

# ENCOUNTER

Introduced in 1999 by the choreographer Nicole Mossoux and the psychoanalyst Trees Traversier, this workshop for children with autism has shifted over time, through encounters with different care centres.

The team has grown but the concept has remained the same: a group of children or teenagers is invited to join Nicole Mossoux, Elodie Paternostre, Virginie Verdier and Fré Werbrouck on stage, while the psychoanalyst Trees Traversier ensures that the given setting is respected. However, this workshop does not have a therapeutic aim. Incidentally, art therapy is a term questioned by the psychoanalyst, Jean Florence,

who for a while was a part of the adventure by being present on stage just like the dancers. The group involves an encounter that gives children a better awareness of their bodies, whereby both well-being and sharing are key. Since 2008, children aged between 5 and 6 have come together at the Écuries de Charleroi from the CORTO Centre in Mont-sur-Marchienne. In addition, since last season, the Cultural Centre of Durbuy has been organising a workshop for teenagers. This includes a discussion with the facilitators, in the etymological sense of the word, who provide them with momentum.

### Early stages

**Nicole Mossoux:** Three encounters had occurred before this project. 20 years ago, I lived opposite "L'école du quotidien", which I didn't know was a centre for children with autism and psychosis, rather a sort of school of duties... Behind the large bay window, I had the impression that the children were making signs at me. Secondly, when stripped to the bare essentials, the vision of Thierry Knauff's and Olivier Smolders' short film "Seuls" (Alone, in English) seemed to go straight to the heart of these children's problem. Finally, I knew Trees, who had worked in Paris with teenagers and young adults in a protected workplace,

For the past 20 years, a group of children with autistic disorders have been experimenting with movement through games and music once a month on a Thursday in a dance studio. Meet the choreographer/dancer Nicole Mossoux and her accomplices.

Interviewed by Alexia Psarolis

the workshop to take place beyond the walls of the institution; this was an important prerequisite, with the search for pleasure, contact and body awareness as focal points.

**Trees Traversier:** The desire to do something for children with autism involving dance and music was inspired by two experiences. In around 1995, the mother of a 7-year-old girl with autism in therapy thought it such a shame that her daughter couldn't take part in a dance group anywhere. I was moved by this; I felt that dance and music could keep her instinctual outbursts at bay, which were otherwise difficult to manage. A choreographer and a musician helped me. The outbursts decreased; her instinctual impulse was contained by body language. It was this beautiful experience that I wanted to share with Nicole: to allow children who are frozen in their bodies to discover the pleasure of moving, especially children who aren't able to express themselves verbally.

The setting is important. Before getting up on stage, we form what we call the "lounge". Sat in a circle, we talk to each other, and above all, we talk to them ("Who's not here?" "Ahmed, you look a little sad today"), we take our shoes and coats off. The stage, which is well defined, is an area dedicated to dance, in the same way as for professionals. The activity itself lasts 40 minutes, then we get together in the "lounge" to talk with them. This talking time is really important.

**Jean Florence:** It is a play area for exploring. It has nothing to do with art therapy. Art therapy took off in the 70s in the US and Europe. Some countries included it in a higher education programme, but this wasn't the case in Belgium. Art therapy is a discipline that uses methods of expression through various art forms, in the context of care, psychiatric, educational or penitentiary centres. The aim is therapeutic, looking to maximise people's well-being.

**NM:** I came to recognise in autism something of this unsettling strangeness, which is pretty much the Company's (Mossoux-Bonté, editor's note) governing principle in terms of its research. But while we play freely with the question of strangeness and distress in our shows, for these children for whom limits are difficult, the relationship with the world is often painful, and the reality is totally different: there is a big step between allowing people to see and share our shows, and the blossoming of pleasure. There are, however, underlying links, and these children, free from all social contingency and given over to their extreme sensitivity, question our humanity, our potential to be in the world.

**JF:** There is a significant amount of decision-making in



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these children, for example accepting to hold our hand, making a circle, rolling around on the floor. Trees brings children back onto the stage when they leave; they have to stay within this dance area, while the support workers who accompany the children to the studio keep out of the way.

**TT:** From where I stand on the edge of the stage, I can feel the anxiety, I can see the despair, but I can also see the faces of happiness. It's all momentary. By stepping away from the game, the children can take a break from instinctual impulse, and find a kind of security. The distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' is very important. It separates the instinctual behaviour within, which is often difficult for them to manage, and the outside world which can be very worrying, and seem dangerous to them. For example, if we look at them too intently, this can be enough to distress the child.

**NM:** The Corto Centre in Mont-sur-Marchienne, which we work with, is perfectly in tune with our way of approaching relationships, and the team strongly supports the project. We feel like we are resisting behavioural "diktats" which try to put children on the straight and narrow. We need to consider children's distress and not try to bribe them with a reward if he/she is able to behave in a "normal" or "appropriate" manner.

sharing, pleasure, a sort of carefreeness...

### To touch and be touched

**NM:** We also aim to create relationships between the children, which doesn't come naturally to them; we get them to break out of their isolation by giving them the opportunity to enter someone else's space, even if this sometimes only lasts a few short seconds. This is why we want to work as a group and not with individuals.

