

Droomtheater

Project : De Droomkoffer

Droomtheater is a social theatre foundation for puppetry and storytelling, based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. De Droomkoffer is a project for intercultural shadow theatre performances, presentations, lectures and workshops.

Joanne Oussoren, storyteller and Frans Hakkemars, puppeteer, got in touch with Chinese Shadow theatre and its enchanting techniques in 2012 while visiting a Chinese Puppet Festival in Cheng Du. They decided to develop a new social and educative concept for using shadow puppetry in a mobile suitcase. In coöperation with artist Annie Katsura Rollins, from Canada, they worked on a special technique in a mobile suitcase, designed by Hansuëli Trüb from Switzerland. During the last five years they have practiced in The Netherlands and Europe by activating their audiences and creating lively moments for exchange and dialogue.

The word INTER, (cultural heritage from modern French philosopher Jacques Derrida) is very important in Droomtheater practice. Inter means 'in between'. We all are familiar with the word INTER-ESSE, which is a collusion of the words inter and esse, and means 'being in between'. Droomtheater project the 'De Droomkoffer' is dealing with INTER as an in-between, as a medium in between performer and audience. Droomtheater has a special style in producing with is international, interactive, interdisciplinary, intercultural and intergenerative. With the intercultural shadow play Droomtheater travelled successfully worldwide and throughout Europe performing, lecturing and presenting workshops in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Berlin, Brussels, Antwerp, Spain, Oman, Bombay, Iran and Uganda.

With this project Droomtheater brings back to the East all the fruitful experiences from the West with the excellent in-between 'De Droomkoffer', for connecting different cultural heritage and audiences. We would like to hand over a Droomkoffer to Mrs. Tang Dayu to the Asia Pacific Commission for intercultural shadow theatre practices.

Droomtheater is interested in meeting professionals and volunteers working with children, adults, elderly and extra challenged people for transferring shadow play, making puppets and stories. Sharing, connecting and showing



the great value of shadow puppetry means increasing health conditions. Chinese shadow puppetry by nature is a powerful artistic skill for celebrating life qualities!

Financial support to produce and explore the project in The Netherlands and Europe is given by International Group ING - Bank, Long Live Arts foundation, Dutch foundation for Cultural Participation and Rotterdam City Council.

www.droomtheater.com

www.franshakkemars.nl

www.anniekatsurarollins.com

www.theaterpack.ch

Shadow Theatre, a suitable means of developing the talents of the impaired elderly.

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Driven by my personal interest for the benefits of shadow theatre for special target groups, I set out together with puppeteer Frans Hakkemars to roam the city of Rotterdam, the continent of Europe, and indeed China with my Dream Treasury, my portable shadow theatre, as the most important luggage. Since 2012 we have been working in theatres, libraries, community centers, care centers, and penitentiary institutions. Depending on client and audience, we choose a theme and subject matter, and we use shadow theatre in combination with other art forms such as dance, music, videos, cooking, and different narrative techniques such as slam poetry and prose.



Working together

Having departed on our venture as autonomous puppeteers, directors, and storytellers, we gradually became more and more involved in the shared social responsibility of artists, politicians, stakeholders, and volunteers, for the care and well-being of our fellow man. The elderly in our society are becoming more and more vulnerable and their needs are pressing, because they themselves are often responsible for maintaining their own social networks of friends and acquaintances, their networks of care givers, and for initiating new contacts.

Over the years, we have become increasingly convinced of the importance of collaboration, of sectors such as care, health care, art, and welfare, joining forces in caring for the growing number of elderly in our society.

More and more partners now realize that active participation will keep people involved, independent and fit. A theatre show we did towards the end of 2012 prompted a very special request. It was a shadow theatre show of Saint Saën's "Carnaval des Animaux" which we did for the residents of care center *De Steenplaat* in the *Feyenoord* quarter of Rotterdam. It involved the participation of children and the music was provided by a professional chamber orchestra. After the sequence of shows, the volunteer coordinator of *De Steenplaat* asked us to continue our sequence, this time in the living rooms of the care center, for an audience of dementing residents.



