

OTTAWA STILT UNION



The Ottawa Stilt Union is a bilingual group of artists, committed to bringing the magical and the unexpected into the daily lives of people in the National Capital Region and beyond by creating and performing original theatre works that celebrate spectacular physical modes of expression. We strive to make our work accessible to the public physically, financially and linguistically.

The OSU was founded in 2007. Since then we have created 10 original theatre works as well as a series of participatory performance events collectively known as the Youppi Club. Our focus has gradually shifted from pure performance to more audience engagement. We have a particular interest in bringing our events into unconventional performance spaces, with an emphasis on collectively devised, site-specific creation.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

To work with seniors at Carleton Lodge in creating an original performance that reflects their personality as individuals and as a group.

PARTNER SITE

Carleton Lodge is a long term care home in Ottawa-Carleton.

ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place, a 3-year professional artist-in-residence program, addresses social issues by placing artists and arts groups in community settings to co-create art projects and provide free of charge arts programming. The 2015-2016 projects enable participants from non-profit groups, in Ottawa, to take creative journeys through theatre, dance, music, storytelling and visual art. Art Place amplifies voices in various underserved communities touched by the project, to tell their stories and share their unique perspectives.

INTERVIEW WITH LAURA ASTWOOD – OTTAWA STIL UNION

February 29, 2016

How would you describe yourself as an artist?

As a company we are playful, whimsical and we like to create multi-sensory work that engages us physically and socially.

What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?

We all have different reasons for pursuing careers in the arts. We were initially motivated to start the company to create performances with stilt-walking, which was new to Ottawa and which gives us joy.

What are some recurring themes in your art practice?

Nature/ecology; magical creatures; a-cappella singing; the combination of intimate storytelling and spectacular physical action; whimsy.

What are your most important influences?

Influences are: folk tales and songs from many different cultures of the world; circus; climate change.

What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?

We had a grant from the City to perform our work *La Toilette* in underserved communities. That led to our engagement with the Overbrook community where we taught workshops, gave stilt-try-outs, collected stories, and did a six-week project at the Boys and Girls Club.

What did you gain from your experience?

A new perspective about the place of art in society. We heard some really riveting, powerful and inspiring stories. We saw children and adults revel in theatre play, learn new skills and expand their idea of the possible.

How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?

Nearly a decade!

What interested you about working with AOE Arts Council?

AOE Arts Council allows us to pursue our goal to become more involved in our community as a company through teaching, sharing knowledge and creating with our participants.

What made you want to participate in Art Place?

We want to open people's minds to outlets for meaningful self-expression, and give opportunities to create and perform to those who might not have access to artistic materials, lessons, etc. Art Place helps connect artists to groups/communities who can benefit from such creative stimulus.

What inspired you to pursue this project with this community?

We originally tried working in Overbrook (Overbrook Community Centre, Boys and Girls Club) but found it difficult to maintain consistency of participation long enough to create something substantial, due in part to the structure of those institutions' activities and the young age demographic present (mostly under 16). We hope working with the Catholic Centre for Immigrants (CCI) and restructuring our approach will introduce us to an older group (18-25) who will be motivated and focused enough to spend several weeks creating something of substance with us.

How would you describe the project you will be working on?

We will engage the group in creative and skill-based workshops representing our practices as a company (storytelling, stilt walking, acrobatics, song, creating with found materials) over the course of several weeks, and then we will put these skills to use creating an original performance collaboratively with the participants. The nature of the performance will depend on interest and input from the participants.

As an art collective, what do you hope to get out of this process?

We hope for inspiration. New ideas. New perspectives.

What do you hope participants will gain from this process?

We hope participants will gain new tools for expression and discovery. We want to empower people to create and express themselves in

comments (with hand-drawn representations substituting objects in cases where participants felt a particular connection to the item and preferred not to part with it). The completed

memory board was shown to all participants, and remains on display in the home. We rounded off the session with a reprise of 'You Are My Sunshine' and more dancing.

SECOND POST FROM CARLETON LODGE

Blog post 2 -March 8, 2016 by Laura Astwood

Here are my (somewhat scattered) thoughts:

Today was our third session with the folks at the Carleton Lodge. I think that whether or not they exactly recall that it's us and we did this activity before, they have warmed up to it. It is easier, they respond more readily, they tell us more stories. (Or maybe it's us who have warmed up) There are one or two who simply cannot articulate the things that are in their head, or they do but it is so soft that we can't hear: heart break! We don't want to miss anything.

