

It's simple. Move.

By Gina Renzi • November 14, 2007
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When you were a child, you probably skipped, jumped, and imagined. Now that you are grown, do you pause to pretend that you are a sunflower or a fire engine peeling away to a barn fire? Or do you shuffle sleepily from home to work to home, and, on occasion, a restaurant or theater? If the latter, creative movement will save your life as it will shake loose the ideas that are somewhere in your brain but never reach your tongue or pen. I am not talking about dance. We with no coordination and short legs can still explore our bodies, and not in the way that my 6th grade Health book suggested.

In my work, I witness and/or participate in hundreds of critical events, from ten year olds on African drums, to Central Asian throat singers on stage with Sun Ra members to HIV patients sharing a Thanksgiving meal. These events nourish me, despite the hours spent producing them. I cringe when I imagine living without this constant inspiration.

Recently, my mind was blown during a session of Collective Imprints, a new participatory community arts project at The Rotunda. This project, a first for Philadelphia, is the brainchild of artist Michael B. Schwartz, who has facilitated community-building projects elsewhere in the country. Last year, he approached me with the idea to create at The Rotunda a large art installation that will manifest The Rotunda's mission statement and concepts of community and place. We quickly shared this idea with dozens of diverse groups from the communities that have developed at the venue over the years.

In Collective Imprints, input is crucial and everyone gets to paint, draw, write, and speak. Inspired by this, West Philadelphia activist and artist Jodi Netzer became a facilitator of Collective Imprints and suggested that we use one session of this weekly project to MOVE in order to inspire ideas that we will eventually paint into the piece. While I pride myself on enjoying challenges, I hid from this idea. After all, I'd flunked Ballroom Dance in college. However, when she took us through an hour of movement exercises that were powerful examples of play at work, my mind was so enlivened that I developed a

pleasant headache. Instead of dance as so many of us know it, this was the building blocks of dancing, foundation of problem solving, and thought unhindered.

Jodi's exercises were inspired by Viewpoints, a system first articulated by Mary Overlie and expanded upon by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. Its principles are tempo, duration, repetition, kinesthetic response, shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography. Sounds scary, right? Each principle is so intuitive that we quickly adapted. Moreover, the shyest of us relaxed in that many of the exercises were done with eyes closed, as the goal is to invigorate one's own space.

Using each principle, we created gestures, mimicked those of the people around us, traced imaginary paths along the floor, bent our bodies into untested shapes, and used movement to act out the themes that we've been developing throughout Collective Imprints. All along, our movements were sharing stories that our words couldn't. Eventually, we formed smaller groups and chose themes such as West Philadelphia's origins, perceptions of the neighborhood, and local Hip Hop. Incorporating the Viewpoints principles, we created movement skits, each of which differed significantly from the last. In doing so, we taught and were taught.

After participating in this freely creative process, we hurriedly tapped our concepts for the artwork that we will eventually create in Collective Imprints. We were abuzz with newly found, or rediscovered, creativity that produced thoughts that we could not have had otherwise. Clearly, Viewpoints was a new concept to most of us, yet we found that it is an important one in that it unlocks forgotten parts of our imagination. The next time your idea well is dry, save your head from the wall, clear your living room or office floor, and, simply, move.

Gina Renzi is the Director of The Rotunda, a vibrant arts and culture community venue in West Philadelphia. The Rotunda is fueled by the belief that art is a catalyst for social change and the arts can lead to the formation of meaningful partnerships between the University of Pennsylvania and the surrounding communities. Over 300 events are presented annually, including live music, spoken word, theater, film, art, dance, and education.