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In a special masterclass, Hansuëli Trüb has been able to introduce his Dream Treasury, a small, portable shadow theatre, in the Netherlands. We added to this concept a contemporary version of the ancient Chinese shadow techniques, and we were surprised to see how making the shadow puppets, and making them 'come to life', could activate and stimulate the elderly. According to the care center's activity coaches, the Dream Treasury approach and procedure led to more communication and activity among the residents. During the sessions, we saw how passive attendees transformed into active participants. Only the very few who did not feel like doing anything, did not join in.

Every event that is out of the residents' ordinary routine is a welcome distraction. Projecting images on a screen and accompanying them by poetry, prose, music, movement, and dance evokes fun and enthusiasm. And when, after a Dream Treasury show, the participants start to draw and cut out characters, and tell stories, their fantasy and imagination are challenged even further and this creates a very special, new energy. Participants become involved with one another, and interested in one another, in a way that is different from the usual, daily contact.

Telling stories

Droomtheater's product - a theatre show followed by activities - offers an essential element of intercultural communication. It always leads to surprising and original associations and conversations.

Also, during the puppetry sessions, when the shadow puppets are being used, interesting themes and topics may be brought up. Sometimes the caregivers attending, for the first time in their lives, see their loved one, while he is coloring a drawing, to his heart's content. Or the nursing staff hear special memories and thoughts from their clients, which they never knew

about before. A new way of looking at each other's personal past develops itself, and opens the door to new conversations between participants. Anything may come up, from favorite flowers, transport by taxi, Donald Trump, the second World War, Indonesian or Chinese folk stories, to travelling, tropical birds, elephants in the circus, chicken, mice, and windmills, but also topical, social issues such as politics, elections, and the care for the elderly.

Telling a simple story can give existential value to the narrator and to the listener(s).

The ways of telling stories, and the approach of *Droomtheater* vary, and are used to suit the different occasions and audiences.

And thus, a story can be part of a program which includes a walk in the park followed by a meal and a show. Or the breaks in the show may be used to bake and decorate cakes which match the theme of the story.

Social media

To reach out to as many people as possible within the organizations we visit, we pay a lot of attention to our presence on social media.

In close co-operation with photographers and film makers we record and document our events. This allows us to communicate optimally with all the echelons in an organization: care givers, volunteers, nurses, activity coaches, and other employees, and to show them exactly what we do. We also maintain contact with those outside the care centers, such as policy makers and stake holders. We aim at using the appropriate medium to reach the people we want to reach. When we send photos to care givers after an event, we send them by email or snail mail, whichever makes it easiest for them to respond. This approach has really furthered the development of our artistic, interactive projects. *Droomtheater* is often invited to attend national as well as international congresses and festivals.

One single move

Just as the elderly in our society can be divided into different groups, those who are suffering from dementia can be subdivided into different categories and phases as well. Due to diminished brain activity, neurological disorders, and/or heavy medication, the response to our shadow theatre may merely consist of just one, slight twinkle in the eye. Albeit a minimal response, it is exactly what we want to achieve.

Whereas the original goal of a puppeteer is to bring dead material to life, to breathe life into lifeless objects, this special kind of theatre, 'shadow theatre with the dementing elderly' breathes life into a brain that is gradually becoming numb, and activates the emotional experience of an audience whose moments of pure joy are few and far between. Sometimes that little sparkle of joy, manifest only in that split second, is such a unique and rewarding experience, it stays with us for days.



Conclusions

The change processes which are activated by using shadow theatre, have their effects throughout an organization, and trigger creativity in its different departments. People, whether residents, staff, or caretakers, encounter a range of unusual emotions such as endearment and amazement, a new rapport develops between people, and between them and their surroundings. The shadow images shown, the music, poetry, prose, and slam poetry produced by guest performers, they all inspire. There is something in it for everyone, and the

atmosphere is enhanced in a way that is felt by everyone throughout the organization.

