

Danse mes playfellows – exploring French through musical theatre

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KEYWORDS

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Outdoor space

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ABSTRACT

Outside. A group of Playful Learning delegates gather. The task is to devise a short piece of movement to the song Les sans papiers from the musical Notre Dame de Paris. Three groups engage with their local environment to influence their storytelling. Their reflections, together with interjections from the session facilitator, offer an insight into their process of using musical theatre to explore the French language.

Overture

Outside. The sun shines (phew!) as the full cast congregates on an empty patch of grass. On the floor is a small black boom box, inside which the Paris cast recording of Notre Dame de Paris awaits. Besides the boom box is a scattering of papers including a lyrics sheet, a music score and print outs of QR codes. These QR codes lead to YouTube videos of Les sans papiers performed by the original Paris cast, the English version of the song (titled The refugees), and a video of the dance created by doctoral project participants that was shared on Instagram.

Laura:

Facing the group, I smiled as I confessed that I had – intentionally – *not* planned exactly how the conference session would unfold. Instead, the delegates would be free to co-construct a dramatic world (Bowell & Heap, 2001, cited in Piazzoli, 2012, p.28) with me to explore, in whichever way they wished, the musical number *Les sans papiers* from the Québécois musical *Notre Dame de Paris* by Luc Plamondon and Richard Cocciante. Giving delegates agency in how to engage with the content of the session mirrored the process applied to my recent doctoral research project.

My doctoral research is on the application of playful learning in higher education, with a focus on the student perspective of learning French through musical theatre. The project ran in two phases: phase one comprised a series of six workshops where two participants chose to devise choreography to *Les sans papiers* and learn the songs *Les sans papiers*, *Belle* and *Le temps des cathédrales*; phase two comprised a single half-day workshop with four participants working through choreography to and singing of *Les sans papiers*, thus repeating the content from phase one to allow for comparisons during data analysis. Participants were then invited to interview to reflect on their experiences of the workshop(s). Bringing my doctoral work to a conference for the first time, I wanted to rely on the familiar (Davis, 2009) by using *Les sans papiers* in the session. This was in order to calm my nerves and increase the possibility that I would be able to respond to any queries about the language, music and story within the song.

During the conference session, delegates decided to work through a translation of the lyrics and to listen to the song before separating into three groups to work on some choreography to the music. Rather than giving a line-by-line translation of the text, delegates were encouraged to look for familiar words or phrases, or to simply guess at the meaning of the words and lines. *Les sans papiers* follows a very repetitive pattern, which (hopefully) helped everyone become familiar with the story of Clopin's community of *sans papiers* – the undocumented strangers/foreigners/others – seeking sanctuary at Paris' famous gothic cathedral.

The conference session did not form any part of my doctoral research, but did allow for some reflections from a facilitation point of view. The act of giving participants – and in the classroom, students – agency in the (learning) process may seem daunting due to the unpredictability of where the session could lead. But, it is this emphasis on *process* (learning) rather than *product* (assessment/performance) (O'Toole, 1992) that is at the core of my research interests and that drives any playful learning experiences that I create. And whilst my initial reaction to holding the session outside verged on the edge of panic, the outdoor space provided a range of environments in which delegates could integrate the space itself into their storytelling and meaning-making of the content. Their experiences of the session follow.

In Act One, Carina, Becky, Vici and Anna-Maria, at the top of a flight of stone steps, share their initial trepidation that quickly morphed into a collaboration centred on emotion and connection, reflected in their movement down the stairs towards their audience. In Act Two, Frederik shares the group's process through the language and creation of motifs that highlighted the themes in the music as the group moved up the grass hill towards their envisioned Notre Dame at the top. Finally, in Act Three, Annette and George describe how the group drew on their drama experiences by creating tableaux and acting out scenes to illustrate the storyline from the community of *sans papiers* seeking asylum at Notre Dame through to foreshadowing the tragic ending of Victor Hugo's original novel. Between each Act I offer a short interval before sharing my own reflections as an Encore to the work of my collaborators.

Act One

Stone steps with a metal handrail through the middle. At the top of the steps is an open concrete space leading to University buildings. The bottom of the steps opens onto a pathway through a green area of campus. Trees line one side of the steps. The four cast members in Act One appear.

Carina, Becky, Vici and Anna-Maria:

We looked at each other. Were we really going to have to do what it sounded like we would have to do? How on earth were we going to do that? Insecurities surfaced about being good enough to participate in this kind of workshop. Despite some group members having a professional life characterised by movement and physical activity, the dramaturgical element and the French linguistics were enough to make us unsure of our own positioning. Somehow these nervous smiles would need to be translated into creativity and problem solving - and quickly.

