

Reviewing Imagined Touch

Imagined Touch by Jodee Mundy Collaborations

Arts House August 2016

By Sandra Fiona Long

Imagined Touch, a DeafBlind Live Art project by Jodee Mundy collaborations, is a multi-lingual work which crosses participatory and multi-sensory arts within a theatre framework while at the same time pioneering a model of inclusion which attends to different sensory needs of audience members. Bringing together a team of artists in the fields of sound, lighting design, interpreting and haptic communication to work with two DeafBlind emerging artists Heather Lawson and Michelle Stevens, this work asks the audience to navigate their own sensorial potential.



Image by Bryony Jackson

Imagined Touch, while rooted in the DeafBlind community's need for agency in mainstream culture, also has the intention and potential as an emerging art-form which brings agency and application to all society by opening up modes of aesthetic experience led by the DeafBlind. The language used by critics and reviewers has the potential to influence and even facilitate receptivity to works such as Imagined touch, and influence the aesthetic development of inclusive participatory arts. However this is complex and multifaceted, and requires critical language to develop in tandem with the form.

In this essay I will look at the reviews of the work available following its premiere season at Arts House, Melbourne 2016, a personal interview with director Jodee Mundy, my own experience of this production, alongside other sources to investigate how we might communicate about work which crosses cultural, political, social, sensory and linguistic divides such as Imagined Touch. I

will also investigate through this dialogue what shifts work such as Imagined Touch may create in our larger cultural dialogue.

Reviews:

Imagined Touch was not as widely reviewed as hoped. According to Director Jodee Mundy, two major reviewers cancelled on the same night. Reviews thus came from independent online arts press with the exception of the 7.30 report, which did a TV presentation of the work. (Sales 2016) However those who reviewed the work were unanimously moved, and word of mouth spread. One of the reviewers who cancelled lamented on radio he missed out after hearing about it.

For Mundy, getting reviewers on board is the next step towards recognition of this arts project outside the disability framework. Mundy was determined to avoid 'ghettoising' the work in disability focused spaces from its earliest developmental stages, but was repeatedly 'directed back to disability related venues as the only viable options' (Adams 2014, 27), till supported by Polyglot and then Arts House. Mundy insists 'It's about social change, getting one person at a time to reframe and understand.'

But critiquing a work like this is not easy. According to Mundy, feedback has been in two streams; 'how amazing they are being DeafBlind and doing this!' which is fair enough. As Mundy herself says, 'How can you critique someone else's experience?' This is especially so as Lawson and Stevens are essentially community artists.

But the other perhaps less frequent stream of critique, is of the art-form itself, which Mundy would like more of:

I would love more feedback about the timing. Does something feel too long? People have never seen the signing on hands before. For me it's like, How much detail do people want to know about this foreign culture? How long do you need to sit in that before you understand and can take the next step? Timing and cultural emersion. I am interested in that sort of feedback. (Mundy 2016)

Then there is the question of who the reviews are by and for whom? It's a complex work with many layers, tailored across sensory needs. Participants give information about their sensory needs prior to the show, including if they don't like being touched, and wear coded armbands, so the show can be customized to audience members. This highlights how subjective experience is, and calls into question the role a critic can have in work like Imagined Touch: 'How intense? How long do we leave them? How much do we touch them? Everyone is different. Some people don't want to be touched.' (Mundy 2016)

But it is important critique gives voice to this art-form. Disability culture activist Petra Kupperts says "The other holds a fascination because it challenges and plays with the criteria for 'being human' that act as gatekeepers of the rational."
(2013,70)

Imagined Touch creates a framework from DeafBlind experience, which opens a gateway of human possibility. But once through this gateway, if audience are open to framing the work from their own experience rather than through the notion of 'disability', there is potential for anyone to reset this 'gatekeeping criteria'. And critique can help navigate audiences through this gateway.

Experiencing Imagined Touch



Image by Bryony Jackson

Section 1:

Audience members make their way to a seating bank facing a bright red curtain, and two women waiting. Even after everyone is seated, the women wait. Eventually they converse in tactile sign, then one speaks aloud 'I have no idea if the audience has arrived.'

The audience laugh.

She asks for an interpreter. 2 interpreters join them and using tactile sign inform them 'Yes the audience has arrived.'

'Any good looking guys?'

'Hmmm... 2.'