The following objectives are paramount:

1. The change-inducing powers of art and culture are based on participation, motivation, and inspiration. By intensifying collaboration and communication, new developments will be initiated which will offer more opportunities for artistic practice.
2. The frequency of the activities organized is often too low and the current situation requires a higher one.
3. The change-inducing effects could increase if not only individual artists would be involved, but projects would also be attracted in collaboration with other organizations such as festivals, theatres, museums, art schools, and nursing schools, so that more of the lonely elderly will become involved in activities and be inspired more often. The involvement of more volunteers requires the involvement of more professionals to coach them, and to structure and monitor the activities.
4. Sharing the experience and knowledge gained in shadow theatre for the dementing through different media, will generate a wider reach, more input, and more enthusiasm.
5. Professional experience in cultural transfer, and an increasing knowledge of it, are vital to the enhancement of the quality of community arts. Of course, the involvement of volunteers is important, but more professional expertise will improve the quality, and will facilitate sharing assets and skills in a network collaborating to help the lonely elderly.

Joanne Oussoren, september 2017

Website: <http://droomtheater.com/>

SHADOW AND DANCE

While sharing a healthy meal at the Droomtheater kitchen table, I decided to write an article about the experiences I had with them collaborating in the project 'Shadow and Dance'. Some readers are no doubt already familiar with 'Droomtheater', their exciting innovative activities and productions stimulating our imagination, and invariably encouraging audiences to play an active role in the performance. In this article I would like to focus on shadowpuppetry, dance and ms.

background informaton

Founded in 1990 by Joanne Oussoren, master puppeteer Frans Hakkemars joined some years later. Together – as well as frequently collaborating with other professional artists – they have worked on a wide range of projects. Their attraction to shadow puppetry was stimulated upon visiting the UNIMA International Puppetry Festival and Congress in China, 2012. After having witnessed some beautiful examples of ancient traditional shadow puppetry they were hooked! Joanne and Frans invited Annie Katsura Rollins, a specialist in the ancient art of Chinese shadow play – to come to the Netherlands, in order to share and transfer her knowledge of – and skills in – this ancient form of community art. Another major step in Droomtheater's shadow puppetry theatre happened at the 'Figurentheaterkolleg' in Bochum, Germany when Joanne and Frans discovered the Swiss expert Hansüeli Trüb, yet another master with whom they worked. Under his expert guidance they created and launched in 2014 their successful 'dream suitcase'. This mobile 'mini theater' has since carried on to become a widely travelled valuable tool in the theatrical world, and can be seen in action throughout the Netherlands and beyond. In just a few years Droomtheater have dynamically re-launched this ancient form of puppetry – which originated in 2000 BC – when it served to hold Chinese agricultural communities together, and have brought it into an appropriate and contemporary existence. Something that brings diverse groups of society together and that stimulates these groups to share their communal experiences.

about us & ms

Earlier this year, I was given the wonderful opportunity to take part in a special event, the 33rd Annual International Dream Conference. A group of 'dancers', including myself, were invited by Joanne and Frans to work together on a presentation wherein two creative worlds would be brought together, the worlds of shadow puppetry and dance. Dance as such only became part of my life in 2015, I had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2001 and for years I was told – and accepted – what I could NO longer do! However, I eventually found strength and 'salvation' in dance. My physiotherapist talked to me about an organization called 'Dance for Health' whose core mission is to promote and improve the quality of life for its target groups, people affected by MS and with Parkinson's disease. I had always been slightly reticent to join any 'MS groups', but when I heard that these classes were a mix of ballet (had a childhood dream of being a ballet-dancer!) and modern dance – and that they were held at the splendid opera house in the centre of Amsterdam, where I regularly went to watch dance performances – my curiosity was aroused. Through the MS dance classes hosted by 'het Nationale Opera & Ballet', I had the good fortune to

meet Joanne Oussoren and Frans Hakkemars. Having recently developed a programme combining shadow puppetry and dance, they wanted to open it up to physically impaired participants and thus invited our MS group to partake in this multi-disciplinary project - and we were more than keen to be involved. Joanne, like myself, has MS and over a period of time we met regularly – occasionally inviting Frans to join us! We danced, drank lots of coffee in a number of cafes, visited each other and shared our experiences along the way. We would discuss our feelings, thoughts, different reactions, what we liked disliked, found helpful, unhelpful, difficult, problematic uncomfortable etc. All aspects were covered. For example the fact that we both enjoyed playing with light and colour, and that we found it fascinating and fun to experiment with light, darkness and shadow.

