



Charlie Blowers



Jose Parra

## An Interview with Charlie Blowers

By Nancy Eichhorn

**O**ur bodies reveal our unexpressed stories through facial expressions and gestures, through patterned holdings and chronic pains, through gentle nuances and subtleties of movement occurring without conscious thought. To hear the body, one must speak its language. One must understand its consciousness to engage and encourage it to speak without fear and physiological response. Yet, the human body is often bound and gagged. It's only form of expression is to use words for experiences that have no accurate semantic discourse and in the end belies the truer narrative of sensation and impulse.

*So, then, how do you support a client's body to both speak aloud and feel heard?*

**One way, according to Charlie Blowers**, founder of Moving Pieces, is to integrate physical theater with arts psychotherapy, creative writing, and body skills designed to stabilize the nervous system. The therapeutic model for Moving Pieces is informed by the theoretical underpinnings of our social engagement system (Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory), movement oriented trauma work (Bessel van der Kolk's work with trauma and yoga), titration and response completion (Pat Ogden's Sensorimotor Psychotherapy), and Bodydynamic Analysis with a focus on both hyper and hypo-nervous system responses to stress (Merete Holm Brantjberg's work in Denmark) as well as other body-based work. An

impressive foundation erected from an inherent need to know. As Blowers shared during a recent SKYPE interview from her home in Central London, UK

**Blowers trained as an arts psychotherapist** 20 years ago. She loved the work yet felt something was missing from the model—the body. Her involvement in theater arts and performance guided her to Physical Theater where she discovered and devised ways to connect with sensation and impulse in the body, and to notice and release patterns of tension in the body. During training groups, she noticed the therapeutic potential in Physical Theater work, particularly preparatory work involving grounding,

centering, finding space in the body, as well as the potential of this practice to regulate the nervous system. “As a performer myself, I also feel there is healing potential in performance for both the performer and those witnessing,” she said. This experiential work in physical theater and exploration of body based psychotherapy served as a launch point for further research and development of the Moving Pieces therapeutic model.

**One main thread of thinking** guiding Blowers’ work was her primary question: ““How can I combine components to support a healing process that will involve both image and action-based methods with ways of self-regulating at the same time?”

**Blowers knew** some of the potential hazards in arts-based therapeutic work such as patients getting to unconscious material too quickly before they had a chance to digest it, to be with it. She wanted to support people to learn how to regulate their nervous system, and then use this self-regulation within a safe space to go deeper, to dive into unconsciousness, into implicit memory held via the imagination and bodily sensations.

**“At theater school,”** Blowers said, “you do so much with the body and imagination that people can fall into crisis; and, vice a versa, just doing body-based work you are not exploring imagination and metaphor. There is such rich material in there, but how do you put it together with safety

mechanisms—ways to put on the brakes—alongside deep exploration?”

**“Dysregulation occurs in the body,** in the nervous system, as a result of traumatic experiences,” Blowers continued. “I have attended trainings connected to the Trauma Centre in Boston with Bessel van der Kolk and his team (Heather Mason, The Minded Institute) and learned how central nervous system regulation is essential to resolve these traumatic experiences and effectively use other therapeutic supports.”

**“Physical Theater helps you to** connect deeply to the body, to detect and respond to sensations and impulses in the body. In line with Bessel’s yoga work experiences, Physical Theater offers ways to tolerate sensations and integrate them. The movement is present, here and now, bringing muscles to a more neutral place so the body is energetically more available and able to balance the nervous system. Simultaneously as muscles become more neutral, memories, sensations and impulses previously held in muscle responses begin to circulate.” Blowers said.

**A key component** of the Moving Pieces model is to connect to these bodily sensations and use them as the basis for creating a story; a narrative which can be shared initially, metaphorically, and then as more direct resonances to life experience, as those experiences move into a more conscious awareness. This process of creating and sharing stories offers a bridge between how implicit

memory is held in the body and how explicit memory, (thoughts, memories and feelings) can be articulated through language.

**We are interested in** working with both hyper arousal (sympathetic activation) and hypo arousal (parasympathetic activation) in the musculature and nervous system as responses to stress, and how these responses are reflected in the body, in stories, and in our relating with each other.

### **The Main Components of Moving Pieces**

#### **Structure**

**Moving Pieces is designed** for groups of 12 to 16 people. Courses are structured over 8-weekly sessions or longer, week-long courses, and weekends. Participants meet in a refurbished Victorian school building, a dance/theater studio sense with open space and harlequin flooring.

**Blowers works with a wide** range of mental health challenges as well as therapists and performers interested in devising work from a more personal point of view. There is also a non-theatrical off-shoot of Moving Pieces designed for one-to-one work or smaller groups, working with specific challenges such as anxiety, depression, PTSD. These structured courses offer body based strategies to rebalance the nervous system with facilitated group process. Modules can also be custom made for specific needs such as conferences and training programs.

