

## Dear Caroline...

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**Abstract:** On the quest of expanding one’s horizons, people frequently come across... the *Other*. Having hopes, dreams, plans, roots, and feelings of being de-rooting, everyone is capable of exerting an influence on who they interact with, and telling one’s story through art can, eventually, lead to a thorough, deeper mutual understanding. Although unsuccessful, the application process for the Caroline Plummer Fellowship in Community Dance set the cornerstone for a new field of interest, and also for a new type of approach towards the back-stage world of performing arts – the pedagogy. The following text aims to explain not only the quintipartite structure of the proposed program, the expected outcome, the intended work method and the possible anthropological analysis derived from it, but also the presumed reasons for the response received from the host institution and even details related to what can be the cause of the *Fascination of the Distance*, of what makes the freedoms of mobility and movement appealing from more than a socio-economical or a physical perspective.

**Keywords:** the Other; Caroline Plummer; fellowship.

Caroline Plummer left us at the mere age of 25, yet, her legacy lives on to this day, through the memorial fellowship in community dance that her family established, alongside the University of Otago, in 2004. She had a people-centred personality, therefore, self-understanding, the analysis of personal experiences, and learning to share them with the others (with the World, after all) need not be left aside when relating to her memory. This is the first moment when the concept of *the Other* comes into discussion in this case – a network of unfamiliar names becomes the foundation of a creative project focusing on the development of a wider group of people.

When I discovered the possibility of applying to the Caroline Plummer Fellowship, I realised that it would be a great opportunity to explore, alongside people my age, the relationship our generation has with the country where they were born, and also with the place they are

currently living in, as the environment and the ones we come across define our personality as much as our origin, profession, and hobbies do.

What is community dance? Although the name of this type of creative exposure might seem self-explanatory, it only partially is. Yes, it does mean that a professional in the field of performing arts (usually choreography) guides a group of amateurs towards a final artistic result, but the notion of community as a broader image implies adhering to and identifying with a context of the present times, and also with a series of *Others*<sup>1</sup>. This contact within the extensive limits of a pleasant activity that the entire group enjoys has the capacity of leading to mutual understanding, in the literal sense: various approaches, different word choices for the same ideas, and distinct manners of concept-context analysis must be translated for- and must accommodate the needs of the people forming the group, the community. Each of the participants filters the view of the others through their own philosophy on life, observing and, why not? implementing several of the newly discovered thought-habits into their own life. This way, community dance enables the existence of a manner of artistic back-stage practice rarely available to groups of professionals, who have the mutual language of identical or similar theoretical aspects: creation, implicitly movement derived from the organic communion with the other, “from an essential otherness”<sup>2</sup>.

However, one more question arises - why New Zealand? Why?! As the furthest place I can go to at the moment, professionally speaking, this country would have granted me not only the chance to come across my peers’ polar opposite (literally!) but also to challenge myself in regards to my relation with Romanian values, traditions, and ways of being, with everything that I call *familiar*. Facing the unknown and adhering to a community I would have been a stranger to, at least initially, my only resort would have been understanding the others, communicating inside the social groups encountered there and, eventually, altering, or, perhaps,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.communitydance.org.uk/DB/resources-3/what-is-community-dance> - Site dedicated to developing the knowledge in the field of community dance. The link provided here explains, in simple terms, the three major aspects of community dance – “sense of identity and belonging to a locality or cultural group”, “coming together with others”, and working alongside a professional.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Louppe, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, translated by Sally Gardner, Alton, Dance Books Ltd., 2010, p. 126. The author states the fact that movement “does not have its origin within the subject [...] but, on the contrary, comes from an essential otherness”, more visible, dare I say, in the practice of community dance than in the theoretically established professional choreography and elaboration of dance productions or experiments. Laurence Louppe consciously presents movement as an anthropological practice that aims, since the earliest times, to assure a thorough development to the people involved in it, to the members of the performing... community.

even reshaping my old self. Consequently, wanting to place myself in contexts beyond socio-economic migration, choosing to relocate (temporarily or not) for professional advancement highlighted the importance of having freedom of movement, freedom of choice in what concerns *the Other* we let us be influenced by, either by virtue of fascination, or out of intrinsic necessity.