Supposedly light is an important factor to MS patients and it is believed that sunlight can determine the course of the illness. However we are not sure whether it is a true fact or not, but interestingly we found out that while Joanne has a great affinity with the sun; in contrast, I have a great affinity with – and am drawn toward – the shade.

interdisciplinarity and interactivity

We particularly liked the cooperation of the various disciplines and entering into this experimental new area of dance and shadow theatre. Here we had a specific form that enabled us to show more of ourselves to the public and thus inspire them to get involved as well. Gradually we became aware of the potential of combining shadow theatre and dance, and of the power of this combination. Fired by our enthusiasm we started to find ways in which to transmit our shared experiences and discoveries... we were in the process of seeking new routes for the future. I was thrilled to have been introduced to this new territory of shadow puppetry. It added another dimension and allowed me to take the next step in my healing process. Back to the early summer, when we took to the stage during the ASD congress that was being held in Limburg. With the live puppet theatrical as a backdrop and an eager audience in front of us, we were joined by Andrew Greenwood – professional ballet-dancer/master and ‘people mover’ – who guided us on this inner journey.

experience of dance

What followed was a synergetic mix, where the shadow puppets acted as the catalyst. Participants were dancing and moving to the stirring music of Stravinsky’s Firebird and the projected firebird images of the shadow puppetry. The music and the puppets aroused our senses, evoked our emotions, and in turn stimulated our movements and minds and encouraged expansion of our creativity. While the dramatic developments and transformations took place in ‘Firebird’ – which we could empathize and identify with – we were undergoing a similar experience. The music and the shadow puppets supported this ‘journey’, the energy flowed and our inner imagery was set in motion, becoming a powerful means of expression and letting our imaginations run free. There was a wordless communication between all involved and, as Joanne poetically put it: “there is so much that can be said with the body and *without* words”.

benefits

Prior to our inter-active performance I had become increasingly aware of the health benefits of this project, on both a physical and mental level. It works on balance, coordination and mobility, furthermore it stimulates imagination and communication and at the same time helps build confidence, and allows us to find back our (often) lost self-esteem. It also made me very conscious of the strength and potential of art and visuals. The shadow puppet imagery inspired me to delve further into my inner imagination and express myself via dance.

This was further enhanced by an introduction to classical music, which I never before fully appreciated. Now I am a huge fan of it, having felt its power and influence on my emotions and creative output. To have been introduced to these cultural stimulants was an unexpected discovery. All of the above are very important factors for people with chronic disabilities. It turns out to be a valuable lesson for everyone involved, it shows the world what we are capable of and it allows us to move beyond the stigma of being labelled 'disabled' or 'sick'. And, it is such fun! Despite my years as a journalist, I find it difficult to put into words the power and value of such a creative unifying, activity. It can only be fully appreciated when one has been physically there and has witnessed – or better – played a part in it. Whether it can be proven medically or scientifically that dance aids MS – that remains to be seen – the precious 'feel good' effect is incontestable. And ultimately this positive aspect helps our condition, which inevitably has a great effect on our condition. What a joy it was – to be able to experience this and most importantly – and to realise that we have the power and capability to return to that magical state of being. It was not a dream... but a reality made possible through dream circumstances.

future plans

Although the project is still in the early stages for Droomtheater, Joanne already enthusiastically talks about future collaborations with Andrew Greenwood and perhaps adding poetry to the creative mix of shadows, puppetry, music, dance and health. And "why not even combine it with cooking activities! And how about introducing fall prevention activities for the elderly?"

Droomtheater offers plenty of opportunities for all the age groups, different tastes and states of health... so keep watching this space www.droomtheater.com !

videolinks bij 'Shadow and Dance'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx6HIFBGetU> Shadow and Dance

https://youtu.be/D_QOTRmqDnA The firebird shadows

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmnCAPRyAYo> MS-Dance

Christine Gravemaker-Scott: Scottish, designer / journalist, now ms dancer

7 november 2016

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