

EUGENE MEMORY 1

I worked with Eugene at the Pavarotti Music Centre in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina throughout 1998. At that time, Mostar was still a divided city, with little freedom of movement from one side of the city to the other, and with the town's physical destruction from the war years still very visible. I worked as one of a team of local and foreign musicians and teachers, leading creative music projects in schools and communities.

The first workshop I remember Eugene leading was in a town called Ljubinje. It was our first workshop there and we had been invited by a teacher in the local high school who had started a drama program with his students and wanted to extend them further. Very few of the local Mostar musicians came with us that day, because Ljubinje was over the Inter-Entity Border in Republika Srpska, and they did not feel safe travelling there. For the rest of us, we piled into a brown kombi van, and set off one very sunny day, travelling through towns with ancient standing stones alongside dynamited houses, grazing sheep and suspicious farmers who watched our car as it ambled past their fields, and slalomed its way between mine-shaped pot-holes in the bitumen.

Two hours later, we were greeted by the group of students who had gathered in their school building on a non-school day, eager to meet us and work with us. "Go and find a stone for yourself, a stone that will fit in your hand," Eugene proposed, and we scattered, finding all range of stones in the outdoor landscape – mud clods alongside cement fragments and smooth river stones.

We made a circle, sitting cross-legged or kneeling. Eugene instructed us to pass our stones on to our neighbour, one by one, around the circle, in rhythm and at the same time. The speed would increase, the laughter and sense of exhilaration in the moment increased apace. Eventually the rhythm would falter, the groove would be lost, and someone would have ended up with a pile of stones in front of them. "You're out," Eugene would say, smiling broadly and shaking his head but holding firm, and somehow, going out was just as much fun as staying in.

He taught us a song to accompany the stone-passing – *Bombhela* – from his home country of South Africa, and described the children who would sing it there, watching for trains, running after them as they sped past, wondering if this would be the train bringing their fathers home from the mines or work in the city, perhaps with gifts in their pockets. Years later, when I teach this game and this same song to my students here in Melbourne, Australia – many of whom are from Africa and only recently arrived in Australia – I am transported just for a moment back to that first day in Ljubinje, when we met with an isolated group of young people, sat on the floor together, passed stones, sang, and communicated clearly and directly, "We're here together because we want to be. We're connecting with each other through the joys and directness of this music. We don't need anything more than ourselves and our imaginations to do this together."

EUGENE MEMORY 2

"If we are going to work with children, we need to remember to play like children!" It was the start of a new school year and Music Centre had organised some professional development sessions for the local musicians and us to get us geared up for the new year of workshops. We had asked Eugene to lead the first one.

I remember that in the beginning, Eugene got us to play lots of games, to reconnect with our playful selves. Games that involved chasing and tagging, physical activities, working in teams, inventing words and rhythms quickly, and so on. The team was a complex group – all were dedicated and skilled musicians and teachers, but all had also survived the nightmare war years along with their families and communities, and they struggled with the after-effects of those traumas. Being playful – having fun, laughing, responding unselfconsciously, bouncing off unexpected ideas, embracing the unpredictable or the non-linear – were not easy attributes to deliver on demand. I observed the tremendous good will and trust in the room, but I also sensed a protective layer, jovial jostling that masked ill-ease, perhaps.

Later, we moved to a smaller room and Eugene asked us all to lie on the floor. And then, to just breathe. "Pay attention to your breath," he instructed in his distinctive voice – itself always an invitation. "Breathing in, breathing out..." It was like a meditation, but it raised a lot of self-consciousness. Someone let their breath out in a sigh, and giggles burst out across the room, along with murmured comments and shuffling bodies. Eugene then asked us to allow our breath to be released with a sound, a natural, unforced sound – but this created even more giggles. "Oh Eugene, it's not going to work!" I remember thinking to myself, feeling sure that *I* knew where he wanted to take us, and equally certain that it wasn't going to work, not on this day.

But this was my lesson in trusting in the process, and trusting in the group. The giggles continued, but they lessened. In time – quite a long time – the energy in the room had settled into something quite intense and shared. Eugene silently – so silently I didn't even realise it was happening! – beckoned one of the group to sit with a djembe and to play a slow, warm pulse, its bass notes in time with the exhaled sounds, now creating expansive washes of chords that filled the darkened room. One by one, little by little, Eugene beckoned more people to take up instruments and we found ourselves in the middle of an entrancing, affirming, healing improvisation. So many different lines – some solos, many harmonies and complementary sounds. Earth sounds, grounded sounds, a shared musical outcome. It was, quite simply, magical. I felt lucky to have been there to share in it.

REFLECTION

In writing about these two memories, I found myself wanting to use the word 'communing'. I held back, unsure that I felt comfortable with the religious overtones of 'communion' or the hippy convention of 'communing with nature' (i.e. dancing about naked under the full moon).

When I think back to all my experiences of working with Eugene, there are several recurring themes that I can recognise as fundamental elements of his practice and approach. One is the idea of communing through music – groups being drawn into a shared experience through the medium of music in such a way that it creates a sense of community and belonging and acceptance.

Another is the notion of playfulness – Eugene is so masterful in the way he invites us to usher forth our inner child and our playful spirits. 'Play' doesn't mean that the outcomes are not serious, thoughtful, rigorous or disciplined, however. But the play is the safe doorway in to those deeper encounters. Trust comes through play.

The third element is that of invitation. Eugene invites in many ways – partly because he is so damn warm and friendly and fun to be with. When he gets enthusiastic about something he bubbles over and takes your hands – metaphorically perhaps – and invites you to be part of this magic that he is already entranced by! I remember someone in Mostar once telling a story about being pulled into an endeavour of some kind, saying, “and then he started you know, making all those *kissing noises* and of course I had to join at that point.” We all knew exactly what these were, and that they signified an infectious enthusiasm and invitation that was too much fun to even put into words.

These three qualities – the invitation, the playfulness, and the communing – converge to create precious, beautiful music-making experiences, which then become healing. ‘Healing’ is a fourth important element in Eugene’s workshops, perhaps the most important. But it wouldn’t be healing, or inviting, or playful, or community-building, if the music weren’t equally powerful. And there are so few satisfying words to describe music and how it affects us that I shall stop here, trusting that those who have experienced Eugene in full musical flight know, and those who haven’t, can imagine.

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