



HA!Man report on the first retreat held at Eagle's Ridge

By Francois le Roux, 18 May 2020

I will now attempt to say something about the past HA!Retreat we presented at our home base, Eagle's Ridge, Stutterheim, Eastern Cape. We only had two participants, but for a first time, the small number was conducive. And they were experienced retreaters, giving us valuable advice.

Retreats seem to be flourishing all over. This might not seem to be a good sign, of course. It means that society is so stressed that more and more people need to take time off, to retreat into silent corners, to catch up, to heal, to find perspective. But even in a healthy society, retreating can have a role to play. Healthy societies need to stay afresh, cannot allow itself to stagnate. And a good retreat is one that does not provide escape, but nourishment, true refreshment, so that what has been garnered can be ploughed back into the real world.

All sorts of programmes and disciplines are doing the rounds. But what happens at a HA!Retreat? There is no tradition, no discipline of name, no programme, no set of instructions or rules or principles. We just get together to play. Yes, you can call it improvisation, but it is more – or less. It is – time and again – entering silence, and from there to flow with expression. The first retreat was very much about musical expression, but the field is open – writing, drawing, moving, building, talking, dramatizing.

So is that it then? Just play? Yes, that's it. The only specification I can add is to spell play with a capital: Play. And talk. The first two participants were good thinkers and

talkers, so we did discuss quite a bit, in between the sessions of playing. And we discussed how playing is perhaps not an adequate term to use. We say that children play – they play almost constantly. But for a child, there is not such a thing as playing. They are simply being alive, they are simply engaging with life in the fullest of ways. “Play” to them is feeling, touching, testing, enjoying, observing, moving, handling, constructing, messing around, talking, screaming (of joy and of pain), sounding out, repeating (learning) and confronting. All the basic skills we have, that we rely on minute by minute, we acquire through the early years of “playing.” We call it playing, because there is no agenda, no curriculum, no set of desired outcomes involved. Playing seems to have a life and purpose of its own. One plays to play. And yet, so much comes out of that.

So that’s basically the setup of the HA!Retreat: laying down frames within which to play. Frames of time and space and means. At Eagle’s Ridge, the time frames were four hours each morning (about three sessions of play during each morning). The frame of place was an African hut, which is pretty much one of the best spaces I have ever worked in. And then the frame of means: instruments (between the three of us, we had a choice of 50 different instruments!), a floor to move on, a microphone for speech, writing and drawing materials.

So we would go silent. Become aware of the wind, of birds singing, the depth of the mountain space. And one of us would make the first sound, or a cough or a rustle. From there, a trickle of flow would ensue, building like a mountain stream, becoming a river at times, a waterfall, a lake..

I was afraid that five days would be too much for this simple undertaking: just to play together. It was not. Each day would surprise us. The well of creative possibilities would seem endless. It is not. But it is huge. Not that we set ourselves out to be particularly creative. We only set ourselves out to breathe. To be. This means that we do not HAVE to express. Expression only happens when we really feel like doing it. In this case, the three of us felt this most of the time. But the doing always hinges on the freedom not to do.

I was the facilitator, but for myself, I also got so much from it – these five days. I did try and analyze various aspects of improvisation – its effects, implications and contribution. In short, these were emotional healing, creativity boost, spiritual nourishment, thought renewal, the sharpening of awareness, technique enhancement, group sensitivity, the value of sharing and the building of community. Again, none of these are set out as goals, and yet, much of these are effected through the act of Playing. Or the allowance to flow. Or the practice of being present.

Another concern I had was that not enough is happening during the retreat. The mornings are taken up with the improvising sessions, yes, but the afternoons are basically free, with certain recreational activities as open options. Each evening there was a performance, for an hour. And we did incorporate extra sessions for specific discussions during early evening. Then there was the Saturday, free during the day, with a final concert in the local theatre in the evening. That was it. And yet we seemed to have sensed the balance right. It transpired that there is a need for as much time to digest the experience of self-expression, as the experience itself. Not to mention the evening performances. Except for one evening of watching videos and listening to

recordings of improvisational acts and collaborations, I did a solo improvisation performance on each of the other. First on the piano, then the cello, then the theatrical interpretative performance I call "Birth" and finally a talking performance – again theatrical.

We took all of this energy to the local theatre as a conclusion to the week's "work." It was literally a spill-over from the retreat into the local community. Deep seeds have been planted and we can already feel how this will sprout forth in the form of more regular community concerts – with spontaneity at its core, more retreats - also in other parts of the country and world - and the advancement of improvisation as a foundational boon for society.

My conclusion: like the term "HA!", the richness of our first HA!Retreat experience, lay in its simplicity.

Again!