One gentleman is very articulate, but in a sort of free-associating way, so that everything he says is poetry. One lady smiles so widely that her whole face scrunches up. One man attached a clothespin to my nose today! We laugh a lot.

We sing a bit and make some rhythm sounds to warm things up. One gentleman can't grip anything and I feel his frustration with being asked to hold things. He is too reserved to sing along with us. I want to find some way that he can participate, something that he will enjoy. Does anyone reading this have a suggestion?



This is new territory for us and we want to remain on the right side of the line that divides trying to stimulate and inspire from condescending or annoying.

Sometimes very serious things pop out: last week something made one man think about (and mention) the importance of access to clean drinking water. Today another man said (in response to the whisky cork he was holding in his hand) that it was a warning: you could get looped and kill someone! People mention their weddings, they remember travel and gardens and house work and songs and careers as pilots!

We have no idea, right now, whether what we are doing is going to amount to something concrete for us, artistically speaking, but the experience is so magical in itself that it is bound to inspire something... Time spent with these people is a gift and the things that remain to be discovered are tantalizing to us.

Overall, our presence was well received. Many participants welcomed the opportunity to make their thoughts heard, and we were pleased with the amount of personal memories our activities evoked, although some activities proved more stimulating than others. The song and the memory board both worked as strong triggers for creativity and self-expression, whereas we found the sound exploration and word association to be less effective in generating cohesive creative momentum in the group. We will return next week with a new song selection and a similar structure, modified slightly to emphasize the activities that worked best the first time around.

MISE À JOUR APRÈS 4 SEMAINES AU CARLETON LODGE, PAR ÉLISE GAUTHIER

Blog post 3 - 19 mars, 2016 by Élise Gauthier

Au fil de nos sessions au Carleton Lodge, je tends l'oreille pour entendre les histoires des résidents, je tiens leurs mains pour un petit boogie-woogie assis, et, surtout, j'apprends à prendre mon temps.

Il faut dire qu'en commençant notre résidence il y a un mois, on ne savait pas tout à fait dans quoi on s'embarquait. On avait planifié des activités thématiques, avec des discussions de groupe, un orchestre sonique... mais dès notre première rencontre avec les résidents, on s'est rendu compte que c'était trop. Nos bonnes intentions d'artistes multidisciplinaires ne répondaient pas aux besoins de nos participants, qui souffrent tous d'un type de démence ou d'un autre, et qui, souvent, ne peuvent pas répondre à une question trop précise. Mieux vaut rester ouvert et leur donner le temps de trouver les mots qu'il faut.

Nos sessions ont donc évolué pour répondre aux circonstances. Soudainement, une heure semble à peine suffisante pour faire le tour du cercle avec notre bol d'objets et leurs bribes d'histoires.

Parfois, un participant choisit un objet dans le bol simplement parce que sa couleur, sa texture ou sa forme lui plaisent. « It's pretty. »

Mais, parfois, un objet d'une apparence banalité mène à une histoire émouvante.



Comme l'homme qui choisit une épinglette du drapeau canadien pour nous raconter que son

frère a combattu contre les Allemands, qu'il est mort au combat, « and I'm not going to say any more. »

Ou encore la femme qui ne trouve pas les mots nécessaires pour exprimer ce qu'elle aimerait nous dire, mais qui fait tourner l'objet dans ses mains, et hoche la tête pour nous faire comprendre qu'elle se rappelle.... de quoi? On ne le saura jamais.



Et puis, il y a les chansons. La semaine dernière, on a chanté « There was an old lady who swallowed a fly... ». Même les participants qui ont souvent du mal à trouver les bons mots, ou qui ne parlent presque pas, ont chanté avec nous. L'un d'entre eux, qui a 80 ans, se souvenait encore de son père qui jouait cette chanson sur sa guitare. Comme quoi la mémoire musicale est bien ancrée en nous.

Ceci dit, certains participants semblent avoir épuisé leur intérêt pour notre bol d'objets. Ils se souviennent qu'ils ont déjà fait cet exercice, et ne choisissent plus des objets que pour nous faire plaisir. Lors de notre prochaine session, nous allons donc essayer autre chose. Nous allons chanter plusieurs chansons qui, on l'espère, susciteront d'autres souvenirs et réactions émotives de la part des participants.