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## Assessment

**Regardless of the group size** or focus, an initial in-depth, assessment is always conducted. Blowers and her co-facilitator, Jose Parra, screen participants to determine what they are interested in, why they are coming, and what mental health and physical challenges are present. This information guides the status of the work as they begin to teach/guide participants how to focus on regulating the body. Different movement exercises are used, which are “not too dry,” and are embedded in theatrical and body based work, such as grounding, centering and lifting/ lowering the nervous system.

## Social Engagement / Regulation

**An early goal is to create** the experience of feeling connected with the group dynamic. One exercise comes from a circus skill that involves balancing a peacock feather on the palm of your hand. The process generally makes people laugh as they try something totally outside of their regular experience, Blowers said. Imagine 16 overly large feathers drifting about until the participants learn to keep the feather straight when they release it with the steady hand and keep their focus on the eye of the feather. Once the skill is mastered, participants are directed to engage with others, a dance of sort results as they begin to feel safe within this fun and playful contact. During this playful interlude, executive functioning activities are occurring (prefrontal

cortex activation), proprioceptive awareness, self-regulation, and social engagement, without participants even being aware of it.

## Connection to Implicit Memory

**As a sense of community** and safety evolves, Blowers and Parra begin to use further exercises that combine self-regulation and body awareness. Movements become subtle, connected closely to sensations and impulses in the body. Participants learn how to do a body scan—to notice different sensations and the impulses that naturally arise in the body.

**“Implicit memory is stored** in the limbic system. The body scan supports people becoming aware of and tolerating different sensations in the body. We then directly convert sensation and impulse into imagery by spontaneously going into creating masks and/or writing a story, either a legend or a fairy tale. We stay with metaphor, with figurative language within the narrative, and this becomes a launch point for people to begin deeper work,” Blowers said.

## Enactment

**“During our last open group** participants created masks and then had the opportunity to do a writing improvisation from the point of view of the mask. They later stepped into their stories giving focus to the most charged part of the story—the part that they were most attracted to or repelled by. We trust the psyche

and where it is drawn. With

support from the group, participants were able to enact charged parts of their story, rehearse alternatives and complete actions that may be habitually stuck. We also invited participants to look for polarities in the story and a potential dialogue that may exist between them. This exploration is deepened by creating masks for each of the polarities and embodying them; finding the masks within the masks. These kinds of activities gradually support a more conscious awareness of and integration of conflicting aspects of experience,” Blowers said.

**During the workshop,** Blowers said that participants organically arrive at comments such as, “Ah this reminds me of something in my life,” or “this reminds me of something I’m confronting in my life,” and “I couldn’t get it in therapy but this is what’s going on.”



Balancing a peacock feather

## Assimilation

**“There is an organic moving out** of metaphor into a more direct experience as the group process develops. Participants are supported when they do make personal, more literal connections, but there is no pressure to pace with what others are doing,” Blowers said.

## Closure

**Much time is devoted** to reflection at the end, which varies depending on the group that we are working with. One option offered is for participants to use the raw material from their process of exploration and create an improvised presentation to the group. This can range from creating an installation of the work they have generated to devising a theatrical presentation based on the life of their masks, written stories and installations of the landscapes their stories are held in. As part of closing, participants can also relate to installations of their work and make decisions about what they want to take away with them and what they may wish to leave behind.” Blowers said.

## Continued Growth

Moving Pieces has been up and running for three years. The research phase took about five years as Blowers explored and experienced possible components. The process has been and continues to be revised. Blowers explained that after each workshop, she and Parra review feedback from participants as well as their own observations. Their goal is to integrate what they are

learning to fine tune the process and support its fluidity and flexibility.

**“One thing we learned** while working with open groups with a more normalized neurotic sense such as therapists and performers is to resist reflecting in a thought-based way too early on,” Blowers said. We invite participants to allow themselves to get lost; to discover new territory. Participants who are not used to noticing and connecting to sensations may not recognize where they are going at times but are invited to tolerate that just enough to experience some new ground and move a bit further along in their journey.”

**“It is quite a different journey,** and people often leave with clear insight about their lives. One participant said that she had never felt her nervous system regulated before; she didn’t know what it was like to feel regulated in her body, to digest what was happening in the body at the limbic level.

For others, as with other constellation-based work, the process continues on beyond the end of the course, as insights gradually filter down into a more conscious awareness,” Blowers said.

**Charlie Blowers** trained at I.A.T.E. in 1992 and is a UKCP registered psychotherapist and clinical supervisor with 18 years experience of working with individuals with emotional and behavioral difficulties in the UK and US. Since 2009, she has worked in collaboration with the London International School of Performing Arts developing the Integral Theatre Pedagogy aspect of the school.

**Jose Parra** studied mime and physical theater at Desmond Jones and the International School of Corporeal Mime. He has devised performances for adults and children for the street and stage in UK, Spain, France, Norway, Kuwait, and Jordan. He also works for the Theodora Children’s Trust as a clown doctor in hospitals in the UK.



Participants at a Moving Pieces workshop