'2! One each!'

More interpreters arrive, and start working in teams using haptics; mapping information on the women's backs, in tandem with tactile sign to converse with them about the audience and space. The combination of signing, speaking and haptics reveals the layers of language and support structures forming this work, but also the aesthetic, poetic and humorous potential within this multi-tiered language.

They play out a subversive humour based on prejudices seeing people may have without even realising. A young man volunteers from the audience and the two women touch his hands and face to demonstrate how DeafBlind people meet. More humour emerges: "Rich or Poor?" "Can't tell." "Colour of skin?" "Doesn't matter."

In line with Petra Kuppers claim that 'disabled performers use the strategies of embodying the outsider to challenge social certainties, often using transgressional humor' (2013,71), Michelle and Heather's transgressional humor highlights how inept superficial judgment is for evaluating character.

The two women describe their experiences of becoming DeafBlind. Michelle was born Blind, and then became Deaf. Heather, born Deaf, then became Blind. Their lives are revealed, meeting at computer training, sneaking off for a cigarette. Transitions occur within a linguistic framework; a smoke puff segues into a visual vernacular landscape, Heather's last visual memories as a child, and Michelle's journey with music as solace from her institutionalised life at Blind school. The rise and fall of interpreter numbers on stage creates it's own rhythmic pulse and formal sense. It is a dance, the interpreters in orange contrasting with the redness of the curtain. Interpreters move between signing and speaking in a vocal tone disassociated but warm, creating a rhythmic base to the cheeky humour and memories of the two women.

Reviews mostly skim over this section:

The work begins with the two talking with each other and telling the audience, sometimes through interpreters, how they met (Peard 2016)

But stylistically this section reveals multiple levels of process and social-political background in a complex weave. Finally the two declare 'We want to share with you the truths about being DeafBlind', as they jokingly show the audience how to wear their headphones and goggles the wrong way. Discordant piano plays through the headphones and the goggles are blurred. The audience transitions into this world, waiting for the next section to unfold.

Sound:

In this limbo waiting space sound becomes the prime sensory input, but not just as transitional tool. The sound is based on how the ear works and 'a metaphor for losing hearing' according to composers Madeline Flynn and Tim Humphries:

We built a custom graphic equalizer, which could attenuate various frequencies over different bandwidths to simulate a couple of things. One is hearing loss. And the other is the particular kind of low-resolution hearing which Michelle has with her early model cochlear implant' (Adams 2014, 35)

The resulting sound is processed and played live in response to signal coming directly from the space.

The fact that sound (and light) is a key element in a work by DeafBlind artists challenges possible misconceptions about DeafBlindness. One reviewer seemed to not notice this crucial sound element, or the lighting interplay through the goggles:

‘Sight and sound are adeptly put to one side and the sensation of touch is explored.....In a quiet, dark space it is possible to reflect on the trials faced by the deafblind artists and community at large.’
(Johnson 2016)

This highlights a critical focus on the ‘disability’ of the key artists rather than the art form, and possibly preconception about DeafBlind experience. It also shows the potential impact critique could have on audience preconception of the work by framing the work solely through a ‘disability’ lens.

Section 2:

Waiting on the edge of this precipice of sound, someone takes my hand and leads me away.

I am surprised the seating bank in front of me has been removed. I am walking straight through where it was. This is the first of a series of subtle shifts which disorient me. What I understood about the space has changed. My guide walks me into the suddenly vast space then leaves me alone. Through goggles I see changing levels of light (designed by Jenny Hector) and blurry shapes moving but I cannot see what they are. I was a spectator listening to experiences of becoming DeafBlind and now I am thrust into what this experience could possibly be. And with no signal of how long the wait will be, the theatrical experience shifts to my own experience and response to this situation. My discomfort. My fear. My impatience. And pleasure in the permission to withdraw.

One reviewer reflected on this inner theatrical experience:

I walk with confidence and trust in the stranger but the second they release me, I stop dead in my tracks. Suddenly my footsteps are much slower and smaller. My hands are outstretched in front of me as I come into contact with numerous other audience members. We touch faces, we hold hands, I feel a wedding ring on one person, and another has large, coarse hands. I am creating stories for these people I know very little about. There is a sense of timelessness while this is happening and it feels like I am in another world. (My 2016)

Another reviewer shows how language emerged out of disorientation:

It was unexpectedly scary, especially as we were not sure what was happening around us..... Then a stranger’s hand took mine. I had immediate and complete trust in that hand. I still don’t know who it was. Or who any of the hands and arms and bodies I felt were, but one woman drew a smiley face on my hand and I’m sure we both laughed loudly because it was finally something we could understand.

