

Embodied Grey Panthers
Explorations of a Grey Panther workshop for over sixty year olds
David McMicken - 4th September 2015

Enter into the Tracks Dance Studio on a Friday Morning. At about 8.30 David, the 57-year-old man who has been working with the Grey Panthers Seniors dancing group since 1992, arrives and makes sure all the outdoor steps and pathways are clean of leaves, debris, and any slip hazards that have built up over the week. He then dusts the studio and dry mops the floor. Clancy turns on the air-conditioning, unlocks the studio entrance, and puts the money tin in place. The Air-conditioner is set at 24 degrees, the ambient temperature today is 31 degrees and rising and the humidity varies according to the time of year, today it is 55%, quite low. The bamboo blinds partially covering the mirrors match the warm wooden tones of the floor, the calico blinds are raised on the windows that look out over the lawn and banyan tree in the shared areas of Frog Hollow Centre for the Arts. Shirley arrives early as she has just come from her doctor's appointment. She puts out the chairs in a circle and then makes herself a cup of tea. David sets up the laptop and makes sure the music is ready. Kelly is a 26-year-old dancer, born in Darwin, tertiary dance trained in Melbourne, and returned to work in Darwin, a place she says she feels like she knows. She begins warming up her body and the rest of the women and one man gradually arrive. Cups of tea and coffee are made and conversations about the week proceed. Ellen hits the floor and begins stretching.

Everyone is sitting in a circle, and at exactly 9.30, David calls the group to order with the cry "OK Ladies and gentleman, it is Toni Time, (after a participant, Antonnieta Vanzella, complained that women come late and that if the class starts late, that is her time being taken up). The first part of the session is sharing, beginning with a rousing happy Birthday for Pat, who turned 72 yesterday. Pat smirks and says she had hoped to slip under the radar this year. Notices are given from everyone, often involving medical information about others who are away or sick (lovingly called the Organ Recital), and also updates on people's outside activities. Darryl has returned from Brisbane where he has had his pacemaker updated, Judy sports a scar on her nose from skin cancers being removed, and Liz is on uncertain legs after a knee operation. And the Darwin Choral had an amazing 30th anniversary performance from which no-one wanted to go home.

Time to exercise. There is still a gentle chatter amongst some who still have more to tell. Starting in the chairs we breath; slowly in and out, becoming aware of our bodies sitting, the weight passing from the upper body through the pelvis and into the chair and floor. We feel the weight on the seat, our thighs relaxing, are hands resting on our thighs and the vertebral column rising from the pelvis, slowly we imagine our breath adding space to our disks and we feel our head balanced on top of the cervical vertebrae. Gentle 'no' actions and 'yes' actions to locate the very top of our vertebrae. David again reminds them of the names atlas (at the top) and axis as number 2. The neck begins a gentle spiral, feeling a stretch from the left shoulder, anchored in place, through the neck and out of the

eyes as the head twists to the right, looking over the right shoulder. “Look at the person’s earrings on the right” says David, making comment on how lovely Jenni’s are today, then to the left, as David notices Marge has a new set on.

By now all dancers are quiet and focussed. More centring exercise follow, gradually adding muscular strength, particularly quadriceps exercises, especially for Lillian who had a knee operation. And foot articulations. David has designed these exercises for centring, strength, specifics for special people in the group, and to lead towards standing.

From standing Kelly takes over, her gentle voice persuading the dancers to go a little bit further than they are. We all move our chairs to random spacing in the room, using the chairs as a barre, for support to help our balance. Following are movements that work around their centre, gradually transferring the weight from centre to front, side back. Then working on balance, and leg strength with lovely deep knee bends and rises to test balance. Upper body grace comes from carrying the arm and upper body through front, side back curves, always returning to a still centre. Many exercises based on basic ballet and contemporary dance techniques but adapted for diverse abilities and always giving alternatives to full movement. Calf muscle stretches lead to a stacking of the chairs in the corner. Francisca goes and sits. She has sore legs today and is happy to watch. She continues to give hints from the side.

