

Together We Dance: A Community Dance & Film Project Using Zoom to Combat Social Isolation for Seniors During Covid-19

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Together We Dance is a collaborative dance film project between FORM Dance Projects and Creative Caring. As creative director of the project and the *Together We Dance* film, I met with approximately 20 dancers once a week for 10 weeks with the aim of dancing together and sharing movement explorations to create an online Zoom film. The sessions were split evenly into a) learning contemporary dance technique, and b) executing creative movement tasks. The latter being the method for generating movement material to be used in the film. The project was made possible through funding from the New South Wales Government to combat social isolation for seniors during Covid-19.¹ In this short viewpoint essay, I discuss what dance looks like during Covid-19 and how dance continues to thrive in an online digital format. I talk about the participants involved in the *Together We Dance* project, the creative process, the health benefits of dance for seniors, and where I draw my inspiration and ideas.

Inspired by Covid-19 and the necessity to remain safely indoors, there has been a generous boom in the production of screendance works. Many dance companies have spent hours rehearsing choreography specifically for the screen while other company dancers have filmed themselves doing repertoire in their homes and had this edited together. There've been works between dancers in different countries integrating text, animation, and innovative uses of a phone, laptop, or tablet device. From the minimal to the extreme, the genre has no boundaries when it comes to creative expression on how dance is captured and translated to screen.

In my work, I resonate with Maya Deren's cinematic approach, which represents a subjective reality from a female perspective. As Danielle Cofer states with reference to Deren's work in *Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History*, "With regard to space, the film depicts a woman whose subjectivity in domestic space is explored, foregrounding Deren's interests in feminism and politics via self-representation."² Inspired by Deren and French experimental essayist Agnès Varda, my



own screen works draw upon personal experiences to reflect a feminist subjective configuration of social and cultural constructs.

For *Together We Dance*, I used Miranda Tufnell's books *A Widening Field: Journeys in Body and Imagination*, and *Body, Space, Image*. Both were useful resources for using various materials and creative stimulus to generate improvised movement. I also looked at many dance films, the most inspiring one being *Phenom*, a Zoom music video clip by Thao & The Get Down Stay Down, and enjoyed revisiting Karen Pearlman's publication, *Cutting Rhythms, Intuitive Film Editing*, that I would recommend to anyone interested in editing movement sequences. Other artists whose work I've explored include: Maya Deren, Barbara Hammer, Pipilotti Rist, Tracey Moffatt, Miranda Pennell, Pier Pasolini, Agnés Varda, Sally Potter, and Darren Aronofsky.

Together We Dance Participants and Creative Process

Of all the 20 female dance participants, one third of them were familiar with the work I do and have been previous participants of my classes over the past two years since conducting seniors' classes through FORM Dance Projects. The other two thirds are from an existing group called Agile Not Fragile under the direction of Fiona James and Joe Ibbitson. I met with the *Together We Dance* participants once a week online via Zoom in the context of a contemporary dance class, after which we engaged in creative movement experiments with the intention of producing scenes and scenarios to be used for the dance film.

Most of the participants have had previous dance experience and have a clear understanding of movement practice. What was new to them in this project was the experimental nature of the creative tasks that had an equal chance of succeeding as well as failing. In all situations, the participants gave me their trust, confidence, and curiosity. Importantly, the senior dancers were forming new friendships through digital technology and a shared love of dance.

The participants were invited to film themselves on their devices. This solo material, which I titled "home alone," generated a series of poetic moments that revealed equal doses of vulnerability and power. The participants speak personally about their experiences throughout Covid-19 and how they feel the project has affected their mental, physical, and spiritual health during the time of the pandemic's strict lockdown. They later provided incredibly personal and insightful access to their inner worlds and how they were navigating this sensitive and sensory-deprived period. At an age where most of these women had children and grandchildren, being isolated and away from their families was a challenge. Most participants were unable to leave their homes and some, over eighty, were house-bound as they were most vulnerable to Covid-19. The regular weekly gathering with an invitation to dance and be creative became increasingly significant in their lives, and somewhat filled the void of human contact and touch forbidden at this time.