Qui sait quelles réponses nous recevront en suivant cette nouvelle avenue? Ce qui est certain, c'est que les résidents du Carleton Lodge n'ont pas fini de nous surprendre... et de nous charmer!



PROJECT CHECK IN WITH OTTAWA STILT UNION

March 31, 2016

What changes are you noticing in the participants through the course of your workshops?

Élise: Some of the participants are opening up some more, and seem happy to see us. A few of the residents started off sitting to the side to observe us for the first few sessions, but decided to participate in our most recent session, and seemed like they had a lot to say.

Gabrielle: The residents generally seem less apprehensive, as if they are getting used to us, even if they don't remember meeting us before. Some of the participants who are more shy or silent have spoken to us on later occasions when they felt comfortable to do so. From session to session, we are hearing more laughter.

Laura: There is definitely a warming-up, a recognition among the participants – some of them are becoming our friends – they are pleased to see us.

What issues and experiences were the participants able to voice through this artistic expression in their participation in Art Place?

Élise: The fact that we try to ask open-ended questions and that we don't push them when they don't give us clear answers gives the participants a chance to express themselves in whatever way they are able. Sometimes, this means that they give us one-word answers, other times it leads to a long story about an aspect of their life that the staff had never heard before. The concept of word association through objects seems to access a different part

of their thought process, allowing them to express themselves in a more abstract way.

Gabrielle: I've seen some participants take on more of a positive tone after hearing us playing music. The music component of our work in particular seems to allow some of the participants to delve into memories they are not able to access otherwise.

Laura: We have felt some moments of real connection where a participant seemed to emerge for a moment from his or her shell to express something.

How will the memory boards that the participants created have an impact or be useful to others at Carleton Lodge? Will they be displayed, distributed or otherwise shared? How will this affect the space or the participants?

Élise: Given the responses that some of the participants have had upon seeing the memory boards at the end of the session, I hope that they will be able to look at them with their visitors and maybe spark a new conversation, in the same way that their objects allowed them to tell a story they might not have told otherwise.

Gabrielle: The memory boards are colourful, tangible roadmaps of the time we shared with the participants. I hope that they can help some residents to create connections with their memories or with other people in their lives.

Laura: I hope they will remain on display in the residence for that purpose. And perhaps inspire future activities there.

LA MUSIQUE PERMET UN ACCÈS À LA MÉMOIRE

Blog post 4 – Apr 4, 2016 par Gabrielle Lalonde

Nos deux dernières séances au Carleton Lodge ont été très riches en découvertes.

Dans un désir de vouloir changer notre formule un peu, la semaine dernière a été consacrée entièrement à la musique. On voulait savoir ce qui arriverait si, au lieu de centrer nos échanges sur les petits objets choisis par chacun, on se laissait guider par la mémoire auditive des participants. On a donc préparé huit chansons que les résidents de Carleton Lodge auraient probablement connu, compte tenu de leur âge, par exemple : *Que Sera Sera*, *Daisy* et *Oh My Darling Clementine*.

Quelle fut notre surprise que de voir certains de nos participants les plus discrets chanter avec nous – certains connaissaient même toutes les paroles des chansons! Ce travail d'exploration par la musique nous a permis d'avoir accès à une foule de remarques et de souvenirs intéressants de la part des résidents. Nous avons appris que l'un d'entre eux chantait dans une chorale baptiste auparavant, qu'un autre était pianiste et jouait du boggie woogie et qu'une autre encore n'était jamais montée à vélo comme dans la chanson *Daisy*, mais qu'elle était montée à dos d'éléphant quand elle était toute jeune lors d'une foire à Régina.

Ils étaient plus enjoués qu'à l'habitude. Comme si la musique s'était propagée dans leurs corps. Certains d'entre eux ont eu le goût de danser. D'autres parlaient à un rythme très animé. Tout

le groupe riait et souriait d'avantage. Nous savions déjà que la musique permet un accès impressionnant à la mémoire, mais nous ne connaissions pas tout à fait l'ampleur du bonheur qu'il nous permettrait de saisir chez ces gens que nous apprenons à connaître petit à petit.

