



Left: Jo Verrent.

Not quite right?

Jo Verrent hails the changes that are possible when three dance artists join forces in Scotland

The power to influence takes many forms. Think of water: the dynamic thrust of a waterfall carves its way through rock, but so does the softer, more flowing pulse of a river flowing through fields. Janet Smith, artistic director at Scottish Dance Theatre (SDT), reminds me of the latter. While others engage in discussion and discourse, Janet gets on and does stuff. And often in a quiet, unassuming manner, too. To me she's a river carving through rock.

So what has brought me to this musing about water and influence? A quick recap. In 2007 SDT toured a piece called *Angels of Incidence*, when the repertory company was joined by four guest dancers. No surprises there. But the four dancers – Caroline Bowditch, Michael King, Cornelia Kip-Lee and Daniel Daw – were all disabled people, and the piece was critically acclaimed. For many companies that might be the end of the story. Not for SDT. In 2008 Bowditch came back to Dundee to start a two-year programme as Dance Agent for Change. Based within the company, her aim is to challenge the perspective in Scotland of who can dance and what the words disability and dance might mean when put together.

But that's not all. At the end of 2008 Marc Brew, a disabled dancer and choreographer, received a Rural Retreat Placement from DanceEast to

shadow Smith and in 2009 he returned on an 18-month associate director fellowship with the company. There's still more. This winter sees the three artists – Smith, Bowditch and Brew – working collaboratively to create a piece for SDT's main touring programme in 2010 that will be called NQR (Not Quite Right – an acronym formally used in medical records to describe unexplained difference.)

Why this title? Because disabled dancers aren't supposed to work in mainstream dance environments, are they? Because once you've ticked the box marked 'disability project,' haven't you done enough? No, it's not quite right, because what has a supposedly non-disabled mainstream director got to gain from working with disability so much of the time?

And yet for Smith it all seems quite right and perfectly reasonable. 'We're always engaged with questions of who can dance, and what is dance,' she says, 'in both the context of our education work and the audiences we meet. Through our programming I'm always seeking to broaden our range, and challenge our dancers and audience, so that the work can evolve. Integrated dance isn't a new direction or a tangent, it's just part of the flow. Working with Marc and Caroline will feed our creativity, and help us challenge aesthetic norms. I don't know where this is all going, exactly, but our whole organisation is on a



fascinating learning journey.'

Smith can trace her desire to work with disabled performers back to first time she saw CandoCo but also, more recently, to being asked at a conference what she was going to do to play her part in addressing the discrimination disabled people faced in relation to dance. 'What I tend to do is I sit with a question for a long time, as I did with this one. What could I do for this whole issue of access, and for the right of everybody to have an education, a training - the right to enter a professional dance life? And I thought, well, what we can do at SDT is to nudge the status quo. Lets get some dancers into the company who can hold their own and there'll be no dip in the work. That way we can inspire a new generation of dancers who go "Right, yes, I want to do that."' For Smith it's just an extension



Above: SDT's Dance Agent for Change, Caroline Bowditch and Tom Pritchard in *The Long and the Short of it*. Photo: Matthew Andrews.

of what SDT has always done anyway - seeking to inspire interest in dance at all levels.

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes!

So what's the point of a Dance Agent for Change? As part of an impact study of Bowditch's role a whole range of people were asked just that. The best response was as follows: 'To dare to ask the question - who can dance?' Research has shown that the post is many things to many people. It's an opportunity to challenge perceptions and breakdown discrimination, and a chance to engage disabled people, the dance sector and wider communities both within Scotland and further afield. The ideal appointee would be someone who can question, challenge, debate, critique and inspire, or be a facilitator and explorer by raising expectations.

Perhaps most importantly it's a demonstration of what can be achieved by the process of creating work with disabled dancers. One person phrased this brilliantly when they said that the post is there to 'extend the borders of what we think is possible.'

Challenging what we think possible - to change thoughts, opinions and deep-seated beliefs - is a tall order. How can it be achieved? Perhaps one answer is in the nature of the post-holder rather than in the post itself. As one interviewee stated, 'Caroline has made this post her own. There's no debate about dance and disability when you meet with her. It's clear from the outset that her expectations of the people she meets are to connect with her first, foremost and exclusively as a dancer. There's no room for compromise.' If you've ever

encountered Caroline you'll know exactly what they mean. I think of her less as a slow-flowing river and more like a firework - someone who's blazing amazing trails of beauty and surprise in all directions. She has an astounding presence.

