

escaping

*From walking theatre to walking therapy,
Xenia Taliotis explores the power of a stroll
to spark our imagination and lift our mood*

Pack up your troubles



escaping

“The moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow,” said poet and historian Henry David Thoreau, nicely summing up what contemporaries Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin also believed, and what the peripatetic philosophers of ancient Greece had long known – the path to creativity is a long and hard road best accessed on foot.

As someone who unfortunately has a very close relationship with writers’ block, I’m right there with Thoreau. Walk and thought are inextricably linked. When my brain shuts down and I find myself lost for words, I hit the streets. Sometimes when I’m out wandering, a feature that I’ve been struggling with, one that has hung structureless on the computer screen like a crumpled shirt on a hanger, begins to take shape in my mind. I might still have problems finishing the feature when I get home, but I will at least have worked out a way of moving it onto the next stage and, more often than not, I’ll also have come up with one or two ideas for other articles I’d like to write.

That physical strides trigger strides in thinking is borne out by a 2014 study by researchers at Stanford University in America, which showed that walking increases ‘divergent’ thinking – that is our creative thought processes – by a staggering 60%. How and why this happens is a mystery, though it’s possible that author Virginia Woolf had the

answer when she said that walking gave her the “space to spread [her] mind out”.

Walking is something we do on autopilot, something we don’t need to concentrate on, and perhaps this frees the mind from the active tasks it finds so exhausting, allowing it simply to be. This, coupled with the benefits exercise delivers – among them a boost to the brain’s oxygen and blood supply – seems to produce the perfect environment for creative thinking and, paradoxically, for inventive problem-solving. It’s no wonder then that walking is proving the perfect partner for reading groups, theatre, counselling and even learning, with London School of Economics (LSE) now offering students one-to-one walking study sessions on, for example, revision and time management. According to LSE’s website, “a gentle walk can inspire the imagination, and open up the free flow of ideas, while green spaces can help restore attention and focus”.

Emily Rhodes (emilyrhodeswriter.com), who’s been running her monthly walking book club on London’s Hampstead Heath since 2011, couldn’t agree more. She’s convinced that being on the move encourages a fluidity of thought and speech in people that simply wouldn’t happen in someone’s front room, however companionable. “I think something happens on an unconscious level when we walk, which seems to lubricate our thinking and discourse,” she says. “The conversations never wane, and I think the very fact that we are outside, moving, breathing fresh air, being



Photography: Xenia Tallotis



Photography: Xenia Tallotis



Photography: Emily Rhodes

EMILY RHODES

Emily writes about books for the Financial Times, The Guardian and The Spectator. She runs Emily’s Walking Book Club at festivals and writer retreats, as well as monthly walks on Hampstead Heath.



Left and below right:
Emily's Walking Book Club
takes a stroll on London's
Hampstead Heath despite the
inclement weather.
Below left: Walking in winter
can be just as uplifting as
a summer hike - just don't
forget to pack a cosy hat!



Photography: Xenia Talbot

stimulated by nature, liberates and inspires us. It helps us make leaps in our thinking, and sparks new perspectives on the books.”

I met Emily's walking book group on a wet, windy Sunday. There were about 30 of us and despite being the only newbie, I didn't get the heart-thumping anxiety I usually get when meeting lots of new people, partly because there were no formal introductions, and partly because everyone was standing side by side in clusters of twos or threes, which made me feel less shy. I joined a couple of women who were already having an animated conversation about the book, and that was that: within seconds I was part of the discussion.

Sarah has been a regular at the book club for years: “Walking and reading are two of my greatest passions, so being able to combine the two, exercising both my mind and body simultaneously, is wonderful. Plus there is something about analysing the books while walking that makes us less inhibited, somehow. People come up with theories that they might have felt too self-conscious to mention if they'd been sitting in a circle in a room with all eyes upon them.”

That was certainly one of the aspects I liked most about the group, too. I liked how relaxed it was, how no single person dominated the conversation – as can happen in conventional reading clubs – and how we stopped every 15 minutes or so for a general discussion and for Emily to introduce a new subject for us to think about. We then resumed our walk having re-grouped with different people, thereby engaging with other members, and hearing other points of view.

Active engagement and participation is also at the root of actor and playwright Sadie >

WALKING TALL

Engage your core by tightening your stomach muscles and straightening your spine while walking. Plus, roll the foot from heel to toe and let your arms swing naturally.

