

# Designing with Children

## HOME

Is 'Home' something that can be taken with you? Is it a building, a body, a piece of land or is it a collection of emotions and memories that can be projected on any place? – these questions were explored by the ДОМ/Home dance project, the homonymous [webpage](#) reads. Since 1995 Benno Voorham, choreographer and producer of the Home project, has worked intensively in former Soviet Union countries teaching workshops, choreographing and co-ordinating partnerships and performances for, and with, children and young people, groups that are not very often listened to. Intense geopolitical changes in this area have left many children and young people and their families living marginalized and under-privileged lives and with few opportunities to directly influence their circumstances.

As with Lava-Dansproduktion other projects – for example, the more recent 2015 'Waiting in the Margins' project, Georgia – children's everyday lives, experiences, stories and dreams are a focal point in Benno Voorham's explorations. With Home, more specifically, a group of six dancers, one musician and other facilitators from Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus worked with a group of children from a children's home in Chisinau, Moldova, from both Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking backgrounds. Together they explored children's memories, feelings and reflections on what home means to them and weave their narratives into a dance piece.

## Motivation

The original concept for this project was developed by Sybrig Dokter and Benno Voorham of Lava-Dansproduktion with the intention to put different stories of the children in the ДОМ/Home project and find a way to make an artistic dance performance, giving a voice to their often marginalised voice in society. The Swedish Institute places particular focus on former Soviet states, looking how to aid these

### What

Dance performance (pre-brief)

### Where

Moldova

Ukraine

Belarus

### Age

7-16

### Group Size

90 children (pilot projects, appr. 30/country);

80 children (main project, appr. 20/country);

19 children (performing on stage)

### Project Stage

Pre-Brief

### Children's Roles

Advocates for Change

### Timescale

November 2011-September 2013

### Partners

Benno Vorham (Choreographer)

Madeléne Beckam (Museum pedagogue, The Swedish Museum of Architecture)

Maline Casta (Set design, costumes)

Ion Coroi (Music)

Sybrig Dokter (Swedish organiser)

Inna Aslamova (Dancer, Belarus)

Daniil Belkin (Dancer, Ukraine)

Mariia Kondratieva (Dancer, Ukraine)

Denys Pronin (Dancer, Ukrain)

Alexandra Soshnicova (Dancer, Moldova)

Sergey Golovnea (Dancer, Moldova)

ADDM (Association for the Development of Modern Dance in Moldova) (Initiator)

countries and give voice to children and young people as key target group.

The aim was to stimulate participants, audience and other target groups to think differently about the notion of home, belonging, inclusiveness and the concept of nationality in a world of moving borders; to support children's self esteem and to offer them tools to function within an open and democratic civil society – a true democracy that gives space for minorities and marginalised groups to be heard. *'What I want to achieve'*, Benno Voorham explained, *'is that children come out of this project with a greater sense of who they are and a different way to be able to relate to both other young people, their friends, but also how they relate to the world outside the children's home, which includes, of course, adults.'*

Lava-Dansproduktion (Initiator)  
'Art Travel', Ukraine (Partner NGO)  
Gallery dance theatre (Partner)  
Udance (Publicity partner, National Dance Portal)  
Swedish Postcode Lottery (Funder)  
The Swedish Institute and the Open Society Foundation (Funder)  
The Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design (Funder)

## Children's involvement

The first part of the project took place in Moldova, where Benno Voorham, six dancers and museum pedagogue Madelène Beckam worked together in a creative process that culminated in the dance performance. Participation in the project was voluntary and remained open to all youngsters and children.

In November 2011 a five-day pilot project was organized in Chisinau with the aim to test different methods and ideas for working with the children, establish a friendly atmosphere and allow the children to freely express their perspectives, stories and dreams in relation to the concept 'home'. Madelène Beckam from the Museum of Architecture, Stockholm, facilitated the creative process and stimulated communication through a set of workshop classes, which included games and visualization activities that ranged from creating physical spaces to designing imaginary spaces in the form of memories and wishes for the future. The pilot project was supported by Margareta Sjöberg, a psychotherapist from the organization Krica in Stockholm.

One of the first warm-up exercises was to enable children map their perceptions of home, asking questions such as 'How does *your* map look like?'; 'What places are important to you, places where you feel at home?' and 'How do you move in-between these spaces?' Next and very central exercise was the 'Box of Feelings' exercise. The children were asked to imagine and articulate the qualities of their home as if it was a box – 'What would this box look like if it contained your feelings on home?' 'Would it be bright, light, dark, pink, striped?' Using paperknives, coloured paper, glue, scissors, glue-guns, and boxes, the children created their home-boxes, an exercise which formed the basis of designing the actual dance stage setting. The participating children thus familiarized themselves with movement in space and explored spatial qualities through pictures and objects (paper rolls, fiber-tip pens, paint, sticky tape, illustrated magazines, rope etc.). Gradually they started exploring the feeling of safety, which informed the 'Superherofamily' exercise, whereby they created houses that supported the different needs of the superhero members of their families and enabled them to live together without hurting one another.