It's impossible to describe what Bowditch as the Dance Agent for Change is delivering in one short article: workshops with disabled dancers; support programmes for mainstream dance training providers; speeches and presentations; education work linked to the main SDT programme; a creative residency for multi-artform disabled artists in Scotland; the mentoring of Scottish disabled dancers; discussion around the myths that people hold around disability and dance; work with deaf dancers and choreographers... Oh, and a three-week residency in >



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Above left: SDT Artistic Director, Janet Smith. Photo: David Bonney.

Above right: SDT’s Associate Director Fellow, Marc Brew with Charlotte Ashwell, Elinor Baker Smith and Nicholas Lawson. Photo: Tiago d’Oliveira.

China with SDT. (Check out www.danceagentforchange.co.uk for more information).

Intentions, actions and influence

If Smith is water and Bowditch is fire, what does Brew bring to the mix? To me Marc is like the earth – practical, solid, pragmatic. Having only ever wanted to be a dancer, he reacted to acquiring a severe spinal injury not by assuming he couldn’t dance anymore but by thinking more deeply about what the word ‘dancer’ really meant. ‘You re-evaluate what it is to dance. I love expressing myself through movement. Movement is movement whether it’s pedestrian or trained. (But as a dancer) it’s about having the knowledge and understanding behind the movement and knowing where it’s coming from, what its intention is, and how to express and let it out through your body. It doesn’t say anywhere that you can’t do that if you’re in a wheelchair, or have cerebral palsy, or a visual impairment. It’s just knowing what your intention is and then achieving it.’

Brew’s work with SDT is extremely focused. In shadowing Smith he’s gaining the skills and experience that will enable him to become the artistic director of a dance company in the future. He already runs his production company that was responsible for producing his latest work *Nocturne* (commissioned by Greenwich & Docklands International Festival and Without Walls 2009).

For Smith, again, this is all just a simple step forward. Rather than seeing the impossible in a situation

she appears to have the knack of seeing the opposite. ‘I look at Marc and think, “What would happen if...?” I have a curiosity about what happens when you suspend judgment. I can feel in myself when I become judgmental, and it always shuts things down. Sometimes you have to judge, quite rightly, but there’s a possibility, an opportunity, that only occurs when you suspend it.’

Currently all three artists are collaborating on the NQR project. Bowditch has already created a duet for SDT called *The Long and the Short* of it. Smith was excited by the potential to work with her on a bigger piece involving more of the company. It was an organic decision to involve Brew once his post became a reality. So is Smith a mentor, a creative guide or a controller of the aesthetic? Smith would happily accept the former two roles, but not the latter.

So far the creative trio behind NQR has worked democratically to choose and brief their composer and designer, although it’s Brew who’s been in charge of scheduling as well as editing and distributing DVDs of relevant material from their research and development period. Although to date the team hasn’t hit any issues of artistic conflict, Smith is aware - having invited choreographic partners to create work with SDT twice before - that this is almost inevitable. ‘I don’t anticipate any aesthetic issues to arise about the movement content,’ she says. ‘It’s more likely to be around structure, dramaturgy and perhaps tone - how light the touch should be. I look forward to it all - the challenge,

the conversations and the chance to learn from each other and the process. And I hope to come out of it better at understanding and articulating my perceptions and maybe, excitingly, having them broadened and altered on the way. That said, if we get pulled in three ways at any point I should shift to an overall director role, since as head of the company the buck stops with me.’

So what’s my role in all this? I’m just a deeply interested bystander. In 2007/8 I produced a paper for the Scottish Arts Council that took a snapshot of disability and dance in Scotland and helped generate the funding for Bowditch’s post, and I’m working on an impact study of that post. I’m also interested in leadership and influence, and what those words really mean when you take the traditional perspective of ‘job title’ out of the equation. I suppose you could say I’m interested in catalysts; I want to know what makes things change. On that score I just can’t help thinking that what’s being attempted – and, what’s more, achieved - by SDT is phenomenal. It shouldn’t be. It should be perfectly normal and acceptable and happening everywhere across all art forms, but the reality is that it’s not. I know I almost embarrass Janet and the company when I rave on about the impact and the legacy of what they’re doing, when I remind them that it’s genuinely influencing how people think and feel about disabled people in dance. It really is changing people’s lives. And quite right, too.

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