

## **Dance and Health**

### **A speech given by Ken Bartlett, Creative Director of the Foundation for Community Dance at the Health and Well-Being Through Dance Seminar, Swindon Dance, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

When I give talks about dance I often have to remind myself of what an Archbishop of Constantinople said in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. Something along the lines of, “Whenever I see dancing there will I find the devil.”

It’s a reference from a book by the sociologist and cultural commentator Barbara Ehrenreich called ‘Dancing in the Streets’, which charts the consistent suppression of dance and dancing in Western and Western imperialist, and primarily Christian cultures throughout history.

Anyway, how many of you have glimpsed or even watched Strictly Come Dancing or any of the other dance programmes crowding our TV screens of late?

Can I park that for a moment? I’ll return to it later.

I was recently, because my organisation is leading an application from across the dance sector to include dance as part of the Cultural Olympiad, wondering what was included under the term sport and quickly realised that there were well over a hundred different activities recognised and supported by Sport England as sports. I want to make a similar point about dance – it covers a multitude of activities, some social and improvised, some social and codified, some representing the different cultural traditions and histories represented in our population and some taken up by the royal courts of Europe and translated to the stages of opera houses and theatres across the world as being of specific cultural value by those who used to be of count in the social hierarchies established from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century on.

I want to emphasise that in the wider world of dance I see and value is this incredible diversity

- Diversity of styles and cultural traditions
- A diversity of people choosing to dance
- A diversity of reasons for engaging in and with dance
- A diversity of purposes for engaging people in dance by leaders and teachers
- A diversity of places and contexts in which people dance

This diversity is one of dance’s strengths, as it means that the entry and exit points allow a very wide range of people to enjoy and gain benefit from dance at different stages of their lives and that matches their circumstance as well as their individual tastes and aspirations.

I am always extremely grateful to our colleagues from the sports and leisure sector for researching, demonstrating and developing the key message that participation in physical activity has enormous health benefits - a result of which, until very recently of course, has led to increased investment and was seen as a key to our successful bid for the London 2012 Olympics.

For, of course, Dance is a physical activity, and it is sited in the body, the body that I see as being under attack, from amongst other things, war, poverty and disease

So for me this connection with the body and my concern that dance professionals become experts in the body is central to what I want to say about dance.

I see the individual body as being the site where everything happens and I believe it is more important than ever to recognise this in an age where class, community and other collective loyalties are being challenged by a culture of individualism and freedom of expression.

The body is therefore for me:

- A site of being - physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically
- A site of health, well being and respect
- A site of learning and knowing
- A site of collaboration, communication and community
- A site of imagination, creativity and invention
- A site of cultural identity, change and transformation
- A site for sharing aspirations, dreams and desires
- A site of values and morality

When I was preparing for today I was reminded of something the American choreographer Liz Lerman once said about where dance came from:

“There was a time when people danced and the crops grew. I think they danced as a way to heal their children. I know they danced as a way to prepare for war. I think they danced to understand what was completely impossible to understand in any other form, and when they did that they weren't pretending: it was real. That was how they felt the energy of the world around them in their bodies. When I imagine this time I like to think: Who got the best parts? Who were they going to trust to do this important thing for them? I think they maybe chose the fattest person, the person with the most weight, or maybe the oldest person, the one with the most wisdom. I imagine that they had a set of values that they agreed on. I like to think that everybody who was there understood the dance; that they didn't have to wait until the next day to read in the papers what it was about. They had some incredible way to connect to it. I don't think it was because the dances weren't abstract - in fact, I think they were highly abstract,

symbolic. It wasn't about dumbing down. People knew the dance because they had learned it or been part of it. Or maybe they had been there at the beginning, when they decided 'This means that the sun is coming up, okay everybody?' Once you are in at the beginning everything is possible."

What kind of dance am I describing? And here I will quote dance artist Miranda Tufnell from our recently published handbook on dance and health.

"Whatever our approach, building relationships, responsiveness and a capacity for bodily empathy with others underlies everything we do, irrespective of the styles of work we bring."

The practice that both Miranda and I represent, and here I slightly misquote Miranda again, is concerned with, "spontaneous, non stylised movement ...that tunes in to inner sensation and to our surroundings and allowing movement to evolve moment to moment. Whereas the traditional conception of dance is associated with learning steps and a set style, this other dance emerges from the inside out and draws upon our interior lives.

