

6 The focus: ages, places, spaces



Above: Jo Parkes.



Greetings from Berlin!

Jo Parkes of MobileDance describes a unique dance film project that brought a youthful slant to a great city

Postcards From Berlin is a dance-film project in which teams of artists worked with pupils from four Berlin schools to create short dance films – dancing postcards, each one minute long – of their city. The result is a collage-like portrait of a dynamic, ever-changing metropolis seen through the eyes of its young people. The films received their cinema premiere in May 2009 at Potsdamer Platz and in the Berliner Fenster, the screens on the Berlin underground trains where 1.5 million people saw them each day.

The Process

Four teams of sixteen artists in all, with each team consisting of choreographer, filmmaker, composer and dance assistant, worked with pupils from two primary schools and two secondary schools in three different boroughs between September 2008 and January 2009. In each school the teams worked with the whole class in ninety-minute periods during a normal school day. Here the pupils learned both basic dance and choreographic skills, and were given an introduction into the process of shooting and cutting a film and creating music/sound for it. The idea was that as artists we put our skills at their service, seeking an exchange of ideas and vocabularies so we could create films that reflected them and their experience of the city.

The artist teams were combined in ways that would offer the young people a multitude of approaches in order to create diverse and contrasting films, but also permit different points of connection to the work – some familiar and others

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All photos: Postcards from Berlin. Photographers: Eleanor Clarke, Abby Warrilow, Marion Borriss and Jo Parkes.

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“Who has not secretly wished to sit down on a moving escalator? Or leapfrog the person next to them? At the main station – the pulse of the city – the dancing pupils met the mechanical movement of the escalators and the architecture of this new building.” Jenny Haack, choreographer

new and perhaps, at the beginning, strange. The backgrounds of the dance artists, for example, encompassed contemporary dance, breaking, parkour and Arabian folk dance. This fusion of genres was carefully thought-out. It allowed us to start from a place of security and enthusiasm, and then widen the pupils’ experience by introducing forms they found more challenging – and to which there was sometimes resistance.

In the dance workshops an entire class was taught the rudiments of different styles. These we started to combine immediately, setting basic tasks so that the pupils learned how to take the movement and develop their own choreography from it in pairs and small groups. We also set open choreographic tasks so that the pupils could freely create their own movement. Additionally we watched dance made for the camera in many genres (experimental, advertising, pop video) and talked about how artists had used the medium.

We adopted a similarly eclectic approach with the music and film elements. The musicians ranged from a well-known local pop star fusing Turkish and German traditions to a new music film composer. All the filmmakers had experience with dance for the camera, but one came from a documentary background, another from pop video/advertising and two worked more in experimental filmmaking.

Each class was split into groups of about four or five pupils. Working with the artistic team, the pupils selected a location in Berlin for their postcard. Some chose iconic sites like the Berlin Wall, others suggested particular areas from their neighbourhoods. The pupils considered the history of their chosen place, and also reflected upon their personal relationship to the place. We then visited every location, experimenting with the movement potential each one offered. Afterwards we developed the dances further. Each choreographer’s brief was to take the ideas, movement and images from the group and work in collaboration with its members to create the final piece.

Ten rehearsals of ninety minutes each was a short amount of time to teach dance skills, develop a shared creative vision and select, rehearse and refine the dance that would be shot – and all of this with four separate groups. The strongest movement content came from those choreographers who found the right balance between taking the suggestions of the pupils and blending their ideas, skills and performance abilities into a more developed and expressive vocabulary.

The films were shot, for half a day each, in January 2009 during one of the coldest winters in Berlin for a hundred

years. In the following month pupils experienced the process of cutting video and creating sound for their dance films in additional workshops. Many worked with the composers to create elements of the soundtrack themselves. The filmmakers and musicians then worked separately to create the final cuts and soundtracks.

Getting together

The project idea was born when I worked with a class of children in a borough in the east of Berlin and realised that they’d never seen the city’s television tower – the equivalent of, say, Big Ben. In any city we tend to hang out in the area where we live; in German, this is our ‘Kietz’. In Berlin, with its many centres, its history of division and its rather delayed response to the challenges of integrating immigrant communities, this tendency to identify with our local community and not venture outside it seems amplified. Several pupils had never been on an underground train before, and many did not speak German until they entered school.

I witnessed young people moving around their local area with confidence and bravura but who, when asked to go to a location a few streets away, were suddenly unsure, alienated and often defensive. With *Postcards From Berlin* we hoped to encourage them all to investigate their city, travel around, meet young people in other areas and thus reflect upon their own “Kietz” and how to varying degrees it defines them and their behaviour.