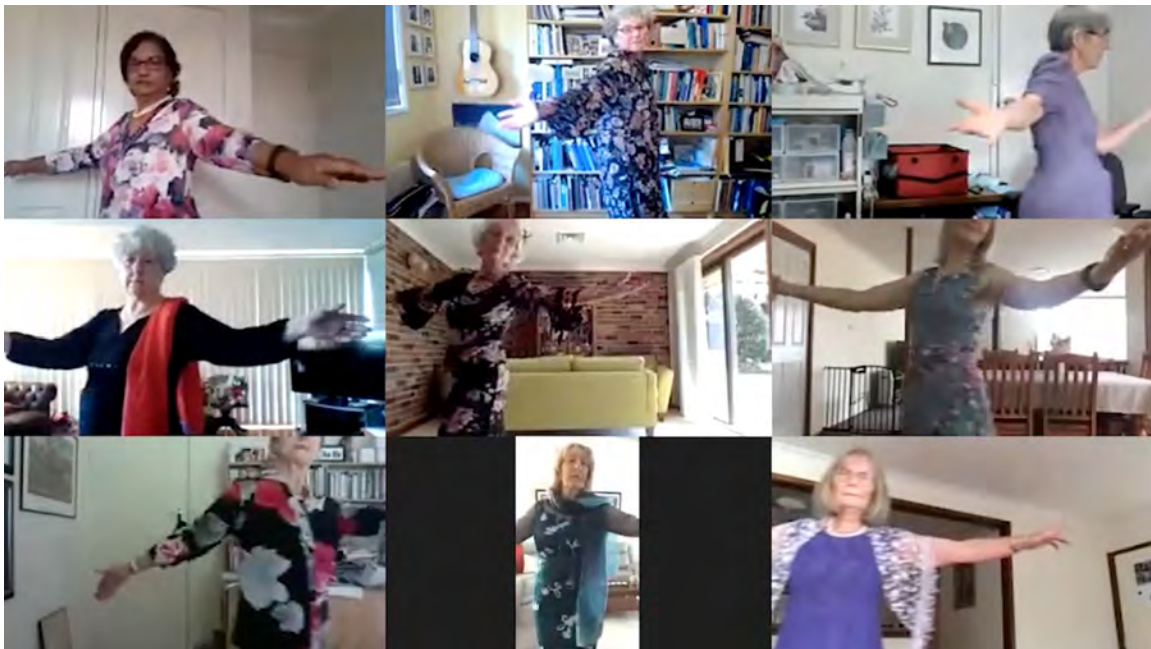
The dancers are having fun on our black themed session, singing along to AC/DC!

The creative objectives of *Together We Dance* were two-fold: creating group movement ideas and choreography specifically for the frame. Inspired by film director Mike Figgis, whose film *Timecode* (2000), brought choreography to the fore as the film is a totally improvised piece of cinema shot on a hand-held camera for 90 minutes in real-time. After participating in a workshop with Figgis in Amsterdam in the early 2000s, I was inspired to create my own split screen film, *Super Power* (2011), which screened in over ten international film festivals. My introduction to split screen, through Figgis, had taught me to consider my choreographic and editing options whilst filming, and to execute both roles, filming and editing, in consequence to each other. In this sense, editing becomes another choreographic device.

For the *Together We Dance* process, we needed to go with the flow and be open to whatever would happen during the one-and-a-half hours we met on Zoom each week. Some people experienced technical difficulties, or had a screen that always made them look like they were wearing blue no matter what color they had on. Patience and communication created an authentic flow between the group as we embraced all hiccups as possible creative devices. For example, we did a close-up facial exercise that was timed using a metronome, whereby there was a clear rhythmical cue when to conceal the face and when to reveal it. One person came out of sync and made a hysterically funny face while the others were concealed. I'm reminded here of the work of Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist whose playful approach to movement is often foregrounded in her early video works, in particular *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986). Other challenges were how best to communicate the tasks to a blind participant. I made sure I did a verbal description of all movements and kept checking in that my descriptions made sense. One participant did not have a camera so she was asked to

audio describe her movements when leading a group mirroring task. I've always believed that the participants will guide you toward being a better teacher if you listen to their needs. Challenges are opportunities to be more creative.

I introduced the idea of choreographing the frame to the participants and explained the three main shot sizes we'd be working with: wide, mid- and close-up. Choreography takes on a double meaning as one needs to compose the movement patterns with the forethought of how they will be edited together. This allowed me to creatively direct the project wearing not only my teacher and choreographer's hat, but also my filmmaker's hat ... a challenge I embraced with great enthusiasm. I was completely transparent about my ideas for the editing process and used myself as a practice tool to show them how I intended to film a scarf scene in slow motion, then have it sped up and reversed for the final film. I was able to share my screen and show them a previously filmed image of myself doing the sequence—sped up and reversed. My intention behind revealing stages of the creative process to the participants, allowed them to understand where we were going with the imagery we were creating, and how each image had the possibility of being manipulated.



This is the closing shot in Together We Dance.

