

Dancing in Time: two perspectives

Dancing in Time, choreographed by Wendy Houston, was part of the latest edition of Dansopolis, Yorkshire's biggest community dance showcase that occurred at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in July 2009. Below we get the inside story on this intergenerational commission from one of the cast members and Houston herself



Overweight and middle-aged? So what! **Patrick Kelly** leaps well outside his comfort zone

'What was he thinking of?!' I struggled hard not to imagine what was in the minds of the startled members of the audience on the opening night of Dansopolis this past July. There they all were in the West Yorkshire Playhouse, observing the galumphing progress of a portly, middle-aged figure dressed in a tuxedo that, like its wearer, had seen better days. Indeed, what had I been thinking of when I sent off my application to join close to three dozen other members of the local community in Leeds and York in creating and devising a work of contemporary dance with a renowned choreographer?

Readers of Animated would no doubt cut off their right arms or have all their teeth extracted for such an opportunity. To understand my bewilderment at finding myself onstage in front of hundreds of people, *dancing*, you need to know a bit about me. I am a 54 year-old journalist who currently carries a little too much excess weight, and I haven't been on a stage since my spear-carrying role in the school play. (I was also wearing one of my mum's old dresses then, but that's another story.) Nor have I moved in any kind of organised and highly public fashion since dropping out of an Irish dancing class at the age of eight because I couldn't face the idea of wearing a green kilt. Since then my dancing has been of the average male-brought-up-in-a-working-class-district-in-Belfast variety – a kind of embarrassed shuffle punctuated by an occasional frantic waving of the arms. Later, and only at private parties within strictly controlled age parameters, I graduated to an approximation of an elderly Mick Jagger strut.

I have always secretly admired those who can cast aside inhibitions and simply delight in the pleasure of making their bodies meld music and movement, whether it be in a living room, on a dance floor or up on the stage of Sadler's

Wells. Strictly Come Dancing didn't interest me much because ballroom, like classical ballet, felt too formal. But on those few occasions when I saw contemporary dance I found myself appreciating the unrestrained way that classical and modern styles were mixed, producing something that compelled me to watch.

So perhaps Dancing in Time, as the segment of Dansopolis that I took part in was called, was a moment waiting to happen. But when I first entered the rehearsal studio and met my fellow rookies, I nearly left there and then. Those that weren't appallingly young and fit still had a few decades of dance experience of one type or another behind them. In contrast I was the rawest of raw recruits, the John Sergeant of the troupe, and so far outside of my comfort zone I needed a spacesuit and breathing apparatus.

Let's head immediately to the first heartening revelation of the whole exercise: my fellow dancers were just about the most helpful and considerate bunch of people I could wish to meet. They went to enormous lengths not to make me feel like the remedial boy, dispensing advice on exercise and warm-up and tipping me off to little tricks that lodged the sequence of steps in the memory. They congratulated me on getting things right and, mercifully, didn't laugh when I more frequently got them wrong.

The second revelation was the sheer physical effort of preparing a dance sequence that lasts just 25 minutes but requires more than 40 hours of concentrated practice. Every three-hour rehearsal of leaping and jumping, stomping and spinning left me exhausted but also exhilarated – as if I'd conquered a mountain peak in the space of a Sunday afternoon. I felt drained and ached all over, but friends and family started to remark how well I looked.

As for the sequence itself, I had half-expected the drill sergeant approach with the choreographer barking out instructions in the manner of a school PE class: 'Put your right arm here, left leg there. No! Up a bit. Okay, hold it! Now stay there for two minutes.' But that's not how Wendy Houston works. She's too thoughtful to be a taskmaster. We were asked to contribute because this was our work as much as hers. Creative ideas were tried and junked, suggestions were taken on board and reworked. There was much thinking aloud as the complete piece was gradually revealed. It was like watching a sculptor work a lump of



All photos: *Dancing in Time* (Dansopolis 2009) rehearsal and dress rehearsal © Kirst Wilson.

stone into a beautiful carving.

Unlike a sculpture, however, we couldn't just sit back and admire her handiwork but instead had to perform it ourselves. On the big day, as we joined the groups of children and teenagers who would share the stage with us, I became suddenly conscious of the enormity of my ambition. I was, along with my fellow dancers, meant to entertain the audience and not just avoid making a prat of myself. Oh, God! Does the running on the spot bit come before or after the spinning round bit? Will I be able to get up off the floor after the dream sequence? The auditorium of the West Yorkshire Playhouse looks vast, meaning that any error on my part will be magnified a hundred times over. What was I thinking of?

