

Wellbeing Writing with Taira Foo and Terry Hyde



Taira Foo is a Choreographer known for her rapid-fire, high-energy choreography, delivering powerful emotional performances.

Terry Hyde is a Registered Member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (MBACP), and former dancer.

S I C K follows one man's struggle against depression. Told through contemporary & street dance influences and a slick use of props, this brand-new work from Taira Foo Dance Company will take you on an emotional journey.

CAN YOU BOTH TELL US WHY YOU CAME TOGETHER TO CREATE S I C K?

Taira: The work is about one man's struggle against a mental health condition. We are raising awareness around mental health by creating and producing the show. It is very important to me that I communicate our message as authentically and truthfully as possible. This means that the artists themselves also need to portray their characters with as much understanding of the subject matter as possible.

I wanted to bring an expert in to help all involved gain a deeper understanding of the topic. I immediately thought of Terry Hyde. His expertise and experience in this field could help us understand key aspects of mental health and enable us to give authentic performances.

Terry also has an extensive performing arts background which I feel could really help the dancers relate to.

Terry: I was very pleased to have been asked by Taira to work on her project S I C K as a mental health advisor. We had met about three years previously when Taira interviewed me for her blog, so I must have made some sort of an impression! The brief for my work on S I C K was twofold. Firstly, to present a couple of workshops explaining to the dancers about the different mental health disorders. And the signs and symptoms from the perspective of the individual experiencing the issue, and how it appears to those around them.

Taira: As well as artistically helping, I also wanted to create an environment in the studio that would facilitate the artists' general wellbeing. Just before rehearsal, the government announced its third national lockdown. Fortunately, we were still allowed to rehearse under guidelines, however, COVID has had an effect on us all and I felt that we needed someone like Terry to give us tools and techniques to help us get back into working in a rehearsal environment. I believe that we have all been affected in some way by COVID. For me having worked remotely for such a long time I was extremely anxious about getting back into the studio, some of the dancers also expressed their concerns about returning to rehearsals at such an uncertain time.

Bringing Terry in gave the cast not only the knowledge, tools and techniques to create an enjoyable working environment, it also allowed time for the artists to have 1-1 sessions during the rehearsal process, which I think is an invaluable space to help the artists address or identify any difficulties they may be experiencing.

I think having someone like Terry as part of the rehearsal process has shown how effective and important his role is. There are so many demands on performers not only physically but mentally and having an expert involved could make all the difference in creating a positive working experience for the artists.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT SEEING THE S I C K PROJECT WILL DO FOR AUDIENCE MEMBERS?

Taira: The whole purpose of writing S I C K was to help people that may be experiencing mental health conditions. I want to help those that are struggling and show that there is help out there. As with all my work, I wanted to create an emotional experience for the audience, to help them connect and gain a better understanding the nature of the beast. I want to take them through the dark but also show that the light can get it in, even in the darkest moments. I wanted the work to help people begin those difficult conversations that they have perhaps found hard to begin. I remember after the first sharing of this work, I came out into the auditorium and there were already people talking about their experience of poor mental health and how it has affected them, this was precisely the reason for me to create the work.

I also wanted to highlight the difficulties for the support networks of those that are suffering and help others to understand the toll it takes on loved ones.

An important aspect is that the work is accessible to all. I want people from all backgrounds and communities to be able to access the work. I want to create outreach programmes wherever the work goes, designing creative and positive experiences in local areas, schools, colleges and universities.

Practical elements in the piece have been put in place including signposting towards mental health charities. Terry and I have also talked about a Q&A at the end of the piece, with audience members being invited to ask any questions that could help them or someone they know.

I have always said if we are to make a difference to one person's life then it has all been worth it.

Terry: From my work as a therapist, I am really pleased to see Taira addressing this difficult subject. The challenge with mental health is that, unlike a physical illness or injury, no one can see the problem. From the inside the person who is affected struggles to deal with their everyday life, from the outside this person may be seen as being difficult, lazy or unreliable. Mental health issues have physical effects and Taira has done an excellent job of creating a powerful visual expression of this.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO SEE CHANGE IN DANCE SETTINGS AS A RESULT OF WHAT YOU'VE LEARNT FROM WORKING TOGETHER?

Taira: I believe that having someone like Terry as part of a company can only be a positive move forward. Artists have so much to deal with during their career, we live our lives from job to job, never really knowing when the next will come from. We dedicate our lives to our craft and can often go long periods without work. When we do get work it's always very intense, so much information needs to be taken over a short period of time and we can become overwhelmed. To have someone to talk to and share how we are feeling could make all the difference. Even though most companies are supportive and nurturing, to be able to speak to someone in confidence is a powerful action.

I think there are a lot more companies that are using well-being as part of their practice and I think that's wonderful. During our rehearsals of S I C K, we started off the day with a meditation and a check-in to gauge how we are all feeling. Not only did this help us connect, create and build trust, it also helped us find that necessary space at the beginning of a day so that we could then take the information on in a calm and balanced way.

The meditations and check-in as part of the rehearsal process have been a valuable experience and one that I would like to maintain within my rehearsals.

Terry: What I would like to see change in dance settings as a result of what I learnt from working with Taira is greater use of the simple exercises I taught the dancers in this project. The check-in and meditation as an integral part of each day for dancers on all levels are simple but very powerful exercises. As Taira mentioned it benefited the members of the company in an individual and collaborative way. Can you imagine how different the world of dance could be if this practice was adopted more widely?

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM EACH OTHER? WHAT WERE THE MOST BENEFICIAL PARTS OF YOUR PARTNERSHIP WITH EACH OTHER?

Taira: I started to see things from a different perspective while working with Terry. His vast knowledge and experience of working with dancers was very evident during this process and he delivered the sessions with a deep understanding of what the artists needed.