We held 10 face-to-face Zoom meetings; each was guided by a different focus as we simultaneously created a color-coded storyboard. We innovated with words, colors, props, and frame size as stimulus for movement tasks. I knew from the outset that I wanted to create a contemporary environment which the participants inhabited, this entailed concocting scenes that were big and energetic as well as scenes that were intimate and gentle. I drew inspiration from dance books and isolated the hands to create a more intimate look at movement, then danced freely on numerous occasions

knowing that we were all doing this together in our private spaces. There was a strong sense of community and trust of free expression within the group. Exploration, experimentation, and play kept us together. During the week off, the participants were invited to send in a video of themselves dancing at home. The freedom and pure joy in these solo videos is astounding as they exude such confidence and grace in their authentic movement styles.

During the last few weeks, I integrated the use of break out rooms, which I found to be a productive tool for working with groups and film-choreographic arrangements and tasks. Each group of approximately 4-5 people was given a creative task with which to devise their own movements and then create a shared choreography within the group. Once that had been mutually established, they took turns at presenting it to the other groups. This process provided a safe setting for a performative aspect as well as social engagement.

The general tone of the project was committed, relaxed and light. The group was adventurous and trusted my experiments such as demonstrated by the short AC/DC inspired head banging moment during our black themed session. Overall, the participants felt safe to explore movement ideas outside their comfort zone. The atmosphere of nonjudgement encouraged uninhibited play.

Health Benefits of Dance for Seniors

There have been numerous scientific studies regarding health benefits of exercise in older adults. Those who participate in creative dance activities are actively improving their quality of life as they age.³

As part of my planning and weekly session structure, I incorporated the use of repeating movements that developed into choreographic patterns. Most combinations were rhythmically structured to a regular bpm (beats per minute) that, at times, was modified to accommodate the groups' comfort needs. My direct objectives for the dance and creative sessions were to use movement sequences to enhance balance, lower leg strength, cognitive processing speed and the ability to complete creative tasks within a short time frame. All of these objectives align with similar aims for people living with dementia and other cognitive disorders as well as being key components that support prevention of diseases relating to cognitive decline.

Findings from a recent study conducted in Canada during Covid-19 used dance interventions as a way to "facilitate embodied social connections among older adults."⁴ The results of this study concluded that "Overall, research results appear to support these claims; dance-based interventions have been shown to improve participants' quality of life, satisfaction with life (McNeely et al., 2015b), mood and depression (Crumbie et al., 2015; Hyvönen., 2020)."⁵ These qualities resonate strongly in the film, *Together We Dance*. In addition to these positive personal and social outcomes,

neurological benefits formed from creating and embellishing choreographic patterns is a great way to keep the mind engaged as new neurological patterns are being formed. The repetition of choreography from week to week also enhances memory capacity.

Overall health, both mental and physical, is enhanced through community projects such as *Together We Dance* that serve to reduce feelings of isolation and increase social support. During this unique period of Covid lockdown in Sydney, Australia, the participants needed to feel connected to like-minded people. Dancing together on zoom was the perfect medium to achieve that goal.

The group have since continued with another online dance course, without the outcome of a film. Friendships are being formed as we meet each other in our own homes every week. We often share news of our experiences with local topics such as floods, fires and at times, medical issues. Zoom has presented a successful medium to connect and sustain community communication through the love of dance.

Biography

Busuttill holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Dance from The University of Western Sydney. In 2000, she was awarded a DAAD scholarship to study at The International Women's University in Germany. She received scholarships from Film Victoria and the Ian Potter Cultural Trust Fund Award, Australia and had artistic residencies at fabrik Potsdam and PACT Zollverein in Germany. Her choreographic interest combines dance, performance and visual art in a collaborative mise-en-scène and most commonly deals with the visual representations of the female body. She uses these elements to create her visual stories, be they visual, narrative or a mixture of both.

As choreographer she has worked in theatre, opera, music, dance theatre as well as facilitating various self-devised youth projects. Her video dance works (screendance, experimental and narrative films) fit into various categories: queer, feminist and dance, and have screened at various International film festivals. In 2017 she made her first short, experimental, documentary film, *Without Consent* as part of a Master of Research Degree. *Without Consent* is a personal story about forced adoption in Australia circa 1950's that has screened in Australia and internationally to critical acclaim.

Other publications by Diane Busuttill can be found [here](#).

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Notes

¹<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/inclusion/seniors/overview/chapters/what-we-are-doing-under-the-strategy/combating-social-isolation/successful-grant-recipients>

² Cofer, "Deren, Maya (1917-1961)," 109.

³ See for example Gottlieb-Tanaka, "Creative Expression, Dementia and the Therapeutic Environment."

⁴ Hansen, Main, and Hartling, "Dance Intervention Affects Social Connections," 1.

⁵ Ibid. 3.

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