(Peard 2016)

It is in the experience of restricted sense, so carefully crafted by this team, that the potential of insight, of an inner art, of new ways of imagining communication happening and poetic potential of a multiplicity of languages and art-forms opens up, with the potential to be truly inclusive. According to dance writer Deidre Sklar:

a shift in the way we configure aesthetic information can jostle the whole epistemological structure and performance becomes a kind of insight mediation. (2007,43)

These two reviewers captured the potential of this shift in configuring aesthetic information, based on being vulnerable and disorientated, to impact on thinking. This is perhaps the essence of this art-form.



image by Jeff Busby

I cannot help but peek through a tiny hole in my goggles. I glimpse a white space, moving projection, and Stevens signing the same story I am hearing through my headpiece about her increasing isolation as she became Deaf to a circle of people without goggles. Around the room people like me sit, incapacitated, isolated essentially in their goggles and headsets. I am intrigued by the layers of organization. According to Mundy, feedback from Deaf people during early development resulted in an element not experienced by seeing/hearing people, where Deaf people take their goggles off, experience the narrative otherwise heard through headsets in sign, and are enlisted to help:

One Deaf person gave feedback that “Oh my god, the tables are turned. Suddenly I was the one in power. I knew the language and it was my job

to support all these people who are able and can see and hear. That was a really profound experience for me, to be the mainstream.”

(Mundy 2016)

I am not left to sit for long. Like it or not I am danced with, taken for a run, and my hands are placed on a guide dog accompanying a Blind audience member. Eventually I am taken to a third space.

Section 3

I am lead to a seat, instructed to take goggles and headsets off, and discover we are in what appears the original seating bank. Michelle plays the piano.

This project (with consultant Dennis Whitcombe) pioneered the use of social haptics to ‘push at the edges of ways to offer immediate feedback and specific musical lesson feedback’ to Stevens, already a gifted piano player from childhood. (Adams 2014,36)

Stevens plays with great sensitivity. Then text is projected on the screen: ‘This is Michelle speaking...’

She is speaking through the piano, the sound of which she no longer has full access to, but yet sculpts so affectively. The awareness that music is language has never felt stronger.