“Walk and talk therapy... helps speed up the healing process, people might be more receptive when on the move”

Dixon-Spain's Walking Theatre Company (thewalkingtheatrecompany.com), where audiences follow the actors through Scotland's forests, gardens, churchyards and glens.

Sadie says she first got the idea for theatre on the move when her children were tiny, when she would tell them stories as they walked. “We'd just moved to Glendaruel, in Argyll, and wanted our kids to grow up using their imagination and appreciating all that nature had to offer them. We didn't have broadband at the time, but even if we had, we didn't want it to be their entertainment. Each day, we'd put our wellies on and go searching for Puck or Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or for fairies, or characters I'd make up. Exploring the forests and creating the scenes for them added enchantment to the stories – as much for me as for them – and gave me the idea for my walking theatre company.”

Sadie started her 'theatre without walls' in 2009, and says that the fact that audiences

move through the landscape, following in the footsteps of the actors, connects them on a deeper level to the play, to the story, and also to the 'set' – which is, of course, nature's own creation. Sadie and her company now put on theatre performances nationwide.

“It's an incredible social and immersive experience. The audience has to walk to the next scene – it's not presented to them via a set change, which means their engagement is physical as well as intellectual,” says Sadie. “To get the most from the performance, audiences have to get involved – they have to move, they have to use their imagination and they have to be willing to interact. In other words, they form part of the narrative. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, ‘great thoughts are conceived while walking’. I love that. I love that our audiences leave our performances completely fired up.”

For psychotherapist Lara Just (thewalkingtherapist.co.uk), the decision to treat people while pacing outdoors came about gradually, and partly through her own experience: when her own life fell apart, it was