The short duration of the project was challenging. We had a relatively short period of time to move from being strangers to being a cohesive team, to share our hopes and limitations, coalesce on an idea and build it into a physical performance.

The song, new to all of us, held up a musical mirror to our own positioning. Just as we could hear and feel the tension between the vulnerability of the *sans papiers* as individuals and their power as a group, so too were we aware of how our own individuality and our relative unknownness to each other was set against our need to join together and create one unified and cohesive body. Our approach was iterative, with each return mining another layer of meaning. Our goal was to translate sound and words into physicality, but first we needed to listen and read before we began. This vocal and aural input was taken initially at face value before we adopted a more analytical approach, to explore and agree meaning. Once we had negotiated the emotional heart of both the music and our response to it, we were ready to craft the kinaesthetic and visual expression.

Collaboration in the group had to be established quickly; we had to work together with respect for each other's movement patterns, physical presence and emotional engagement, as well as our respective comfort zones. In creating the dance through an improvisational approach, it was important that there was a mutual respect for each other's ideas. We needed to listen to each other with great empathy, and we acknowledged each other's ideas through laughter, playfulness and embodied presence and experimentation.

We wanted the meaning of the music to be expressed through the movement of the dancers and agreed that we wanted to represent the tension between individual and group visually, beginning with a solo movement that was then closely echoed by others in turn until we moved in unison, retaining our own idiosyncrasies within that. Due to challenges hearing the details of the song as there were no loudspeakers, we focussed on the gradual crescendo of the piece. The movement itself was physically 'rising up', matching a build in the music and in turn mapping onto the rising emotional temperature of the song. To begin with, we intended to capture this by taking advantage

of a nearby flight of steps, setting the scene for the castle for us to conquer, which would allow us to rise up towards our audience. However, our 'first draft' made us realise that we would achieve the visual effect and emotional response we were seeking more effectively by reversing our movement - approaching our audience from the top of the steps and building in size as we came down, to emphasise that the one individual seen at the start was one of many; that the group and its problems were getting closer to the audience, rather than moving away from it, making both sides face each other and be joined in the emotional journey through life's events; that the under-privileged were confronting the society urging for a solution to their situation.

As the song repeated key words and musical phrases, so too did this become the motif for our physicality. The repetition of the refrain allowed us to absorb the key words and use them as the basis for understanding the scenario, in that we built on the repetitions of our movements, multiplying them as we grew from one to many. Similarly, the use of rhythmical movements and the pacing of the music gaining in strength and speed combined to accentuate the dramatic rise of emotions. The gradual development from an individual performer to the whole team joining in, mirroring and accentuating the dramatic build up in the story and its presentation, echoed the rise of emotions presented by the group.

During the session the group worked on several dimensions stemming from the piece, and the group of players was allowed to analyse real events and problems facing society, assess and verbalise their own attitudes to these events, and attempt to present these in a visual form to others. It provided a platform for the group members to co-operate, share ideas, shape and improve the plan for the presentation. It has also been a catalyst for the group expressing feelings through movement, becoming real fellows in the "dance" and transforming them into a group of underprivileged individuals with whose situation and feelings the group tried to empathise.

The emotions of the group members are also worth reflecting on. At the start of the workshop we were four individuals brought together by curiosity, a desire to learn something new, familiarity with the workshop organiser, even perhaps an idle choice on the programme. By the end, we had become a group, linked – as were the characters we came to represent – by common problems, expectations and aspirations. And as the characters became more and more vocal, bold and demanding, we also experienced a growth in confidence and unity. In spite of an initial sense that the space may not have been a safe space to navigate an individual role, reflecting back there is pride in what we achieved together. This project shows the transition from presenting a piece of text and music to embracing a wider scope of complex emotions and issues present in the current world and common to all people; a transition from art to reality, and from reality back to art.

First interval

Laura:

The cast of Act One highlights the use of dance as a means of building group cohesion. The collaborative element of theatre practice enables participants/delegates/students to start working together quickly, even if there is potential hesitation, or discomfort, at the start of the activity. In having a common goal, the group was able to experiment with ideas and utilise the outdoor space to reflect the key message of the text. Acknowledgement of the liminal space between the 'reality' and 'art' echoes Chemi and Firing's (2020, p.24) use of drama as a tool to create "bold and safe learning environments" where learners can reflect on their own positionality.

The group's reflection on how the steps could be used to articulate their message demonstrates how the physical environment can be incorporated into meaning-making. The direction of their movement, initially moving up and away from the audience then downwards and towards the audience, challenging the audience to engage with them, created an intensity to the plight of the *sans papiers* that they represented. In contrast, the cast of Act Two weaved upwards on a grassy hill to represent the musicality of the song with its climbing key changes and rising tension. Despite the different directional movement of these two groups, the same themes are conveyed clearly and convincingly. Through embodying the community of *sans papiers*, the groups invite the audience to reflect on the themes raised within the song.