**EP:** And we can very clearly feel when the encounter between ourselves and them has taken place.

**NM:** These children don't have an imitative instinct, which is why we must find other ways: contact, play, accompanying and supporting their movements, even if it involves us doing the imitating. However, some of the children have an incredible memory and can reproduce situations that we no longer think about months later.

**TT:** Sometimes a child comes up and touches me; Fatima comes and gives me a kiss and then immediately goes away. Tom comes over and bites me (to check I'm still alive?). All these fleeting gestures are necessary to them and show how instinctual behaviour can surprise them, how they seek to share, despite everything, to feel safe in their distress.

**JF:** The relationship with the body is considered to be dangerous and some places have psychoanalytical principles that restrict contact, while it is essential to not be scared of contact when dancing, to play with proximity and distance.

**TT:** Of course, we need to control our own

impulses, and not lose the child to these impulses, and instead look to create a non-verbal, hands-on connection that comes from them.

**EP:** Sometimes, there is eye contact, but this is rare; the children don't hold eye contact. Nevertheless, we manage to do things together without using our eyes or our speech.

**NM:** We don't have a clinical background of the children who attend the workshop, apart from certain medical recommendations. For example, cases of epilepsy requiring us to take certain precautions.

The support workers who come to the sessions are often amazed to discover new aspects to their behaviour, as the context reveals sides of these children that they do not express at the care centre.

**EP:** I think it's beautiful, everything that can happen in this precise moment with these children. It would appear that these children ignore social codes, that they don't use them to communicate; what connects us is sound, space, energy and the sense of touch: it is direct, natural, alive.

### Dancing with music

**NM:** The omnipresent music is above all a sign of the beginning and the end. Its role is to be the common denominator; it reaches all of us, both adults and children, even if it doesn't

...the same way...

**NM:** Each child has his/her own dynamics, whether shy or confident, and we are here to work in harmony with them.

**JF:** From time to time, we invite a group of musicians (Thomas Turine and his band), and it's mostly the children who take hold of the instruments; the drums are particularly popular!

### Development

**NM:** We often notice very significant developments. Over one year, one little girl was unable to leave her cuddly toys or objects behind, and stayed near the instructors in tears; and then, we saw her change, running around. Another little boy, over one year, stayed lying on his stomach in the same spot, then one day, he got up and cried out: "Come on, let's dance!", taking the dancer on the stage in his arms.

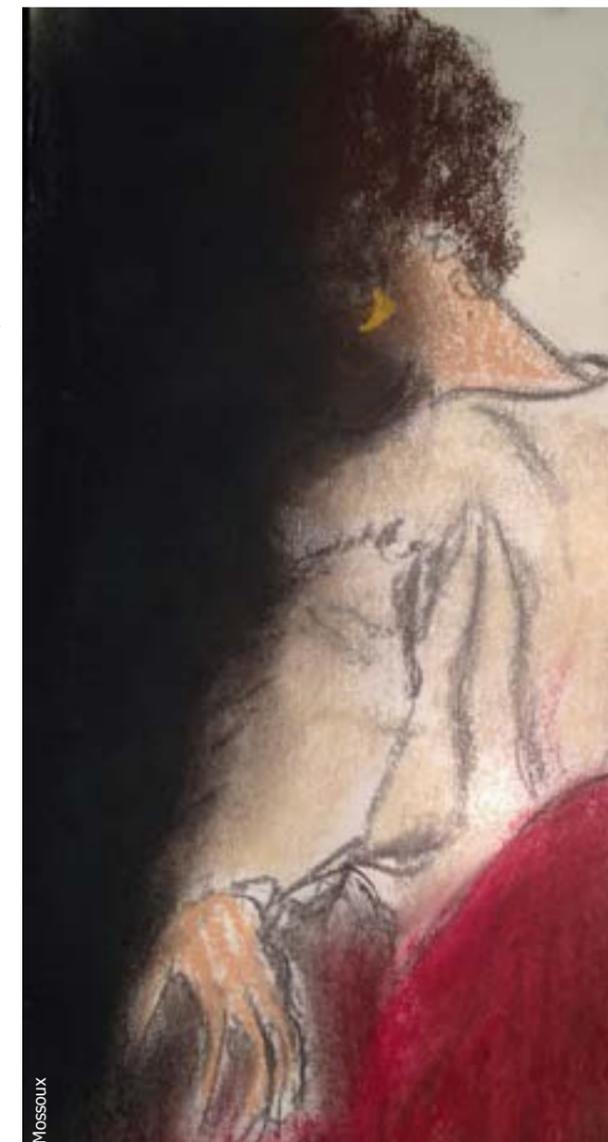
**JF:** We understand to what extent we are coded, without knowing it. In our conformist society, these children must look at us very strangely! Today, we tend to shape people into

**TT:** A child waving and cushioning an sitting. The around on joined me. we invest full-blown i desire.

**EP:** This w moment, ir is importan

**NM:** We v cannot and respect fc important t project ca parents an of such ir callings fc clinicians.

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