Somehow, mainly by blindly following the lead provided by the more experienced dancers, I kept up. I may have been a step behind on occasions, but at least I didn't find myself facing in the wrong direction when the music stopped. And then came revelation number three: I had expected relief at the end, but as the clapping reverberated through the West Yorkshire Playhouse I felt sheer, unadulterated joy. Admittedly most of the applause was for the kids whose virtuoso display of break dancing had the audience alternately gasping and cheering, but basking in their reflected glory felt pretty good, too.

Although I won't be applying for my Equity card anytime soon, I now have an inkling of the buzz that performers get from doing their stuff on stage. More important to me is the pleasure that has come from working on an idea with a group of people whom I didn't know, and with whom I formed a brief but lasting bond. It's said we have become an atomised society, expected to take our pleasures singly

at a computer terminal or TV screen. Our opportunities for collective endeavour are shrinking. Dansopolis taught me that when such an opportunity presents itself, it should be grabbed with both hands...and maybe even the feet.

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And now for the choreographer's perspective...
Wendy Houstoun
on *Dancing in Time*

This community dance project had been scaring me witless for the months running up to it. I kept imagining horror scenes of forty people waiting for me to tell them what to do, and I couldn't quite square that up with what I know to be the low-key, fumbling method of working I seem to have developed over the years.

I did do my prep though, striking a deal with an Australian dance company I'd worked with named The Fondue Set. I'd seen a piece they did called The Hooper which had all the elements I thought crucial to my project in Leeds, especially a humming unison step sequence that possessed a driving energy and could easily absorb difference. I directed a piece they were touring, and in

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All photos: Dancing in Time (Dansopolis 2009) rehearsal and dress rehearsal © Kirst Wilson.

exchange they were happy for me to spread the word about this sequence. I also armed myself with assistants: Tracy Tinker, who was formally employed through Yorkshire Dance, the independent dancer-choreographer Gary Clarke, and some students from the Northern School of Contemporary Dance that Rachel Krische, the school's Head of Performance, had put me onto.

The only reason I'd thought the project was at all possible was because of an idea I'd had following a Scratch, or work-in-progress, night at BAC (Battersea Arts Centre). A solo piece I'd made felt like a viable model for development involving more people. I kept having a vision of loads of bodies on a stage all doing many different kinds of dance. A kind of genre-filled collage, like a Breughel painting or Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It was about persistence and multiplicity.

The first weekend was unlike anything I've ever experienced before. Three different groups – the youngest participants or 'small people,' age 7-10; 'the middle people' age 11-14; and the adults or 'big people,' age 15-74 – came into the studio one after the other. There was barely time to register what was happening; it felt like a hit and run without anywhere to run to. It took me a week to recover and also to realise just what I'd taken on. But the following weeks settled into a pattern – Tracy teaching the sequence, me leading looser ideas and structuring, and both of us co-coordinating developments. This entailed endless hours doing floor plans, placing and ordering the moves and the movers, and making the video and sound track.

In retrospect I would say that *Dancing in Time* was one of the most pleasurable projects I've done for some time. The place it had in the lives of the people who took part seemed to me to be correct. That is to say it was a part of

their life, not all of it. They brought into the room where we worked a pleasure in moving, humility, humour, generosity and a commitment not always seen in the 'professional' sphere, a world so beleaguered with competition, opinion and identity issues that it can sometimes make for a heavy working atmosphere. At times I found myself skipping just because of the pleasure the others were taking in what they were doing. There I was articulating very personal beliefs and sophisticated ideas in simple language to a six year-old. I loved the fact that in the middle of a rehearsal a wind-up dinosaur would suddenly walk across the floor, or that someone would ask a question like, 'Miss! Miss! If you cough up blood do you always die?' as a quick aside. Or that after doing a lot of stamping and jumping about someone would remark, 'My legs are fuzzy.' I loved being reminded that being small makes it hard to sit on a chair and lean forward. I also found myself noticing how much I cared about this thing I do, and I liked being reminded of that.

I was quite stunned, too, especially given the fact that they only had a three-hour tech rehearsal in the theatre, that a lot of people who'd never been on a stage before had managed to space and time themselves, go through a lighting plot and do a run-through with a minimum of fuss. It came to me that I hadn't been quite as clear a communicator as I might've been when, after this rehearsal, I was asked if the next time everyone was going to do this dance there would be people watching. But watch they did as my gang of 36 carried themselves without a glimmer of anxiety (or so it seemed). Refreshing and inspiring, the performance was its own reward.

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