Act Two

A small, rather steep, grassy hill curves up towards another part of campus. There are no footpaths across this stretch of grass, only shrubs and trees peppered across the landscape. The ground is uneven, with small pockets of earth chipped out of it. The four cast members in Act Two appear.

Frederik:

In our group we had some knowledge of the French language, and even more knowledge of music as two of us have a musical background of some kind: musical education and training, teaching music and/or a degree in musicology. Our focus was first on the music itself, and we decided on a few salient aspects of the song around which we would centre our performance. Those were: 1) the time and beat are hard to follow; 2) there is a crescendo throughout the song; and 3) the song is very repetitive.

The song has changing time signatures with an emphasis on different beats in different bars. This makes it rhythmically difficult to dance to, as it is not always easy to find the first beat of each bar. Also, the volume was quite low, and hearing the music while performing was difficult. Therefore, we quickly abandoned the idea of doing things on time and decided instead on a series of movements, changing on cue. We would strike a pose, and then one member of the group would verbally signal to the rest of us when to change to the next pose. This signal was the term 'change' – written the same

as English but pronounced in French. This made it possible for the whole group to act synchronously regardless of our individual musical training or the quality of the loudspeaker. As there is a strong message in the song about unity – people struggling together against a common foe – we wanted to stress the importance of acting together. Between these movements we walked in single file to a point higher up the hill to copy the music's ever-rising key changes and the increasing tension of the song. We repeated this several times, walking first left up the hill, then right, then left and so on as we weaved our way upwards.

As the song is very repetitive we decided that performing the same movements several times would be a way to represent that. We focused on learning particular words and phrases, including, *des étrangers* (strangers/foreigners), *des sans papiers* (undocumented), *des hommes et des femmes* (men and women), and *sans domicile* (homeless). These words were expressed through different poses. We also included a power pose with raised fists to express the song's sense of strength and struggle, firstly with one of us raising a fist, then two, then all of us, as the song is one long crescendo.

Second interval

Laura:

To add to Act Two from an audience perspective, the poses used throughout the piece could be interpreted as a reflection of both the unity of the group as well as the individual within it. Each member of the group struck a pose on cue, yet the poses themselves were not uniform; the group members changed the levels and directions of their poses from looking directly at the audience, to being sideways on, to turning their backs and facing towards the hill. It is interesting that the group added further French language to their experience by instructing the poses when one of the group members called 'change' in French. This addition extends their immersion in the language.

It is clear that drawing on previous knowledge – be that linguistic, musical or dramatic – played its part in the delegates' creation process. A cast member of Act One recalls their regular experience of using movement within their professional setting, the cast of Act Two utilised their musical knowledge to reflect the key changes and gradual crescendo, and the cast of Act Three drew upon their drama experience to create tableaux and devise scenes to tell the story of *Les sans papiers* (see below). In drawing on the familiar, delegates could potentially find individual ways to engage with the content of the session. Transferring this idea to the playful learning classroom, if students are encouraged to draw from learning experiences that they already have then this may aid a sense of belonging, and reduce any potential stress associated with learning 'new', or what might be perceived to be new, material.

Act Three

A flat grass space that runs alongside a pathway with a small tunnel at one end of the stretch of grass. A couple of trees line the path. The performance space begins close to the tunnel but then moves along the grass as the story unfolds. The three cast members in Act Three appear.

Annette:

In our group we all knew a bit of the French language but we were not music people. We listened to the song many times and then talked about what we had heard, and we had all noticed the same words: *sans papiers, des étrangers, sans domicile and asile*. So, we started to imagine some pictures in our mind, talked a lot, heard the song again.... and tried to create a story. We made three “pictures” which we acted out and then showed to the other groups.

In picture one we were walking toward an imaginary city with a big city wall around it. Two of us were taking care and helping the third, who had their arms around our shoulders for support. We stopped half way and turned to an imaginary crowd and then sat down on our knees and raised our hands up in the air to the words *asile, asile*.

In picture two we walked to the imaginary door in the wall and pounded on the door to the words *des étrangers, sans papiers and sans domicile*. Two of the group created the shape of the door, facing each other with their arms raised and hands meeting in the middle, as the third member of the group mimed pounding on it.

In picture three we turned again to the imaginary crowd and fell back to our knees to the words *asile, asile*. We ended the scene flat on the ground. No one would let us into the city.

