

22 Dance and disabled people



Coral's Coming of Age day at Tate Modern. Left to right: Marianne Rouvier-Angeli, Jacobus Flynn, Sarah Archdeacon, Daniel Weaver (Richard Layzell behind), Graham Evans, Bridget Chew, Jo Eastwood, Hannah Souper, DJ (Housni Hassan). Front: Bethan Kendrick, Jackie Ryan, Cynthia Bowling. Photo: Dave Lewis.

Happy 21st, Corali!

Georgina Cockburn marks the coming of age of a company - and a sector

Corali, the London-based company that works collaboratively with dancers and artists with and without learning disabilities, turned 21 this year.

Reaching that number is traditionally an important event in life – a firm step into adulthood and, ideally, a future full of promise. But the significance of Corali's coming of age may be felt by more than just the company itself. In the bigger picture it could be viewed as a milestone to mark the positive shift in attitudes towards - and recognition of - artists with learning disabilities across the fields of art and dance.

To celebrate its 21st anniversary, in early 2010 Corali presented a mini-festival of three events during consecutive months. Coming of Age was the umbrella name for a day of talks, performance and workshops held at Tate Modern in January. A new work entitled *How Happy We Would Be* premiered at the Whitechapel Gallery in February. Finally, *Scapes* was a collaboration between Corali and dancers from Matthew Bourne's company *New Adventures* that was devised for the annual Connect Festival at Sadler's Wells in March.

As the company's participation officer (a title designating our particular version of education and outreach duties) I'd like to take a closer look at those events, but first a bit of history might be in order. Corali originated in a day centre in Southwark as a casual group formed as a result of the clients' interest in, and enjoyment of, dance and the arts. From the start it was clear that the company was very committed, and gradually it developed a reputation for engaging and entertaining shows. In 1991 Corali received an initial grant of £6,000 from Charity Projects, allowing it to move away from the day centre and set up independently in an office at a local community centre. The change in location encouraged a new focus and set the way for Corali to develop the high-quality professional performance work with which it's associated today.

That history was an important undercurrent of the day at Tate Modern. For this event Corali curated three morning presentations by, respectively, Intoart, an art collective that includes people who have a learning disability; Robin Deacon, performance artist and senior lecturer in Drama and Performance Studies at London South Bank University; and Corali itself. The company presented a time-line of its professional and personal history, using performance techniques and visual actions that were realised by literally sticking papers and photos – symbolising memories, landmarks and turning points – onto the wall of a room. Corali dancers Bethan Kendrick, DJ (Housni Hassan) and Jo Eastwood guided the audience through this experience, turning to the rest of the company to offer up personal memories. Sarah Archdeacon, Corali's artistic director, and the freelance staff – Daniel Weaver, Jacobus Flynn, Marianne Rouvier-Angeli and Bridget Chew – contributed as well. Tales of journeying to rehearsals in mini-buses, getting stuck in portaloos and oranges rolled across the stage all featured in these recollections, which together coalesced into a seamless company narrative.

Prior to the creation of the time-line, Robin Deacon presented a moving testimonial account of a residency the company had at his university in 2008. Performance artist Richard Layzell then moderated a discussion among an audience that included artists, students, representatives of arts and specialist disability arts organisations, friends and support workers. Everyone was asked to share ideas triggered by the time-line, and the preceding presentations from Intoart and Deacon. Written on cards, the responses were sincere and varied. They ranged from 'I was very proud of them', meaning the performers, to 'There is a warmth and honesty here' to 'Great to hear about the power of being and creating in the present'.

Other thoughts reflected on the response cards were connected to notions of risk-taking and impulse or, as one

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Bethan Kendrick and DJ (Housni Hassan), at Corali's Coming of Age day at Tate Modern. Photo: Dave Lewis.

person wrote, 'doing rather than talking.' These comments became even more resonant as the afternoon programme unfolded. Danny Nasirpour Smith and Chris Brierley, members of the learning disability organisation Heart n Soul, performed an improvised piece called Framed. Under the auspices of Intoart, Ntense Eno Amooquaye and Clifton Wright showed a film and used performance to recollect their experiences of the South London art collective's recent exhibition at the Whitechapel. For its part Corali presented extracts from the Visual Voices work developed with Project Volume. (Visual Voices is a training programme for emerging dance and visual artists with learning disabilities; Corali handled the choreographic side of the project and Project Volume, a new company led by Susan Norwood, concurrently ran a course for visual artists offering opportunities to develop their curating skills.)

For the second part of its anniversary celebrations Corali returned to the Whitechapel after ten years (having been commissioned in 2000) with a new performance. How Happy We Would Be was partly inspired by Celebration, a film by Melanie Manchot that, in a single tracking shot, focuses on a street party. Her work was being exhibited at the Whitechapel while Corali was resident there in February. Company members thus viewed photographs she'd composed into a time-line of street celebrations. Afterwards, as Sarah Archdeacon explains, 'They spontaneously brought in photos of themselves at the Queen's Silver Jubilee street party. Not wanting to make our upcoming show too much about street parties, we took the idea of photos and celebration as our starting points but held onto pianos, long tables and tea as key aesthetic themes. By using the company's own photos the piece drew upon personal narrative, blending the experiences of the individual members with a style wrought from Corali's professional history. A risk-embracing process and an innovative use of space are very much a part of what constitutes that style.'

Jacobus Flynn, who was the piece's dramaturg, expands upon Sarah's words. 'To sidestep the loaded emotion that these photographs contained, we went back to look at the details and framing within them. This led the performers to cast an outside directorial eye over the re-creation of the images. This was helped by the Visual

Voices project the performers had recently taken part in. It led them to a sense of ownership, pride and engagement in the material that was a joy to watch develop. It was also possibly the first time Corali has worked more explicitly with a narrative voice to shape more atmospheric and abstract material.'

For Sarah, How Happy We Would Be is an especially apt piece to have been made for Corali's 21st birthday. 'In creating the piece the company properly used spoken word and personal memory for the first time. It was conceived around ideas of the past - looking back as you would at a milestone. But it was also very much about looking ahead, and testing a new approach to making work and developing our practice. At the Whitechapel we were able to fully take over a studio, demonstrating the company's site-specific expertise.'

The performance with New Adventures was a project that developed further the Visual Voices work by exploring new approaches to collaboration. From the outset Corali wanted to challenge ideas of project leadership; that it should be a true collaboration with New Adventures' dancers and an exchange of ideas was a paramount concern. Such ambitions don't always lead to an easy journey - perhaps that could be a metaphor for the company's first 21 years - but the finished piece made plain the value of taking creative risks. The dancers from both companies were empowered by the honest communication required to make shared artistic decisions. This had a direct impact on the work itself. As Helen Prosser (manager of Re:Bourne, the education arm of Matthew Bourne's New Adventures) later said, 'The connection between the dancers permeated the performance, and was beautiful to see.'

21 is an age to consider where you've come from and where you might go next. There's always more to learn. And so Corali promises to continue exploring the logistics and ethics of creative ownership, addressing and answering the need for more training and employment opportunities for artists with learning disabilities while striving to make strong and innovative performance work as a company.

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