Lors de notre session d'aujourd'hui, nous avons choisi de ramener les objets dans notre travail, mais cette fois, ceux-ci avaient tous été trouvés dans la nature. Les yeux des résidents s'écarquillaient devant les feuilles, les fleurs séchées et les pommes de pin sur notre plateau. « It's a bit of tree skin », fait remarquer un participant, en brandissant un morceau d'écorce.



Ils nous ont parlé de Noël, de leur enfance à la ferme. Leurs réactions enjouées face à ces objets m'ont fait constater que pour la plupart des résidents, le rapport direct à la nature est quelque chose du passé – ils observent les arbres et les ruisseaux par la fenêtre de l'institution



bien plus souvent qu'ils n'ont la chance de les sentir en personne. En voyant notre tableau complété, un des participants est devenu ému en se remémorant le temps qu'il a passé dans les bois durant les saisons de chasse au cerf. « On peut presque sentir l'odeur [de la forêt] », soupirait-il. Pour moi, la nature, ça sent la liberté – quand je me trouve au bord d'un lac ou dans une forêt, je prends vraiment mon temps et que je savoure le moment. Je sympathisais tout à fait avec son sentiment.

J'ai déjà hâte de les revoir la semaine prochaine, pour notre dernière séance!

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT ON OUR PROJECT

Blog post 5 – Apr 6, 2016 by Ottawa Stilt Union

This project has been such a beautiful experience for us. We asked Linda Dagby, Activities Co-ordinator for Long Term Care at Carleton Lodge, for her perspective. Here's what she had to say:

The program has gone over very well with our residents in the Long term care — the combination of songs, sharing, conversation, inclusiveness and laughter has made a huge difference in the lives of our residents. The memory board (word association) is a really good idea; it works especially well with our lower functioning residents. I am amazed at how residents with dementia are able to find words to describe the objects they have at hand; short, simple, yet profound answers. I watched some of our residents come out of their shell (smiling and sharing freely). The other day, a resident said to me after the sing along session “you know my father used to play guitar and sing that song to me and my siblings when I was a little girl”. Another resident said this about a piece of pine leaves she was holding – “this reminds me of my husband”. I cannot tell you how phenomenal this is. I could see the difference. The residents love the program, our team always looks forward to seeing the

friendly [Art Place](#) group on Monday mornings at 10:00 a.m.

So it is with some sadness that we approach the end of this project: only one more week!



OTTAWA STILT UNION'S ART PLACE RETROSPECTIVE

Blog post 6 - Apr 16 2016 by Ottawa Stilt Union

The Ottawa Stilt Union's residency at the Carleton Lodge has come to an end. After seven wonderful sessions, here are some of my thoughts on the project.

Before knowing which organization we'd be working with, we had hoped to build some sort of performance over the course of several weeks. This would not be possible with the group at the Carleton Lodge, where physical mobility was an obstacle and week-to-week continuity could not be relied upon. Instead we decided to collect information from our participants—stories, memories, thoughts, anything—which we might later use in a project of our own. Ultimately we wanted any content generated during the process to come from our participants.

Not knowing exactly what kind of response to expect from them, we set open-ended goals going in. Our initial (perhaps overly ambitious) approach of doing a lot of things and getting a lot of results had to be curbed dramatically to respond to the needs and abilities of the group. We originally tried some themed sound exploration and word association exercises, which mostly ended up with us saying words and making sounds to the group and not getting the kind of creative response that a theatre company might hope for.

We quickly abandoned those activities and focused on creating memory boards, allowing participants to select objects that spoke to them in some way, and to say a little bit about what that object meant to them. These objects, along with select comments on them—ranging from anecdotes, memory fragments, and enigmatic (to us) free association—went onto the board, resulting in a tangible collection of objects and stories that participants could subsequently admire and ponder. We got a lot of interesting comments this way: someone said “communication between the one and the many” to describe a safety pin with about 10 others hanging from it; for someone else, an acorn evoked “something written by my little

grandson; something far from me.” We made audio recordings of our conversations, so that elusive, poetic observations like these would be preserved.



The songs we sang seemed just as evocative. Each week we bookended our session with a song we felt would be recognizable to our participants. Sometimes nearly everyone sang along. Other times there was mostly clapping or humming the melody. I think one strength of starting off this way was that the song was viewed as a performance we were giving for the group, so there was less pressure to say something interesting or come up with answers to our questions.