We were three people put together in a group, with two of us knowing each other, and one not knowing either of them. I am the one who did not know anyone. Normally, I teach drama classes and I think in my head it came naturally for me to think of the act in that way.

George:

The session was initially something outside of our comfort zone, although I’ve always loved musical theatre and opera I’ve never engaged much with dance or theatrical performance, I’m also quite bad with the French language so in a lot of ways the prospect was faintly *effrayant*. Our group had also only met each other briefly before the session so we quickly had to work out movement between ourselves. That said Laura was great at getting us to feel at ease and start experimenting with different movements as well as familiarising ourselves with *Les sans papiers*. It was great how quickly a narrative formed within our group about what we were trying to express and there was a fantastic exchange of ideas, despite at first having no idea what to do once we got started and become more comfortable with each other and the space we ended up with lots of ideas about how best to illustrate the narrative of the song.

Encore

After watching each group in turn, the full cast return to the patch of grass and sit in a circle.

Laura:

I invited everyone to share any reflections on the process of devising the movement and engaging with the French language through a piece of musical theatre. Understandably, at the start of the session there was a sense of discomfort for some, ranging from a lack of confidence with the French language, to a sense of insecurity in attending a session that seemed so unstructured – (maybe this is note to self to be mindful of how to introduce the participants'/students' agency in future!). However, all participants found a way to immerse themselves in the activity and trust the process, which resulted in three unique interpretations of the story of *Les sans papiers*.

Whilst there were no explicit learning objectives for the session, the use of key words and phrases in French observed whilst the groups were working, demonstrated that participants were *using* French in a very active way. This is something that was also evident within phase one of my doctoral project where the participants recited words and phrases as they experimented with movement and largely choreographed to the language as opposed to the music (Barclay and Lagoni, 2024). During the conference session, rather than sitting down and learning the grammar of direct object pronouns, participants were reciting this grammatical structure in the line *Oh! Notre Dame et nous te demandons Asile! Asile!* Had this been in a setting where specific grammar is part of the learning outcomes, this information would likely have been noted as part of the process but within this single conference session there was not a lot of detailed discussion about grammar. The repetitive nature of the song helped to reinforce the language and grammar structures evident within the song and hopefully made it more accessible in terms of allowing delegates to hear the same content over and over. The potential for the music to become an earworm could also lead to extended engagement with the French language beyond the time within the session itself.

The use of an outdoor space presented both challenges and opportunities. The biggest challenge was with regards to the use of music – my little boom box was not quite loud enough to contend with the hum of campus life! – but this did not deter the groups from persevering with their storytelling. Problem-solving through the use of individuals' phones to re-play the music, coupled with familiarity through repetition of key phrases, enabled participants to navigate through the challenge. Also, where my initial plan (there was, in fact, a plan with various 'options' for delegates to choose from) was to show delegates a video of the original cast performing *Les sans papiers* as well as a video of my phase one participants' choreography which one of them had shared on their professional-facing Instagram profile. However, without the use of technology I offered QR codes with links to these videos that delegates could watch if they wanted to. Inadvertently, the space itself had created further agency for participants to elect whether or not they wanted to see other interpretations of the song – and potentially be influenced by those videos. In addition, the space itself became an integral part of each group's storytelling and in the case of Act 1, actually influenced the change in direction of the dance. Despite the 'playful environment' being a key component of the design of my doctoral project, the data shows that the physical space used within the project was nowhere near as

prominent a feature as it was in this conference session. This leads me to the conclusion that the vastness of the open, outdoor space, provided the opportunity for delegates to explore *how* the physical space could become a feature within their storytelling and thus a part of their wider experience of the session. Whilst there might not be as much opportunity to experiment with learning spaces within my teaching in higher education, the additional opportunities afforded by non-traditional learning settings cannot be ignored.

Reflecting from a facilitation point of view, I was relieved that so much was achieved in such a short space of time and that all participants willingly joined me in seeing what evolved throughout the session. Initially I was a little daunted at presenting in this way to colleagues, and worried about the potential to come across as unprofessional or as someone who did not know what they were doing, but I hope that the lack of instruction opened up opportunities for delegates to essentially design their own conference session. Despite the fact that I planned for the session to be unstructured, it took a leap of faith for all of us to stick to this design and not be tempted toward me directing the groups in timed exercises focusing on particular aspects of the song or trying to influence *how* the delegates engaged with the French language throughout the session.

I am incredibly grateful to all the delegates who participated, trusted the process and immersed themselves in the experience, especially when initially feeling unsure about it. Facilitating the session has enabled me to reflect on both my teaching and presenting practice, whilst also strengthening my conviction in the power of playful learning to foster learner agency which leads to creative and positive outcomes.

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