

## **An Unexpected Online Biodanza, by Rupert Meese**

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The first Northern Biodanza Festival brought together a rather special group of people from all over the country. Not quite from Land's End to John O'Groats but at least from Cornwall to Scotland. It was a group with a certain magic to it, because in the blend among us there were some remarkable properties. Supported and nurtured by the biodanza there was the power to want, to feel, and to express with simplicity, to expect magic to happen, to say 'yes - why not?', to organise and to commit, to be generous with each other, to be accepting and easy.

After the festival Facebook provided a way of staying in touch and easing the way 'back into the world'. Perhaps two weeks later, through various posts and comments and over a number of days a thread ran something like this:

"Really missing you guys."

"Yes, it's a shame we can't do a vivencia on facebook."

"Why can't we by Skype?"

"That would be brilliant!"

"Yes"

"What do you think teachers? Is it possible?"

To which I, like everyone else I imagine, thought, 'What a lovely sentiment, but: No - of course it's not possible.' Something stopped me writing this though and likewise no one else posted the obvious 'No.' It would have seemed too callous.

Some days later following an unrelated post came this comment:

"When are we doing biodanza by skype Rupert?"

"Name a day," I continued the joke.

"Sunday"

At this point I started thinking about it.

What was possible? How could it relate to 'actual' biodanza? What were the pitfalls? What could people get out of it? What exercises could we conceivably do and how could they form part of a whole that was greater than the sum? How could I manage the inevitable technical troubles without the troubles dominating the time or leaving people feeling left out or rejected?

Luckily I teach improvised comedy. I knew the joy to be had in things going wrong, in the earnest attempt to do something just out of reach. I knew how to nurture and hold a space where commitment married light-hearted acceptance.

This is what I came up with:

I created a Facebook event called "The Absurd and Impossible Biodanza by Skype" and invited those people who had been at the festival. I chose the name

to set a particular frame and context - one which declared the process as experimental and set the criterion for success not as 'achieving' (since this was impossible) but as 'enjoying' - enjoying the absurd - the attempt. It was essentially a play frame. Play functions importantly as anti-shame. Shame has been described as the withdrawal of support from the environment. It functions as a medium of social control. Play - particularly social play, acts as the inverse - it is the gift and re-establishment of support from the environment. It is the place where our offer ("I'm a lion!") evokes response ("No! Run Away!"), independently of supporting the offer ("Yes! Good play!").

To my mind in biodanza part of the role of the play that we invoke in the form of ludic games and creativity exercises has this function. It contributes to the re-establishment of sense of self and self-worth for this reason. Often where self-worth has historically been diminished by an environment of shame. Play in online biodanza would form an important role in shaping all attempts and offers - either technical or emotional, danced or cognitive - as accepted and welcomed, whatever the outcome.

Within this context I committed to creating the most authentic biodanza experience possible. We could at least dance together, but by now I was feeling that we could do much more. I created first an internet radio station over which to broadcast the music. My conception was that the music would be delivered over internet radio - typically by a smartphone connected to participants hi-fi. I could then facilitate and we would share our presence by video. This separation, although it added some complexity, seemed important for the following reasons: One thing that we do when we dance biodanza is allow ourselves to become permeable to the music. We become progressively available to the emotion and physical motion that it engenders. We know to support this handing over to the music in the dance it is better for the music to be sufficiently loud. In the context of online biodanza though it did not seem acceptable to me to have the facilitation come at the same volume from the same location as the music. When we dance we process the facilitation and the environment - the group - differently to the way we receive the music. To have them undifferentiated by attributes of space or volume seemed to me to be asking for a cognitive confusion that would most likely result in lesser immersion in the music and a less vivencial experience.

To ease the technical issues I posted direction and the link to the radio station a week before the event and asked people to consider the location they would dance in and test the music. The radio station played a test loop of music all week to allow participants to test and tune their setup.

For the video I chose Zoom - a commercial video conferencing alternative to Skype. Zoom seemed to offer greater reliability and control than Skype (I kept the event name Absurd and Impossible Biodanza by Skype as an eponym). Again I sent the link out early to allow participants to ensure they had the right connection and offered technical support in that week.

The purpose of this preparation was to give the best possible chance of the technology working. In part this was because I made the decision not to spend time during the event supporting the technical troubles that inevitably come from many people with diverse systems attempting to connect. The clear message was "If your tech does not work on the day we will wish you a fond farewell until next time." While I could have paid for a Zoom account, Zoom offers free 40 minute sessions. I considered that this hard limit on time would be an advantage in helping us de-focus on technical issues or distractions and engage in the vivencia.

So this was the technology. As for the vivencia itself I think the best way to detail the exercises is to describe what happened.

I have a chair balanced on my sea grass clothes chest. On that I have clamped two oak boards. Balanced on them I have a laptop for the video, a laptop to broadcast the music, and my phone plugged into a speaker to receive and play the broadcast. I have a clear space of seven feet by four to dance in. Probably the largest free space in my tiny house. The sea is to my left. I start the music, dance and message the group on Facebook. I don't start the video until exactly 7:30. We have only forty minutes. I click the start button on the video and found everyone there already - there were cheers. Then a message to say "Ten minutes left of your free call" M had clicked 'host' thirty minutes ago and kicked the whole thing off. We bailed out and most of us got back in. M not. Someone went to find him.

Nine of us from the Northern Biodanza Festival attended. Zoom arranged the picture from our webcams in a grid so we could all see each other.

We started with an opening circle. We held our arms out wide as if we were holding hands and we danced as if in a circle together. It was silly and funny and sweet, and it did what an opening circle does. It brought us all together, arms out wide, seeing each other, coming present into our bodies and into the vivencia. We opened to "Days of the Dancing" which made a celebration of our re-union and of being together in the space.

Then we waked - zig zagging around each in whatever space we had - towards and away from the webcams. And we could see each other and share the energy together. We would come towards the camera and meet someone else coming the same way, smile, wave perhaps and carry on. Next we played the clapping game. We each chose someone to synchronise with and changed when we felt like it. This was a delightful chaos. Especially since the music through the internet radio came at different points to each place. Following that we played the animation game - I pointed to a body part and called it out and everyone brought the animation of the dance to that part. Next we attempted to form groups to share a shower - washing, rinsing and drying each other in turn. This was a lot of fun despite discovering quickly that the order that we were displayed on the screen was different for everyone. The time constraint paid off here as we simply had to continue in some way or other and instead of spending time trying to sort it out we formed random and spontaneous groups. Then the

unsurprising disaster struck. A new participant attempted to join, was welcomed and in the confusion someone accidentally started sharing their home screen, overwriting all of the webcams. Restoring order took some time and meant that we lost the new participant, but the episode was filled with a sense of fun and acceptance. I dropped two exercises (segmentary movement of the neck and closing circle) and we moved to segmentary movement of the hips. This worked well to take us into a softer space. We ended with an encounter of stillness to 'Because'. We came close to the webcam and simply spent time gazing at each other and appreciating what we saw. Since we could not know that the person we looked at was looking back at us at the same time the connections, the reflections of beauty, became somehow more evenly spread throughout the group. The experience had a profound quality that was written about on Facebook afterwards.

In all it was a great and somewhat muddled success. There were challenges but they were handled with grace by all participants. Android seemed to behave differently to iPhone. Three participants were not able to join through various issues. Despite this I believe all had a very positive experience and the general request was for more.

In some ways it could be said that in the approach we took we were playing at biodanza. I do not mind this. There is a curious logic about it. What you get when you play at biodanza is... well... biodanza.