



Open Rooms performance, Beppu. Photo: Takashi Kubo.

## Another dancing nation

**Cecilia Macfarlane** ventures into dance in the community in Japan

**My work as an Oxford-based dancer in the community is ongoing and productive.** I delight in the longevity of it and in its ongoing vitality. I'm both content and deeply moved by the value of the work I do, and the evidence I see in my community of its importance and history. I work in many other places as a guest, both in Britain and abroad, and have been fed and inspired by the dancers in those communities.

I was not, however, prepared for the hunger and delight for community dance that I met on my first trip to Japan. There's a deep respect for the potential for this work there, and an eagerness to learn new ways that dance can be. That people in the community can make up their own dances and perform them, that each dancer can be unique in his/her expression and that everyone can create dances inspired by each other were new concepts, and the basis for a potentially very long but exciting journey. I found my personal beliefs about the dance I do, that are so fundamental to my practice and that I take so much for granted, were deeply appreciated and I realised anew how important the work can be.

### **First trip: Beppu and Kyoto, May 2009**

In February 2009 Rosemary Lee visited Japan to research a number of projects with Japan Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN). This Kyoto-based, not-for-profit organisation aims to build bridges among various dance communities. Founded and directed by two visionary artists, Norikazu Sato and Ritsuko Mizuno, it has just celebrated its tenth anniversary. 'Dance is unique among the arts,' Norikazu wrote in 2005, 'in that the dancer uses only his or her body as an expressive medium for communication and virtually no other tools or props. Dance is based on self-examination - the ability to express one's self and create moments where you can relate with others. These are all essential abilities for human beings to live [in society]. You might call it "life force". I believe that these abilities and this force are weakening in contemporary society. This made me think that our mission should be to bring these powers of dance to life in society.'

Bringing dance to the community has been a central part of JCDN's goals since the start, but inviting the audiences to become part of the dance is more recent. Some of >

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Rosemary's time was spent in the city of Beppu, looking at the Public Hall there and meeting artists in connection with a possible site-specific, inter-generational dance event called Open Rooms. The plan was to involve local people as participants, integrating them with dancers from the region who would also create work and perform too. Initially it was envisaged as a long project to be built up over six weeks, and one that might include visual artists and musicians. As artistic consultant Rosemary created a wonderful brief describing a possible theme, and how the work could develop and the building be used.

Rosemary was subsequently unable to return to Japan. I was invited to come and support the project in her stead, and specifically to engage with a group of older women who were new to this kind of dance. I was welcomed as an honoured guest and every detail of my stay was carefully choreographed. I stayed in a ryokan, a traditional Japanese-style hotel with its own onsens or hot spring (Beppu is a geothermal hot-spot), and had spare time to explore two beautiful cities.

The project ended up as a two-week event culminating in two performances, each lasting approximately two hours. Using Rosemary's ideas as a springboard, three Japanese choreographers and I worked with five different groups. We used the whole building, too, from the outside courtyard, the ground floor community hall and kitchens to the second floor theatre and hallway, and then up to the traditional matted reception rooms and roof spaces. The audience traveled through the entire edifice, sometimes choosing what they looked at and at other moments being led. The public joined in the closing processions down the two main staircases, meeting again in the courtyard where they could 'duet' with the dancers and create a final tableau.

Although the cast of 60 performers was composed of all ages they were divided into specific groups for the dances themselves. There was a children's group, a band of young people that included a wheelchair-user, a men's group, a clutch of housewives (placed rather stereotypically in the kitchen) and an older women's group. The older women I worked with were stunned that they could create dances inspired by their own stories and memories, as they'd never



Open Rooms performance, Beppu. Photo: Takashi Kubo.

worked this way before. Along the way there were some wonderful surprises: Rosie suggested that the audience be placed on the stage and look out at the empty auditorium, and that the children could then be revealed there from behind the seats. The choreographer, Yoshiko Swain, manifested this and in a lovely touch the children even ended up applauding the spectators. Another highlight was in the kitchen where dancers in traditional kimonos synchronously lifted the lids of the rice pans, releasing steam perfectly timed to coincide with climaxes in the music. Sheer magic.

I also enjoyed the opportunity to perform in this event with my daughter Emily, a professional musician, who joined me on this first trip. We were an example of inter-generational practice ourselves, and also highlighted Rosie's suggested theme of Past, Present, Future. Emily and I performed in a corridor just outside the auditorium on the first floor. She sang the music of Hildegard of Bingen as I danced in three small circles described by broken eggs (symbolising the past), salt (the present) and feathers (the future). This small but choice collaboration of ours led the



Emily Levy with Cecilia Macfarlane (foreground), Open Rooms performance, Beppu. Photo: Ritsuko Mizuno.

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audience into the next stage of the performance.

Open Rooms was groundbreaking for the Beppu community. The idea that ‘ordinary’ (their term) people could perform in work like this was unprecedented. The two performances were a great success with over 200 people attending them. What’s more, the whole project was repeated a month later with more performers, including two more wheelchair-users inspired by the first performance, and a bigger audience. I was impressed by the speed and efficiency of this project once it started. All of the cast members were totally committed to the hours of rehearsals needed to perfect the work. Additionally, there was no technical difficulty that wasn’t solved. Interestingly, too, every space we changed for the event was photographed and meticulously returned to its functional state.

Thanks to Open Rooms there’s now a new community of dancers, dancing regularly in the town, and a committee of people planning a new site-specific event at various locations including the beautiful hotel where I stayed. (Members of the family that run it were involved in the first performance.) Plainly the dance is going on in Beppu. While there I also led a workshop at a rehabilitation centre for people who’d experienced strokes and accidents, and another in Kyoto for dancers interested in community work. The latter was very well attended, a clear sign that there’s a genuine interest in Japan for the training of dancers in this setting.

#### **Second trip: Fukuoka and Kyoto, January 2010**

I returned to Fukuoka, Japan in January 2010 to present at a symposium on community dance and teach two workshops there - one for the ‘ordinary’ people and the other for dancers wanting to ‘facilitate’ dance in the community. I was interested in the use of this word, as it’s so close to my belief that dance can be discovered in people rather than taught.

I also began research for a new site-specific dance piece, Dance 4 All, intended for the Kyoto Art Center. I held three introductory workshops for participants in this event, plus another to kick-start the project with the three Japanese choreographers who led it into performance after I had left. Dance 4 All, a two-hour performance with 70 performers, divided into specific age groups and an audience of about 150 traveling through the building. A new dancing community will carry on in Kyoto, with new projects being planned for the future.

#### **Next trip: Fukuoka, November 2010**

I’m thrilled to have been invited to return to Fukuoka this November to collaborate with a Japanese choreographer on another site-specific production. Having realised a project researched by Rosemary Lee, then instigating a new performance myself, I’m excited that this time I will be not a guest but a colleague, and look forward to working closely on the event with another artist. I also hope to work intergenerationally with dancers not divided into specific groups but instead mixed together, so that the learning and the making can extend in all directions, and that whatever we create can incorporate all the participants’ ideas and movements.

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