The project I proposed for the 2023 Fellowship was divided in two major parts: a series of workshops accessible to anyone interested in exploring this side of themselves, and a dance piece where the exercises from the workshops would have been placed in a cursive context, within a storyline.

Starting from a series of questions (What does New Zealand mean to you? What is the image, landscape, or the sound/word/taste/smell (etc.) that defines it? What did New Zealand take from you? What did it give to you?), we would have created a factual, yet subjective, image of the place the participants live in now. If New Zealand were a person, what would they look like, what would their distinctive features be? If this person were to give you a gift, what would that gift be? If this person were to steal something from you, what would that thing be?, thus creating not only an image that can be turned into movement, but also forming a clearer definition of the relationship the participants have with the surroundings.

Below, I will detail the general aspects of each of the steps, following their chronological order:

The first stage of the workshops and the rehearsals for the performance consisted of tasks centred around extracting an idea from a written text and, eventually, from a spoken one - what does the text say?, what do I want to choose from this text, and why?, if it is an image – how does it look?, if it is a concept – how does it make me feel? These applications will then be repeated on a text that will not have a written support – the story of what New Zealand means for the participants. By the beginning of the second stage, all of the participants would have been able to extract an idea from a written text or a vocally-presented speech, but now, how can this be turned into movement? – by extracting the visual essence of it and creating a context for the bodies to freely move in: how does it look? – represent it, using its shape, in the beginning; is it static or does it move? – if it moves, represent its movement; is it big/ is it small? – how would it move if it were smaller/bigger?; is it loud or quiet/fast or slow? etc. The third part of the series of exercises was focused on playing with masks and using certain other objects as if they were something completely different and it had the purpose of stimulating the imagination of the participants, in order for them to be able to make use of the

environment and surroundings when working on the storytelling tasks. Once the participants would have become aware that no idea is wrong, nor “crazy”, but it simply reflects the world as they see it, they would have been able to dive into their imagination without taking any possible barriers into account. From that moment onwards, the entire team was to start working on the way in which we could tell stories. The participants in the workshops were to create the narrative that would have been the basis of their future activities. Using the tasks from the previous parts of the project, the story would have become movement and I would have guided the performers, in order for them to not lose touch with their initial idea. Each of them would have had the chance to choose a song that either reminds them of their place of origin, or depicts their relationship with New Zealand or with an experience that they inherently associate with that place, this way creating a sense of authorship<sup>3</sup> for each of them, and also encouraging an anthropological take on their relationships with their roots or feeling of “de-rooting”.

After the series of workshops, the participants in the dance piece would have begun the actual rehearsals for the final stage of the project. The last part of the Fellowship was, thus, focused on building and stabilising the dance production. As the final performance would have been separated into solo acts, but also duo, trio, and group scenes (the number of each type of act depending on the stories that would have been portrayed), the unity of the entire choreography would have been created by ordering the movement pieces chronologically, based on when they took place in the lives of the group of performers. The transition between the scenes would have, then, been based not only on temporal logic, but also on spoken-word parts or non-movement scenes derived from and inspired by what would have happened during the rehearsal period - memories of their childhood, shared with the entire creative team, the story of how they felt when they had to move to New Zealand, a description of the place where they felt or still feel most like home, a poem... At the end of the production, for the purpose of creating a sense of community that also embraced the audience, the performers would have asked members of the public the previously mentioned series

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Flatt, *Choreography. Creating and Developing Dance for Performance*, Ramsbury, The Crowood Press, 2019. As a glossary of terms related to not only choreography, but also to performance practice in general, the previously mentioned book explains and allows the reader to understand vital aspects of the creative process: “Be open to finding a meaningful connection between yourself and the dance material that is emerging.” (p. 31) This is what I intended to ignite in the team I was going to work with – the personal link created between the performer and the story with the help of this sense of authorship would have allowed all of us to have an intimate relationship with the outcome of our work.

of questions related to New Zealand. Using the exercises from the workshops, they would have enacted that, as movement, also allowing and even engaging the spectator in this.

