

A Service User's Perspective

'Dedication to the Seven: Hearing Voices in Dance'

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Twenty-two years ago I was in full-time dance training which was terminated by reduced eyesight due to a rare condition which required corneal transplants and mental distress which resulted in my being hospitalised. At the time it had been my ambition to become a dancer and choreographer.

As a mental health activist I've been inspired by others who have put their experiences of mental distress into different art forms. Art, drama and poetry are mediums which have been used to explain and celebrate the differences that some of us live with, but I am not aware of projects using people labelled as 'mentally ill', nor of activists using their experience of mental distress in dance. It is my hope that my dance might encourage others to explore the subject of mental distress in dance for both educational and creative entertainment purposes.

A couple of years ago I returned to dancing joining a Bharatanatyam class (South Indian classical dance) and this inspired me to choreograph this dance. Although the technique is of western contemporary, my learning of Bharatanatyam influenced how I approached it.

One of the central features of Bharatanatyam are the hand gestures which represent people, gods, animals, things, and convey the story of a dance with accompanying facial expression.

My dance is about my experience of living with what is labelled as 'psychosis', specifically hearing voices and seeing visions. I hear seven groups and individual voices both inside and outside of my head. Psychiatry views this phenomena as mental illness but my understanding of my voices is that they are spirits. It has taken me years to learn to live with them with support. I had to accept them, make a relationship with them, understand what they meant to me and develop strategies for coping.

In my dance I give a short verbal introduction whereby I introduce the audience to a few hand gestures which represent the different voices I hear (and see). My dance conveys a 'journey' and some of the feelings they evoke in me such as fear, anticipation, comfort and reassurance. For me, personally, this dance is a visual testimony of aspects of my voice hearing, and a dedication to my voices, which continue to be a major part of my life in both positive and negative ways.

My dance has been filmed at the Laban centre and the DVD/VHS video is now available through MIND Publications* with an accompanying booklet giving more background information about my experience of hearing voices, an outline of the coping mechanisms that I've found useful and suggestions for group discussions after watching the film. I hope this will be useful as an educational tool to professionals who work with voice hearers. I will also be performing my dance at the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Meeting in Glasgow next year.

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