



DanceXchange advanced contemporary class. Photo: Tim Cross

Growing up to the challenge

Jane Ralls, Dance Development Director, DanceXchange talks about difficulties in providing sustained creative and performance based opportunities for non-professional adults and makes a call to action

We are all aware that there has been a huge investment in the provision of activities and the development of infrastructure relating to dance and young people in Britain during recent years – and most of us acknowledge the positive impact this has had on the number of young people dancing and the value (both intrinsic and extrinsic) that they and others now place on dance. However, I'd like to reflect on what is available to these young people once they become adults – and whether they have anywhere near the same number, diversity and quality of activities as they did when they were 'young'. After all, there is no point nurturing a specific lifelong learning habit if it can't really be pursued after you have reached adulthood (at whatever age that is deemed to be – over 16, over 18 or over 25).

I am proud to work for DanceXchange (dx) in the West Midlands region, which has a strong dance scene with excellent regional dance agencies, renowned dance companies, skilled independent dance artists and some brilliant youth dance work.

In relation to youth dance, there are over 200 youth dance companies who have the opportunity to perform in around 25 platforms in the West Midlands over a year. Initiatives such as Creative Partnerships (in Birmingham, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent) and Find Your Talent (in Telford) have increased engagement in the arts, and regional partnerships such as *DAiR To...* (Dance Artists in Residence) and the regional commissions made possible by Youth Dance England resources have triggered a more coordinated and strategic approach to youth dance provision. At DanceXchange, we run an extensive class programme which includes 25 classes a week for people under the age of 18, two youth dance companies, the Buzz! project (resourced by BBC Children in Need for young people who are disadvantaged in specific ways) and, in partnership with sampad, the Centre for Advanced Training for South Asian and Contemporary Dance. We also provide opportunities through other partnership projects, such as International Dance Festival Birmingham.

Whilst we have pretty reliable figures relating to the region's engagement with youth dance because of the

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Above: Jane Ralls. Photo: Ed Moore. Above right: DanceXchange outreach activity, Telford Culture Zone. Photo: Phil Sayer

diligent monitoring we undertake for Youth Dance England and government funding bodies, we have to make informed estimates in relation to adults dancing in the West Midlands – adults who choose not to make a career out of dance.

There seems to be excellent access to recreational dance activities in a diverse range of styles for adults in the West Midlands. Many different kinds of settings organise these, such as sports and community centres, private gyms, night clubs and schools – as well as dance agencies like dx, which offers 23 different classes a week to adults as part of its class programme. There also appears to be quite a focus on projects which target groups that might be classified as ‘hard to reach’ – projects that improve both the physical and mental health of participants. However, there are only a handful of opportunities for non-professional adults, who aren’t classified as ‘hard to reach’, to engage in regular dance activities that enable them to create, perform and view work in the same way that most youth groups would. I have two questions in relation to this: ‘why?’ and ‘does it matter?’

I think there are three main reasons why few adult groups exist in the West Midlands.

Firstly, it’s often hard to know how to promote this type of work well and to find the resources to do so, particularly if you believe, as I do, that community dance crosses age, class, ethnicity and gender divides. There’s no easy way of reaching all adults in your area (in the way that you can approach all schools to promote youth dance companies) and, even if you could, you’d probably need to talk about different things and communicate in different ways to your ‘urban arts eclectic’, ‘traditional culture vulture’ and ‘mid-life hobbyist’, terms used in Arts Council England’s Arts-based Segmentation Research report.

Secondly, financial resources to support this type of work are relatively hard to come by, compared to work targeted at/for ‘hard to reach’ groups. Whilst it is possible to argue that grants shouldn’t be needed for this type of opportunity because working adults should be economically independent and those without student debt or dependents may have a good proportion of disposable income, in an environment where dance is competing with other leisure time activities, value for money is very important. Without grants, participants’ fees need to be

high to cover the cost of guest choreographers, travel to any performance opportunities and, if independently presented, technical costs.

Finally, and most importantly, there seems to be a real lack of infrastructure to support this type of work. There doesn’t appear to be the same network of opportunities for sharing, presenting and critically debating work, as there is for youth dance.

It was for a combination of all three reasons that DanceXchange recently decided to disband its regular adult performance group. Whilst we still provide, I think, excellent opportunities for adults to engage in creative and performance activities through a variety of our projects, we found it too difficult to resource and sustain a weekly performance group when we had to organise and present the majority of their performance opportunities ourselves – and if our relatively well supported organisation is in this position, I imagine others feel the same.

In considering the second question, ‘does it matter?’, I think this is a problem. Not all the young people who are introduced to the benefits and enjoyment of dance will pursue a career in the art form, even if they want to; but they may wish to continue to engage in creative dance opportunities. If young people find dance a way to express themselves and respond to the world around them, then they should be able to continue to develop this when they are adults – dealing with change, escaping daily life and increasing their physical and mental health at the same time (saving the NHS millions, incidentally, if you look at the research). I think we have a responsibility to provide these opportunities – and, whilst I am not in any way criticising the investment in youth dance, I think it’s time we start thinking about providing a diverse range of dance activity for our ageing population and empowering adults to create and perform work as well as engaging in dance for the purpose of physical exercise.

If you feel the same and are interested in developing a network or circuit of performance opportunities for adult dance groups – or if you know of any platforms where the sharing and discussion of non-professional adult dance work is a focus, I’d love to hear from you!

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