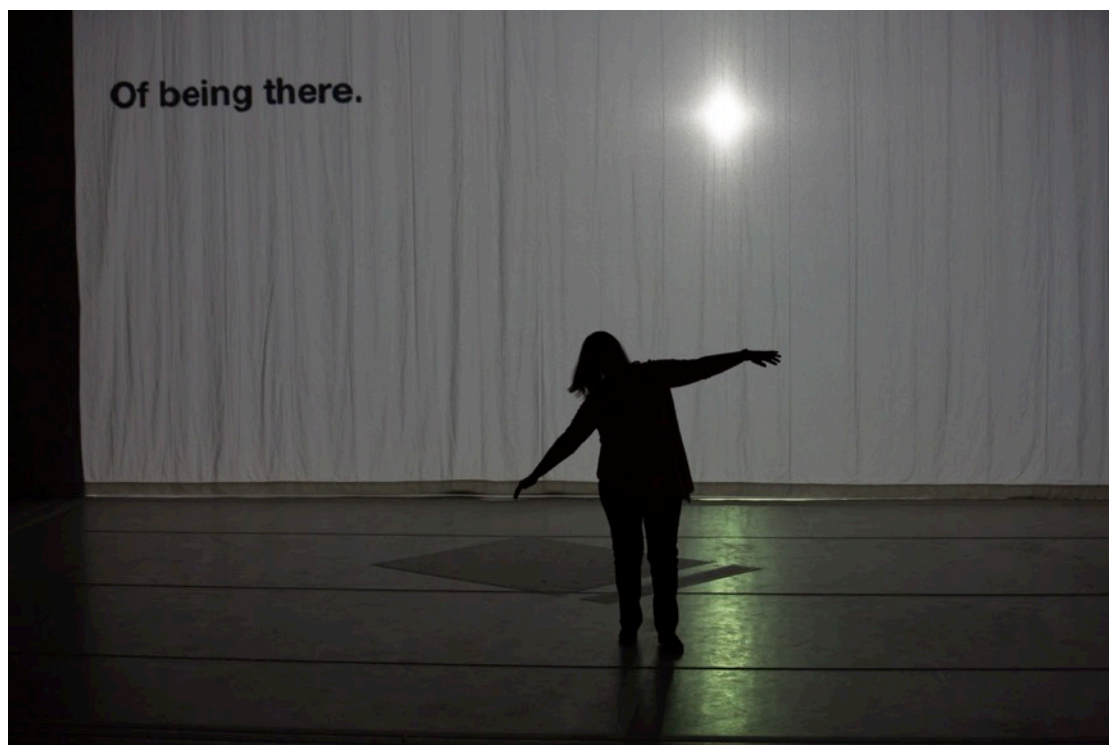


Image by Bryony Jackson

The one moment where I have a critical reaction is next, as more text comes in, describing how important music is for her. I feel this is doubling up what is

being, and has already been communicated, and feel the content of projected text could be reconsidered and more spare. It immediately takes me out of the empathetic space I have been in, to read meaning as 'the other', no longer in the experience.

But the next moment is perhaps the most memorable. Spoken voice joins the projected text. 'This is Heather Speaking. To be honest with you I'm just waiting for the piano to finish.' After sitting in the pleasure of Steven's music the realisation that it has no meaning to Lawson who has never heard music, and is just waiting for it to finish, is humbling. Lawson goes on to share the power she finds in movement which takes on the quality of music as she navigates the wide space.

In the final transition, the furthest curtain is opened, revealing the seating bank we started on, our shoes in their original spots. There are gasps from the audience as they realise they are facing in the opposite direction. Lawson sits on the seating bank, lights fade out and the music finishes. Then, resounding applause.

Conclusion:

In experiencing this work as an artistic experience lead by DeafBlind artists, as opposed to being 'about' DeafBlindness, this theatre starts to look like how we feel on the inside. The possibilities of this are endless for all of society, if not missed due to a fixed cultural position:

the disabled performer in contemporary art signals a historical moment where a culture is examining its bodies, sorts and counts its differences, allocates new quarters, and reinvents itself. Performance is a place where cultural un-certainties can find expression (Kuppers 2013,3)

Mundy sums this up when talking about how DeafBlind artists might reframe their art-form to media:

We are the experts of touch. We are the experts in tactile communication. We are untapped resources knowledge of human potential. We are moving into the age of virtual reality which is all about haptics. Use me!
(Mundy 2016)

The DeafBlind frame is important. It provides a structure to explore human potential, ethics and politics. But if we continue to reframe as artists, critics and audience across abilities and sensory needs, then there is the possibility that alongside the socio-political ramifications of this artistic field, the aesthetics of the art-form can also evolve and develop in untold ways, with DeafBlind artists and others with disability on the forefront of human development.

Adams, DR-J 2014, *INCLUSION IS A MYTH*.

Collins, D 2016, *Imagined Touch: the deafblind live art experience*, <<http://artsreview.com.au/imagined-touch-the-deafblind-live-art-experience-2/>>.

Johnson, S 2016, *Imagined Touch: the deafblind live art experience | Jodee Mundy Collaborations*, Australian Stage, <<http://www.australianstage.com.au/201609087963/reviews/melbourne/imagined-touch-the-deafblind-live-art-experience-%7C-jodee-mundy-collaborations.html>>.

Kuppers, P 2013, 'Outsider energies', in *Disability and Contemporary Performance, Bodies on the Edge*, Taylor and Francis, pp. 71-86.

Mundy, J 2016, *Interview with author*.

My, M 2016, *Imagined Touch review*, My About Town, <<http://www.myronmy.me/2016/09/imagined-touch-review.html?m=1>>.

Peard, A-M 2016, *Arts House: Imagined Touch*, <<http://aussietheatre.com.au/reviews/arts-house-imagined-touch>>.

Sales, L 2016, 7.30
'*Imagined Touch*': *experiencing the world of the deaf and blind*, ABC, 07/09/2016.

Sklar, D 2007, 'Unearthing Kinesthesia', in S Banes & A Lepecki (eds), *The Senses In Performance*, Routledge, New York.