“Alright ladies and gentleman, let’s spread out and face the mirror of truth” calls David. “Today I want you to think of two things. Opposition and swing”. He slowly breaks down a movement phrase, loosely Merce Cunningham in style, where the leg swings across the body one way and the opposite arm the other, followed by a circling of the leg to the back diagonal, a drop forwards with the head into a back curve and a rebound from the back leg, balancing for a moment before rolling the legs through the hip to a parallel standing position. Finishing with a deep knee bend and a stretch of the opposite leg to the side. The usual grumbling that comes when ‘new’ movement is being learnt is absent today, and David wonders if this is because we are just two weeks past a major festival show where they had to learn a bit of new material.

Moving into a new phase David announces we will look at Darryl’s dance – You Don’t Own Me.

Darryl is a 68-year-old man, the only regular male in the group. He came to dance about 4 years ago, having always wanting to play the piano and dance. In class he struggles with the flow of movement but loves the idea. He has been a participant in our Choreographic Development course, usually taken by 18-25 year olds, and has performed in several full length works for Tracks and the Darwin Festival. He speaks passionately about the rights of the senior, of their invisibility, and especially in the GLBTQI realm. “People have to stop seeing the elderly as brave, or cute, or simply sick”. Darryl, with particular heart conditions and a pacemaker, is reaching a time in his life where he has a sickly partner (Chronic Fatigue)

and has moved himself to a rural lifestyle in the township of Batchelor 100 kilometres from Darwin. He feels the isolation at times and gets quarrelsome at times about why rural people should have to come into the cities just to do things.

Darryl suggested that he had a few dance ideas that he would not mind trying. (He had previously stated that all the dance created for the seniors group was created by “non-seniors” who were deciding what they thought the seniors wanted to do. David said he would give Darryl time in the class to do “whatever you want to experiment with”. Darryl booked studio time to explore movement and David would check in regularly to see when he wanted to give the movement to the class.

Eventually the time arrived and Darryl used about 10 minutes to show several movements, struggling with the descriptions but quickly falling into a role of humorous teacher. Jokes were told and often around the forgetfulness of the elderly. By the end of his time, the moves were still vague and David felt himself resisting the urge to step in and clarify.

[As an aside, there is a strange twinge for me. Do you let someone who has made a grand statement that the younger (myself) are imposing ideas and moves and music etc onto the elderly, do you let them struggle because they do not have the skills to impart the physical knowledge? Or do you assist? I choose to talk afterwards and offer my teaching skills if wanted. There is also a twinge when the music chosen is well in the range that we have been working in for many years, for exactly the same reason that he states ie its relevance to the younger age of people in the group.]

After many weeks the piece is finished. It has approximately 6 distinct moves and works a lot on directions. David decided to premiere the work at Adelaide River at a Council Of The Aging Coomalie Region Seniors’ Month event. Darryl lives in the Coomalie Region and David thought the significance would not be lost on Darryl, as it was announced that it was the first time someone from within the group had created a new work, and that we had travelled the hour and a half down the track in order to show his peers.

The dancers take their positions with partners. Liz has been unwell and absent and looks confused. Dianne, beginning to be quite forgetful, joins Liz in joint confusion. David moves to them to try and comfort them and bring them back to the task of learning the dance.

Darryl goes through the moves with the group giving all different counts to what they have learnt. The group is tolerant of this as they know as soon as the music plays it will all work out. Meanwhile Liz and Diane have learned the first 32 counts, sort of. Play music. Laughter and banging into each other, and some getting frustrated and others getting through. Spacing is important as knocking

onto some of the dancers has undesired consequences. Lack of Balance, condition of extreme pain, distractions causing memory loss.

This dance is not yet embodied. David jokes that it takes 40 performances to get it into the body. "So let us do it one more time". Another run and slightly less confusion. David makes a couple of comments, trying to reinforce what he has heard Darryl talk about, but which is not clear in the movement. [Darryl has a different vision in his head.] "Remember in the sixties when someone was trying to tell you what to do, and you wanted to tell them to back off but you did not quite feel strong enough. That is where we are starting, and gradually through the dance you gain more confidence, and then you realise that others feel the same and you join forces, strong independent people." Play Music and the dance takes another step towards its eventual perfection.

Fever - we all dance to Peggy Lee's Fever

Breathing exercises lead to everyone going home