerged to accommodate the range of research and practice involved in this new and growing field. What we might mean by the term 'digital' in a world that is fundamentally 'digitalised' is open to a number of different interpretations and perspectives. Most obvious about the term 'digital humanities' is, of course, the relationship between these two specific fields of research and practice. Most discussion in this respect refers to developing 'tools' and 'methods' to integrate 'technology' and an emphasis on 'interaction' with digital media in all areas of the humanities – literary, arts and so on.

In this respect the work of Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company (MMDTCo) has a neat fit within the field. The company, from its early days, integrated film into the performance, and was acutely aware of the poignancy of these moments of live and mediated elements for both performer and audience in terms of the 'emotional' connection, and the potential to develop this practice further in relation to training and performance.

A co-founder of the company, my role has changed over the past eight years and where in the early years I worked as an 'intermediary' performing with the core company - something discussed by Professor Nicola Shaughnessy in her chapter 'Dancing with Difference: Moving Towards New Aesthetics (White G. ed *Applied Theatre: Aesthetics*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen 2015) this has changed as members of the company have increasingly established themselves as an ensemble and found their own creative autonomy and confidence as performers and, more recently, trainer/facilitators. Eight years on, I find I am in the perfect situation to observe the changes that have occurred in the performers' sense of identity, physical presence and accomplished performances as I become less of the 'intermediary' and more an 'observer' albeit still a performing member of the core company - on the 'outside' but also firmly situated 'inside'.

As the company has developed over this time it has become increasingly important to document the impact of the work, not only in relation to the original company members, but also participating groups with whom we have been working, as well as the artists, other professionals and agencies we have collaborated with or been funded by.

This article explores the impact of the process, performances, outreach work and artistic influence of the MMDTCo creative practice within the field of participatory and creative arts. Using a number of case studies, the aim is to consider the influence, affect/effect, and legacy of work undertaken by the Company in relation to three key strands of enquiry. In the first area of investigation the study considers the impact MMDTCo practice has had on external partners and/or local funding bodies who regularly support the work

which to date includes: Arts Council England, Kent County Council, Medway Council, Age UK Thanet. Has this work fed into policy, influenced practice in the areas of 'ageing' 'health' and 'wellbeing'? The second strand of enquiry explores any impact the work may have had on project collaborators, particularly over the past four years. This is a departure from the more conventional analysis of impact which might focus on audience (both theatre and readership), participants (company members and general public in workshop environments) aspects of which are dealt with in the third strand of enquiry. The strands of enquiry are drawn from a series of interviews undertaken throughout 2017/2018, reports, observations, audience feedback, participant response, conference attendance.

In her article (2012) 'Liveness, mediation and immediacy – innovative technology use in process and performance' *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 17:4, 501-516, Susan Davis discusses the 'fetishising of technologies' specifically drawing on Steve Dixon's argument that "more focus needs to be on the aesthetic elements, the intentions and achievements of the work created, rather than on the use of the technologies per se.

Moving Minds is an initiative developed over three phases and provides an excellent example of the long-term impact of the MMDTCo creative practice using *Doris*, the digital technology tool developed by the company together with digital artist Pete Wallace of Butch Auntie. *Doris* is an important tool for the company both in terms of 'process' and also final performances where digital imagery is part of the performance aesthetic

The first phase of the project, commissioned by Rathini Mills of the Medway Mental Health Services in 2016, comprised a series of performance-based workshops for mental health service users in the Medway area - *Moving Well Chatham*. The workshop sessions took place over a period of eight weeks and were designed to introduce the participants to MMDTCo creative practice. This phase has been documented in a short film in which the participants themselves are able to articulate how they were affected by the project and the benefits of the work in relation to their respective situations and life experiences.

In a recorded discussion in 2017 Ms Mills spoke of one particular participant who:

"had grown in confidence so much that she was now volunteering at the Crisis Café", and it was: "mainly through performing with the MMDTCo" that she had developed the confidence. Ms. Mills, in her discussion, emphasised one of the key features of MMDTCo's creative approach - that the core company comprise women who have a range of life experiences, are non-performers in the traditional sense, provide inspiration and are a testament to what 'participatory arts' can achieve: "having the ladies there was really special, they developed a bond with the participants". **Rathini Mills** (Recording 9)

I attended and participated in several of these workshops and was able to observe the company members leading the movement workshops and creatively working with the participants to collaboratively develop a short piece of performance. This first series of workshops established the group ensemble, giving the participants security and a degree of confidence working with movement to physically represent their perspectives of mental health issues. The MMDTCo members involved in this stage of the project demonstrated themselves to be confident facilitators engaging with the group to encourage creative and imaginative physical performances using the various techniques and methods they, themselves, had been introduced to over the years as they have developed their own creative imagination and practice.

Following the success of this intervention, documented separately in a report by Ms. Mills whose professional background is rooted in Mental Health and Wellbeing Services, a subsequent series of workshop sessions was commissioned to train and upskill three of the original participants from *Moving Well* to facilitate their own future workshops for service users. The core company members, 'the ladies' as Ms Mills refers to them, had developed in confidence, and professionalism and were now leading the workshops and, under Creative Director, Sian Stevenson's guidance, able to facilitate the training of external participants in this second phase.

This phase involved the participants embarking on a system of training with MMDTCo in order to become facilitators themselves. *Doris*, the interactive digital tool, was introduced. The participants immediately engaged with the concept and actively contributed to enhancing the development of the finer details – colour, sequence of movements. All three conveyed a sense that they were collaborating, keen to offer suggestions, and analyse the effectiveness of the projection in the light of leading the workshops with their other group members.

In 2018, this initiative was developed into a third phase which saw the original participants run their own workshop series using *Doris* with support and mentoring from MMDTCo core members. The final workshop of this series took place in April 2018 after which the new *Moving Minds* (as they have become known) facilitators talked candidly about the process and their future aspirations. The group have taken creative ownership of *Doris* and this is immediately evident in their adaptation of the digital images which have been updated with representations of themselves performing the moves. They have been joined by a new member who, keen to use her technical expertise to support the initiative, has been instrumental in developing the creative and artistic elements related to the digital qualities. Interestingly, she also mentioned unexpected benefits of using *Doris* in other group activities. It seems that she keeps *Doris* projections running during art classes and finds that the projected images inspire creativity in other members of the group.

For one new facilitator *Doris* was particularly important: "I feel like I have got a friend there" the digital image is more than simply a prompt. Elaborating further

she said: "...your company has helped me tremendously" a new-found confidence has enabled her to 'push' herself in a way that feels 'unreal': "....I showed my daughter.....she was blown away....Mum I know that's you but I can't believe it's you..." (recording 19)

The newly established *Moving Minds* facilitators have aspirations to run future workshops with mental health users, older people in residential settings, schools and veterans but for the meantime intend to continue the current sessions until September 2018.

Jayne Thompson April 2018

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