The second phase of the project started in August 2012 at a recreational area on the bank of the river Dniester, next to the town of Vadul-lui Voda, 20 km from Chisinau. Over a four-week period the six professional dancers, under the direction of Benno Voorham and with

help from Madelène Beckam, facilitated around 40 children to express their perceptions of home and communicate through body language using modern and contemporary dance techniques and improvisation. Visual art creative classes, role games and floor work – facilitating a deeper kinesthetic experience of movement – were orchestrated to enable expression of feelings of love, care, belonging, safety and insecurity, friendship and loneliness. Informed by the first-phase activities, the children thus explored the capacities of their own body and how it interacts with other people's bodies and space by playing start/stop and sensitizing themselves to what happens in the space around them. Final outcome was putting together a dance performance, which allowed to visualize and enact their perceptions of 'home'.

On 8<sup>th</sup> September 2012, and after two rehearsals, the premiere took place at the Ginta Latina Theatre in Chisinau. The theatre was almost full and consisted of children, families and professional dancers, among others. Around 50 people from the audience shared their emotions and experiences on completion of the performance, in what ended up being an emotional and particularly touching response.

After the premiere the performance toured eight towns in Moldova from 9<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> September 2012 and then functioned as the frame for a Ukrainian and Belarusian edition of the piece.

## Outputs and outcomes

The performances themselves were the key outcome out of the project, and were further disseminated by posters, program booklets in Romanian and Russian, a [blog](#), videos from two performances and a printed report of the project.

Equally important is that the children engaged with an unusual creative process, which helped them familiarise with movement, body emotions and contemporary dance forms. Exercises in creating sound landscapes, visualizing music and sound through the physicality and inclusion of one's body into intricate sculptures and moving abstract compositions were completely new experiences for the children. *'Through dance'*, dancer Alexandra Soshnicova ruminated, *'we can communicate by means of art. Our body will not lie. Our words have the tendency to exaggerate. But our body is honest and the children feel that best.'*

Children's own communication style was not judged, they did not have to compete with one another and were not asked to produce immediate results. On the contrary, children were offered choice and learning experiences through games, an approach which is very different from typical hierarchical disciplinarian systems. The breaking of stereotypes was inevitable to many of the participating children, engendering curiosity and excitement; their desire to play and communicate, move, see new things and get new experiences prevailed over their initial shyness, misunderstandings, fears and defenses.

Having known few adults except for their boarding school teachers and personnel, the dance performance was a positive experience to many children; the hugs, words of gratitude and self-made gifts offered to the adult dancers were tokens of their enjoyment and satisfaction.

For Benno Voorham, his vision for future performances became clearer after discussions with the adult dancers and his own experiences with the children, in that *'the subject of Home was not only about an architectural building. I was more interested in socio-psychological perceptions of home, finding a home within a social context.'*

## Quotes

*'I've learned to control myself and to be more confident. I want my sisters to take up art, too'. (Sahsa, girl performer).*

*'I've learned to dance and to behave myself on stage. I used to watch older boys dancing break and envy them, and now hundreds of people watch me. I can dance anywhere, the only thing I need is music.'* (Vania, boy performer).

*'It's such an intense and interesting journey, to see these children coming in five weeks ago in a project, being curious and also much more shy, and to see how they more and more become stronger as people, as persons. And the fact that this project seems to have supported them to bring back trust from them into other adults. I think it's one of the most profound gifts of those children.'* (Benno Voorham, choreographer).

*'In this project it's much more about having reflections of their ideas of the word 'home', so we do different sorts of exercises, both to start emotional and to get to know each other. I think they get more self confidence as we expose them to things they haven't done before and they realise they can manage this. And also, as we do this, they also get certain skills about how to combine two sticks together, or nail different constructions. To deal with these kids and see their development they give me goosebumps.'* (Madeléne Beckam, museum pedagogue).

## Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Benno Voorham and Madeléne Beckam for providing us valuable information and own insights out of their experience participating in the HEM/HOME/ ДОМ project.

## Resources

Lava-Dansproduktion, 'Home', <http://theprojecthome.org/> (accessed 27 November 2015).

Grabovan, I., Radchenko, K., Marchuk, C. and Grigorovich, A. (2014) *HEM/HOME/ ДОМ – var är mitt hem? Reports about the project in Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. 2012-2013.* Lava-Dansproduktion.



*Building a home with different materials during one of the workshops by Madeléne Beckam in Ukraine. Courtesy: Lava-Dansproduktion. (photographer: Benno Voorham).*



*Building a home for a group of superheroes. Workshop by Madeléne Beckam in Belarus. Courtesy: Lava-Dansproduktion. (photographer: Benno Voorham).*



*The performance HOME in Belarus. Courtesy: Lava-Dansproduktion. (photographer: Benno Voorham).*



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