We spoke about hypersensitivity in people, something I have been very curious about (HSP) the highly sensitive person. I think many artists are highly sensitive, meaning they feel things more deeply, which makes total sense. We are very in touch with our emotions, we have to be, as we need to access them when needed when we are performing/rehearsing but I have always wondered about the difficulty of being able to switch these emotions off easily. When someone is highly sensitive it's very difficult to do this and most performers are highly sensitive, so when we are rehearsing we take things in deeply, overthink, and over-analyse. We do this to try to understand actions, why things are said, and why were they said in that way. You can have all of these things going on in your head in the space of a minute, so learning how to switch this off could be key for a lot of performers who may struggle with being a HSP.

Being highly sensitive is also a beautiful gift that allows us to really be in that state, portray that emotion, feel that piece of music, take us into another world which in turn will allow the audience to transcend into that world we create. Before I knew about being highly sensitive, I used to struggle to understand why I felt things so deeply. I would be exhausted emotionally, overthinking, over analysing. Now, because I understand why this is happening it makes it so much easier for me to deal with. I think this understanding was a great piece of information to share with the artists. It was enlightening and very beneficial to the artists. Hopefully, it helped them as it has helped me. It was definitely a light bulb moment.

I believe the work with Terry not only helped the cast artistically, but it also gave them tools and techniques they could then use in the future and apply not only to their work but every part of their life. The ripple effect of having this knowledge is also something that not only benefits the individual but those they teach and work with, as well as their friends and family, and this is very powerful.

I have a lot of energy and I often think about the next thing before I have finished on a previous task. The grounding really helped me to connect and helped to settle my overstimulated brain. I know that the other artists felt the meditation was also beneficial to their practice, it was a space that was created and made for every individual, it was their time. As well as creating a much-needed space in the mind, it also helped us to connect as a group. Terry suggested that we check in with each other every day, this was also a great tool for connecting, building trust and bonding as a group. As we are dancers, I thought we could tell those around us how we were feeling through movement. I can see the benefit of a check-in but felt to begin with the dancers would find it easier to talk through movement. This also tapped into the creative aspect of a rehearsal and helped to open that pathway too.

Terry: I would say that I have learned that I really need to keep sharing information about the trait of being a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) with dancers. I am really pleased to see that Taira and the dancers have benefited from learning about what being highly sensitive means. It was quite a revelation to me when I first learned about it. I regularly mention it to my clients and discuss in my workshops. Hearing Taira discuss this has made me realise how important this information is and what a difference understanding why we react the way we do because of it.

HOW DID TERRY BEING A PART OF REHEARSALS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE DANCERS AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS?

Taira: Through the sessions, Terry gave us a basic understanding of the mind and why it works in the way it does. This gave us a deeper understanding of why we react to situations

the way we do, therefore helping us to understand why the characters were functioning the way they were. It also helped the artist to make better-informed decisions within the narrative. A deeper understanding of actions helped give a more authentic performance of the work.

Something that is very important throughout my work is the artist is portraying as honestly and deeply as possible while staying safe within their own well-being.

Because mental health is such a difficult, complex and sensitive area to approach I wanted to also make sure that the artists were protected. By this I mean I didn't want to trigger anything they didn't want to access during the rehearsal time. Terry was able to help with this and keep the rehearsal a safe working environment through his sessions.

Terry also offered a 1-1 service for anyone that wanted to talk to him throughout the rehearsal period. Just knowing that this resource was there for the artists immediately created a safe space which is what we needed in order to create this emotionally driven piece.

Terry: As Taira has explained, my role in the rehearsals served several purposes. The first was to give the dancers an insight into how the mind works, and typical reactions to certain painful feelings or states of mind. This was done through a series of workshops before and during the project. This gave the dancers a greater insight into how they could bring this into their work as performers within this project. The second aspect of my work was to provide a resource for any of the dancers who felt they needed additional support because of issues related to their own mental health that arose from working on the emotional aspects of S I C K.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS IN THE PROCESS WITH S I C K?

Taira: I have just completed the third phase of R&D supported by The Arts Council England. The purpose of this phase was to build on the narrative and make sure the piece was working in the best possible way for its audiences. I wanted to create a prologue, giving more insight into the protagonist's challenges, so that his actions are clearer. It is important to me that audiences are able to follow the work, I believe this will increase their connection to the message and story, evoking an emotional experience.

Having done this work the piece now runs at an hour, making it a full show ready to be received.

I also had the props designed by the brilliant Ian Westbrook of 3D creations who has done a wonderful job. They are now all professionally designed and made.

I am working with a fantastic production company Scissor Kick to create a UK tour. I want to tour to theatres in and around the UK, this is now the main focus for S I C K and my dance company (Taira Foo Dance Company). Throughout the tour, we want to create outreach programmes in schools, colleges, universities and local communities. The outreach programmes will create a safe space to use movement as a pathway to promoting well-being. I want to build on our existing charity partners to share the work amongst their members. I am hoping eventually to co-create programmes with our partnering charities to help reach their service users through a creative approach. I believe movement and creativity are key to building a more positive outlook while connecting and building trust in a safe space.

I am very driven by this new work reaching its audiences at such an important time and look forward to the moment we can share our story.

WHERE CAN PEOPLE GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT BOTH OF YOUR WORK, AND THE S I C K PROJECT?

Taira Foo

www.tairafoo.com

https://www.instagram.com/tairafoo_dance_co/

https://www.instagram.com/taira_foo/

<https://www.facebook.com/taira.foo>

<https://www.facebook.com/tairafoodanceco>

Terry Hyde

www.counsellingfordancers.com

IG and FB – @counsellingfordancers

Twitter – @counselingdance

Scissor Kick

<https://scissorkick.co.uk>

social media handles: @scissorkickco