To this end MobileDance organised two shared workshops where all participating pupils came together. The partner schools were selected so that the pupils came from a range of ages, areas and backgrounds (two primary and two secondary schools from three different boroughs). In the first of these large gatherings the pupils met and took workshops in different elements of dance and film. In the second they presented footage of their locations and their rehearsals, explaining their plan for their film. This was an important moment because here they saw their work in the context of the whole project. From here, too, each artistic team was able to better guide the rest of the creative process by making the most of the contrasts in locations, vocabularies and approaches.

The pupils came together again at the cinema premiere in the centre of Berlin, watching all fourteen films for the first time with family and friends. Each group presented its own film, the members acknowledging their collective role as creators of the work and placing it in the public realm. The results were greeted with much cheering, laughter and applause, as well as some frustration when it was apparent

“We chose a famous road by the Brandenburg Gate with Ampelmann as our postcard because it worked well with our breaking and hip-hop moves. Ampelmann is the jaunty green man with a hat on the traffic lights who tells us when we can cross. He was first used in East Germany and now appears throughout Berlin. Dancing on the road was not easy. We had barely started dancing when the Ampelmann suddenly turned red and the cars started to drive towards us...” Tobias, aged 10

that favourite parts had ended up on the cutting room floor. After the premiere the films ran for ten days on Berlin’s underground train system, where they were so enthusiastically received that the company programming the screens decided to repeat the screenings.

The challenges

Berlin secondary schools are currently split into three streams: Gymnasium (for pupils with the best grades, destined for university), Realschulen (for intermediate students) and Hauptschulen (for pupils with the lowest grades and a more vocational focus). The decision on which school you attend is taken when you’re about ten or eleven, after which it’s difficult to move between schools. Those at the Hauptschulen often lack motivation; they know their future has in some way been jeopardised. In certain areas of Berlin over ninety per cent of the children in many Hauptschulen are from minority groups and immigrant families, and so have the additional challenge of learning the language and integrating into the culture.

We chose to work with pupils from two Hauptschulen in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city. Many of these young people had never had the opportunity to experience such a project and were keen to work with us. But they also had a difficult relationship with learning, discipline, working as a group and, indeed, attending school regularly. In one group all four performers managed to attend the project together for the first time only on the day of their shoot. In another, the boy with the lead role in the film didn’t attend school at all during the last three weeks before the shoot. He did send messages through friends to let the choreographer know he would be there on the day of the shoot – and he was.

In a project with such limited contact time and a clear focus upon product, such circumstances were challenging for the artists. But the idea of the final product remained a strong motivating factor for the young people, exemplified by the fact that not one missed a shoot. The process of creative dialogue with them was, for many artists, another challenge. There was a constant letting go of our own notions, an offering of new ideas, listening, going back to the drawing board...

Two stories from my own process spring to mind. From the conception of the project I’d thought at least one film would depict the Wall. It is, after all, the one thing outsiders know about Berlin. But when we started discussing potential locations with the pupils, not one mentioned the Wall without prompting. Of course they were all born after it fell and, additionally, many of their families had not lived

in Berlin at that time as they’d arrived later from other countries.

Four boys in my class nevertheless decided they fancied working with the Wall, but their ideas were very different to what I imagined. I took them to Mauerpark (Wall Park), formerly the death strip where the Wall stood and now a park that showcases talented graffiti artists. When I explained that if they’d stood two decades ago where we were now they’d have been shot, the boys were unimpressed. What did interest them was the graffiti artist spraying further along the Wall. They persuaded him to lend them a can and let them spray. It was the most enthusiastic I’d ever seen them, but not what interested me about the location.

Yet in the end our interests were combined. We began by making a ‘sprayer dance’ with all four boys developing the movements of the person spraying the Wall. We commissioned a graffiti artist to create a piece for them at the shoot, and then built a story around the idea of these boys tagging illegally on the Wall. I worked on the soundtrack with the composer, Anders Ehlin, to source and integrate elements of original sound from the night the Wall fell. When the historical sounds are present the boys are not; instead we just see a black screen.

The feedback from the boys on the final film was good. They were positive about both it and the soundtrack, but annoyed that we’d cut the fight scene they’d devised in order to deliver a film under one minute long. For my part, I felt I’d found a way to engage them and honour their interests while also referencing the extraordinary fact that in one generation the relationship to the history of a place has shifted so dramatically.

I had another group of five teenage girls who had a problem identifying a postcard location because many live in conservative households where they’re not allowed to go out much. These girls spend lots of time sitting on the sofa. We solved this by making the sofa our postcard location and taking it out on tour in their area, targeting places where they would really like to go if they could.

The future?

MobileDance would like to develop more Postcards From... projects around the world. In this way the exchange between the young people will be expanded into an international context. If you’re interested in partnering us on a Postcards From... project I’d be delighted to hear from you. To learn more about the project or to view and download the films **visit** www.mobiledance.org/postcards or **contact** info@mobiledance.org