Photography: The Walking Theatre Company

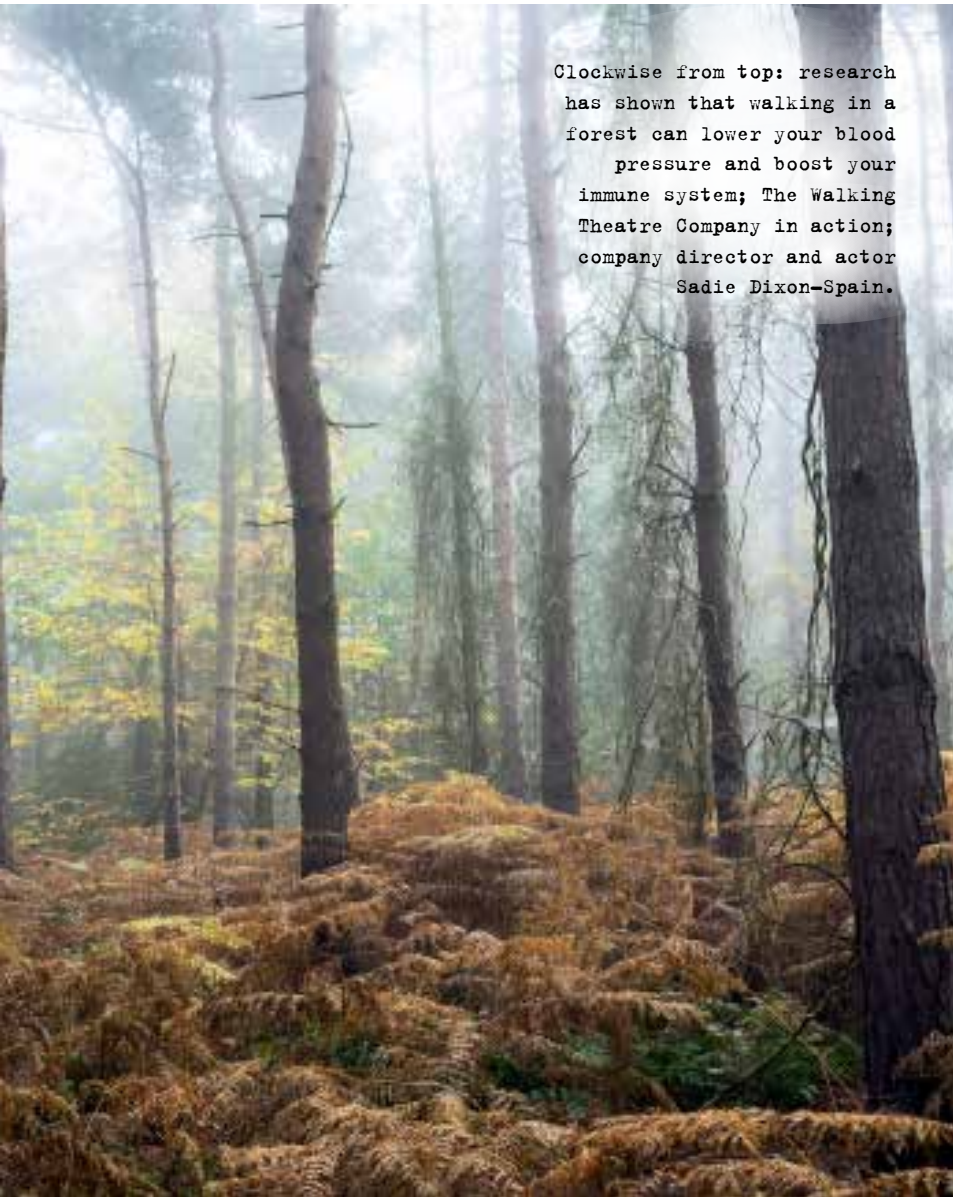
SADIE DIXON-SPAIN

The Walking Theatre Company is based in rural Argyll and produces work all over Scotland. Its shows take audiences on a physical and creative journey through many environments.



Photography: The Walking Theatre Company

Clockwise from top: research has shown that walking in a forest can lower your blood pressure and boost your immune system; The Walking Theatre Company in action; company director and actor Sadie Dixon-Spain.



Photography The Walking Theatre Company

Walking back to happiness

HIPPOCRATES, THE GREEK PHYSICIAN, SAID WALKING WAS MAN'S MEDICINE...

1 It boosts your circulation and gets your heart pumping without straining it. This means that a daily stroll could reduce your chances of suffering a heart attack, stroke or other cardiac malfunction in later life.

2 It's good for your mood. A 2010 study by Jules Pretty and Jo Barton from the University of Essex showed that walks improved feelings of self-esteem and helped combat depression.

3 It will help prevent varicose veins. Luis Navarro, medical director of the Vein Treatment Center, New York, says that walking strengthens the muscles and veins in our calves and feet and helps to maintain a healthy blood flow back up to the heart.

4 It can help some people to maintain bone density, strong muscles and lose weight. To do this, you'll need to up your pace – a fast half an hour walk each day is ideal.

5 Walking is so good for your brain. The Alzheimer's Society reports that taking daily brisk walks is one of the best ways of reducing your chances of developing dementia.

Walking alone or with
a friend is a great
hobby to cultivate,
plus it's free and
kind to the planet.



WISE WORDS

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Lao Tzu, ancient Chinese philosopher and writer

regular walking sessions that kept her going. She imagined that it could be useful for some of her own clients who were going through grief and other challenging periods of transition. She set up the walking therapy project in Hampstead Heath, London, and was surprised at how popular it became within just a matter of months.

For Lara there are several advantages to counselling a person outdoors, not least of which is the environment – some people simply find sitting opposite a therapist in a consultation room too uncomfortable. “Walking side by side in a shared space – as opposed to somewhere the therapist has chosen – often helps put people at their ease, while being on the move is helpful to people with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or ASC (autism spectrum condition) who can find confined spaces stressful.”

More than that, though, there's a lot to be said for the very symbolism of striding and the act of moving forward. “Walk and talk therapy is relatively new so studies are limited, but there is some evidence to suggest that it is proving particularly beneficial to people who are in a state of flux, who are searching for something new, who are grieving or have gone

through some kind of life crisis,” says Lara. “There's an indication that it helps speed up the healing/therapy process and that people might be more receptive when on the move than when sitting in a counselling room.”

While I can't vouch for the efficacy of walk and talk therapy, I can certainly vouch for the healing powers of walking. It was what helped me cling on to sanity and life after my partner died, when I would pound the streets in all weathers for hours on end. In the words of the early philosopher St Augustine, *solvitur ambulando* – it is solved by walking. ☺



Photography: Lara Just

LARA JUST

Lara, The Walking Therapist, specialises in walk and talk therapy, which combines professional psychotherapeutic support with moving the body in nature, often among ancient trees.