I caught a little bit of Strictly Come dancing on Saturday which shows the learning process as well as the judged performances, in which there appears to be a lot of shouting at the participants to get non dancers to 'fit in' to an external view of what the dance should look like and how the dancer should perform particular moves. There was, thankfully some resistance by the competitors to being treated in this way. What will happen by the end, is that the public will, unless Ann Widdicombe's fan club becomes unstoppable, vote for someone, hopefully demonstrating the greatest expressive, creative and emotional engagement and we will see again that such teaching techniques have been only a means to an end not the end in themselves.

So what happens when we dance?

- It contributes to all those things that participating in physical activity does – to general health and wellbeing as well as being used positively in specific clinical conditions. Diabetes UK for example is using dance as part of its national campaign from next year because they are convinced that dancing is the easiest way to get people to take up the physical activity they need in both the prevention and management of diabetes.
- It provides a safe place for people to explore their emotions
- It brings people together and develops a sense of belonging and community
- It offers a truly creative and expressive opportunity. Sociologist Helen Thomas in her reader on the sociology of dance describes what happens in an aerobics class she observed over time. It was clear that the participants were there to address their physical health but what Thomas observed was that individual movement vocabulary emerged very quickly and the class was being used as a more creative

and expressive opportunity by the participants that for them provided greater meaning to the activity

In other words dance has its origins not as a series of physical exercises or technical skills development but in personal and social meaning and even though many of our dances have become codified as in the trials the contestants in Strictly are put through, or from its cultural background, it is ultimately the personal and social meaning it offers people that is the draw. Whilst the motivation for joining in dance might be to get fitter, or lose weight or make new friends what keeps us coming back week after week is the real pleasure we get from moving our bodies and here sports science has been helpful in registering the chemical changes in the brain and the body as a result of movement and exercise, that are exactly paralleled by the act of dancing. It clearly contributes positively to such things as physical coordination, cardio-vascular performance, muscle condition, increased flexibility and the ability over time to sustain physical activity for longer.

Another key feature of the dance that I'm talking about, even when it has a technique framework is that it focuses on the development of the individual within the group rather than external factors established by the largely competitive nature of the sporting world. Whilst I acknowledge technical skill development is a part of dance, it is when the dancers break out of the boundaries of the technique and move into personal expression, or 'say something with their bodies' or demonstrate the 'chemistry' between them that we recognise at that moment in their dancing that they are speaking of themselves and to us and for us about something important in their/our lives.

The Foundation for Community Dance has identified that the dance sector has been making contributions to health in the following ways:

**Health Education:** offering insights and information to enable people to make health choices about how they live

**Health Care:** activities designed to support people who are getting better or who need extra help to manage an ongoing condition

**Managing Illness:** work that supports people who are actually ill and seeking to get better

**Community Development:** initiatives that are designed to build the environments and social networks that are the basis of good health and wellbeing

For the past five years we have been tracking and publishing some of the contributions that dancers have been making in the field of health – working with GPs, in hospitals, hospices and residential and day care centres; looking at specific positive health care interventions in such areas as obesity, dementia, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's

disease and diabetes, as well as recording the broader benefits of taking part in dance to support and develop positive self image and self esteem linked to better social and community developments.

I've been asked to finish by setting a number of challenges. These are largely for my colleagues in the dance sector, but if I might start with one to us all. Whilst it must by now be obvious that I believe that dance has an important role to play in a range of health contexts, I don't think that we should claim for it things it can't do, nor do I think we should claim expertise that we don't have, or expected to deliver things we can't do. The job of the dance professional working with the health sector is to facilitate and lead dance experiences with people, but in partnership with their colleagues in health so that the dance is appropriate to the health needs of the participants.

- Listening to colleagues in health to understand their culture and language so that our interventions are focused
- We need to develop better tools for evaluation again in partnership with our colleagues in health
- We need to engage and commit more fully to ongoing professional development so that we can become more articulate about what it is we do and what it's contribution can be

Finally we need to become real experts in the body so that we can truly claim that dance is not sinful devil worship, but makes a truly positive contribution to the health of our nation.