From an anthropological perspective, the project would have been constructive for the participants by presenting them with the variety of backgrounds of the team members, allowing the performers to understand *the Other's* cultures not only from their own perspective, but also from the series of interactions they would have had with one another, from the points of view of their peers. The relationships between different upbringings, the similarities between cultures thought to have been radically different, and the realisation that communities are formed not only on the basis of mutual points, but also on aspects that are opposite will also benefit them, by solidifying the foundation of mutual understanding and inclusion. In addition to this, the anthropological viewpoint would have given the group of participants the chance to observe how the originary environment affects one's relation with movement, rhythm, and sound, by cooperating towards a mutual goal with people from different countries and cultures<sup>4</sup>.

From a perspective opposite of what I had previously focused on professionally, the proposed project had a strong pedagogical side, rooted in the improvisation exercises proposed by Viola Spolin. Accessible to both professionals and amateurs, these "games" would have also enabled me to explore an aspect of directing praxis that I was not yet very familiar with - didactic explanation, aimed at a group foreign to specialised terminology and theatre jargon. The challenge imposed by this would have implied the development of a new vocabulary, not necessarily a written or a spoken one, but non-verbal, universal, or at least specifically designed for the newly-formed community<sup>5</sup>. Pedagogy as a form of communication, not only as a means of teaching and explaining, as a form of connecting the members of a

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<sup>4</sup> In conformity with the Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance, anthropology, in theatre, has the purpose of "linking performance with other aspects of human behaviour like ritual and play", resulting in "intercultural performances", therefore, inherently, in a direct communication between the cultural backgrounds of the parties involved in the creative process. Allain, Paul, Harvie, Jen, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, Second Edition, London and New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, p. 253.

<sup>5</sup> Viola Spolin emphasises the necessity of developing healthy relationships within a group working towards an artistic result: the "Seven Aspects of Spontaneity" subchapter stands as the fundament for my ideas of correlating the team members through both the work approach and the pedagogical interpretation of the games used in the method, given the "number of individuals working interdependently [and, yet, collaborating, may I add] to complete a given project". Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre. Handbook for Teaching and Directing Techniques*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1963, p. 9.

heterogeneous group, of creating mutual (although, temporary) roots. This, alongside the influence the original place has on one's movement were supposed to cultivate a coherence within the team participating in the workshop series, diminishing the distance between the individualities, the *Others* involved in the creative research process.

The outdoors, the relationship one has with nature, using art as a form of self-expression and catharsis, enhancing the distinctive and exceptional aspects of every given moment were elements that defined Caroline Plummer, alongside her unchangeable desire to bridge communities through exchanging creative ideas and approaches and learning from one another. Her principles and values would have been incorporated in this dance project by forming bonds between students from different cultures and allowing them to be the storytellers and to clarify their relation with their space of origin, with the civilizations they grew up in, and also with the place where they are now. Furthermore, the manner in which the proposed project was constructed would have supported the participants to become creators, to learn how to build and use metaphors, and how to understand themselves better, while giving them the chance to play the part of the architect of their own storytelling.

Unfortunately, the board did not agree with me in this regard. Or, perhaps, the cause of the rejection was my not-yet-appealing portfolio? Or could it have been the fact that the distance between where I live and work, the place that has influenced me most, and New Zealand, its communities and its typical aspects, made it too difficult for me to be able to relate to it at the moment, to understand it, and to be able to propose a project that would have been truly relevant to the people involved in it? Regardless of the reason, the experience of writing a project proposal, maintaining a constant and unitary approach to the selection of activities that I wanted to do while being there, and, most importantly, admitting that *trying* to get selected for this Fellowship was, at this stage of my career and professional evolution, more valuable than *actually being chosen* by the committee stood as cornerstones in the process of me learning about these types of processes and opportunities.

As most of this text was based on questions meant to generate an exposure of thoughts, I will ask (myself) one more, thus stating my conclusion: Would I try again? Most definitely. However, not right now. The respect I have towards New Zealand, as a symbol of *the Other*, of the opposite capable of teaching me the importance of sharing, of guiding, of authorship, and of the perseverance to pursue a trial-and-error kind of professional development once again does not allow me to

present the same self I did this year. I still have closer vicinities to explore, more familiar *Others* to encounter and to let my-self be fascinated and altered by before I can try to reach the so-called Edge of the World again on my quest to expand my horizons and find people I can be mirrored by.

(Translated by Dana Bădulescu)

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