In fact we did an entire session of singing, going up to individuals between songs to hear what kinds of thoughts or memories were stirred. Music, like physical artefacts, seems to have a way of transporting people back to distant memories. We even got a request, for a song called “There Is A Tavern In The Town”, which we had to look up before bringing it in to a later session.

We learned a lot working with our new friends at the Carleton Lodge. We learned to be patient, to take the time to breathe and listen. We made a point of letting people express themselves as best as they could, and tried to avoid ‘leading the witness’ and reading too much into their words when words were scarce. It was a challenge to ask questions that wouldn't put

people on the spot, or require answers structured in a certain way. "What is this?" might be daunting, for fear of giving a wrong answer. "What does it make you think of?" is open-ended, but still presents its own difficulties to someone who has trouble finding words.

All in all, we had a beautiful time. We saw people light up with excitement at times, and fall into deep, contemplative silence at others,

like the woman who, after mentioning her husband, closed her eyes and let a warm smile spread across her face. We had people speak to us who in everyday life were resigned to silence. Whether it was the fresh stimulus, or simply our open interest in what they had to say, something in what we were doing brought it out of them. I'll miss spending time with this wonderful group of people.

LOST IN LANGUAGE, FINDING MEMORY: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS WITH OTTAWA STILT UNION

April 20, 2016

How would you describe your overall experience with Art Place?

This has been a very interesting experience for us: it has expanded our ideas of how we can work. We have thought of ourselves primarily as a physical creation company and we found ourselves, in this situation, with nothing physical to work with. Being able to adapt and create a satisfying experience for ourselves and our community partner was gratifying and opened the doors to new ideas for us to explore in future. Also, we really appreciated having AOE act as interface between us and the community, doing the hard work of administration so that we could do the fun work of art!

What are some of the most significant things you've learned through out your project?

We have learned a lot about memory loss; about how to talk to people who have lost their ability to express themselves; about the power of music to engage memory; about the power of nature to trigger memory... We have also learned how important it is for any group of people to have new experiences – this can refer to us as artists and also to the residents of Carleton Lodge: I think it would be fair to say that nobody expects much of them on a day to day basis, so having us come and ask them to participate in our project was good for them: stimulating.



How was your project a success?

Judging by the response of our contact at Carleton Lodge, this project has been very successful in stimulating and engaging the residents: as the weeks passed they became more open to telling us things, more comfortable with us and our process, and had occasional magical breakthroughs in which they accessed memories long buried. An important part of the success of the project was the fact that we were there with no specific agenda or expectation and thus were able to listen to the residents and let them express themselves without judgement or censorship. Even with the best of intentions it can be difficult for staff and family members who interact with the residents daily to maintain an open mind and a relaxed attitude and to allow the space and time for the residents to express themselves.

What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when learning about your project?

If/when we make a performance with this material we will want the audience to experience what we experienced in working with these people: curiosity, delight, sorrow, love, frustration, heartbreak, hilarity. We will try to communicate the sense of being lost in language which so many of the residents experience, as well as the sense of being liberated from meaning and existing in a world of associative poetry, which is the case for some. We will also try to communicate the sense of the profound physical constraint that many of the residents live with, which, for some, is deeply frustrating and even enraging.

In what ways did or will the community benefit from your project?

The community of Carleton Lodge has benefited from our presence in various ways: we brought new perspectives and ideas both to the residents and to the staff; we helped people connect to their memories through music and through object association; we gave individual attention to participants and valued their presence and responses to us; we gave pleasure to residents and staff, which we hope may have extended in some part to the families of the residents by association. In the case of a future performance, in so far as we are able to shed light on what it is like to be an older person with profound physical and mental obstacles, we hope to spread empathy and understanding.

Did the participants feel that arts and culture offerings are physically, financially and/or geographically accessible to them? Did participating in this project change this?

This program's participants are not in a position to express an opinion on this. I can say from our perspective and from the perspective of our contact person at Carleton Lodge that the elder residential community is underserved in terms of arts and culture since they are really not able to go to see and experience art and culture and few things come to them. In light of that, our presence was a welcome change from routine as well as an influx of new ideas.

Do you have anything else you would like to share about your project or the program?

We are very grateful to have had this opportunity. We haven't yet processed all that it means to us personally and artistically, but it has been a profound experience for us and will no doubt stimulate us artistically for some time to come.

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