

People Dancing

Kate Castle, Associate Director at the Foundation for Community Dance, introduces the organisation's first international event around the theme of taking part in dance

It's always hard to walk in someone else's shoes and the former Creative Director of FCD, Ken Bartlett is a hard act to follow. On Ken's retirement the Board decided to create a new post of Associate Director, to which I have been appointed for a year on a part-time basis. Having returned to freelance work in 2013, after a year's sabbatical mostly spent reading and travelling, I was delighted and surprised to be offered this opportunity to work with the organisation. But what a year it is turning out to be for FCD (and me) with a National Portfolio application to submit, a major international event and numerous other activities as the organisation steps forward into the future with ever-greater confidence and

renewed determination to interrogate what 'wider engagement' means for people and dance.

As an outsider becoming an insider, I've discovered that FCD is an extremely well run organisation, which puts its mission and values at the heart of everything it does. I've noticed that it genuinely cares about its individual members. Having worked with the staff team for more than six months now, I know that they are deeply interested in all kinds of dance and the impact it can have. Most of all, they know that the way to make things happen is to join up with others, to collaborate in the interests of the bigger picture. FCD has friends and artistic collaborators in the most unexpected places.

My main task as Associate Director is to advise on the programming and commissioning for the international event, People Dancing, scheduled to take place in Cardiff 13-15 November 2014.

Firstly – a word about the process. The original idea for the event was Ken's, the result of his travels far and wide and the breadth of work he'd encountered with all kinds of people in all sorts of contexts. That was the starting point, but I obviously wanted to involve the whole staff team and the Board and, frankly, anyone else I could co-opt into making helpful suggestions. And what has resulted is a far from complete survey of people dancing around the world, which



Above: Sangeeta Isvaran
Right: Ian Johnstone
and Gary Gardiner.
Photo: Niall Walker



Nott Ballet, The Renewal Trust and Birmingham Royal Ballet. Photo: David Severn

might in time form the starting point for an international database of current practice.

We needed to look at what were the main themes – the things that simply had to be in there. But we didn't want to be too obvious and so while some are clearly stand-alone – dance for people with Parkinson's for example – others were more cross-cutting and so we've attempted a bit of a 'mash-up' with some of the themes. Then there was the open call for submissions, resulting in a staggering 99 responses from all over the world, all very strong, and if we'd programmed them all, the event would have had to run for a week or more.

I'm not new to planning events such as this, but I am glad to be working with Richard Parr, one of FCD's Producers. He works calmly on spread-sheets, I work chaotically on big sheets of paper with lots of coloured stickies and swearing. At the beginning the process

felt like trying to untangle a big, knotted ball of wool. Then two things happened: I went to the Matisse exhibition and watched the film of the artist briskly cutting out free hand with a big pair of scissors and layering up the paper. Then Chris Stenton, Executive Director, reminded me it's not only about the structure but also the activity – what's actually going to happen and whether people are going to find it enthralling. So it was back to the drawing board again with scissors and paper.

Arts Council Wales has generously supported a programme of commissions from community dance artists based in Wales. The offer included an opportunity to be paired with an international artist for mentoring and support. Judging by the number and quality of applicants we've had there's some interesting work ahead, some of which will be shown and discussed at the event, together with input from the international artists

involved.

For want of a better term, I keep referring to it, rather nebulously, as 'the event'. It was never intended to be purely a celebration, nor is it solely a showcase or a trade fair or even a forum for debate. Rather, I think it's a snapshot of the practice of people dancing across the world right now: why they do it, where they do it, how they do it and what difference it makes to communities and lives. Everything from mass participation projects as part of a national celebration, to small-scale intergenerational work beneath the stars in a deeply rural community. And all points in between.

In describing what happens, I'm trying to avoid the term 'community dance'. I can't help thinking that it comes loaded with connotations and images that aren't useful anymore. It's almost as if it's a separate genre or style of dance that requires particular attention or training in order to deliver >

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when yes, it is special and does need a deep understanding of how to deliver, but surely it's more a particular way of thinking about dance – a deep-rooted understanding that has evolved over many years and poses the questions of what dance can do for people and what people can do for dance. And surely too, the boundaries between what constitutes a 'professional' and a 'non-professional' are becoming increasingly

at the scope of practice worldwide, the different places and partnerships involved and how this affects the outcomes. I'm also very pleased that FCD has been invited to lead a session on the subject of People Dancing at the major international festival Tanzmesse, which takes place in Dusseldorf in August. It'll be good to open up a discussion about participation there, in a major international meeting place for

keynote speakers, discussion forums, panels on specialist subjects, pop-up performances, practical workshops, a trade fair, film screenings, live-streaming of events and of course, networking opportunities at social events.

So who is the event for? Practitioners, producers, managers, educators, policy makers, collaborators and dance artists in all contexts – anyone who is interested in the places and spaces where dance takes place and the people who make it happen – there will be something for everybody. But don't expect to agree with it all: the purpose of an event such as this is to provoke and challenge as much as satisfy and provide endorsement. We're hoping that what you see and hear provokes real emotion and results in a renewed passion, or even a change of direction, with new collaborators and friendships and new ways of thinking about dance.

And as a lasting legacy we hope the event will result in, among other things, an international People Dancing network and a regular gathering. See our website for booking details for the dance event of the year and I personally shall look forward to meeting old friends and colleagues and meeting up with the new.



Live Bolero, Big Dance Weekend 2014 Commission by Jeanefer Jean-Charles. Photo: Dance4

blurred. And then there's the dilemma for an artist who works tirelessly in such contexts but might just crave time to make work for its own sake and not for the value to the community she works with or to achieve social transformation. I'm just skimming the surface here; the event will cover these issues and many more in a packed programme over the three days.

It's important to remember that People Dancing is essentially an international event with the purpose of flinging wide the doors and looking

the performance sector.

The venues for People Dancing are nothing short of spectacular. Imagine the Wales Millennium Centre with almost every part of it filled with people talking, dancing, seeing dance and then watching the sun set over Cardiff Bay. The city has great places to eat, good hotels and the sense that art and culture matter. The Centre has been extremely generous in sharing the space and opening its doors and platforms and these will be filled with performances, provocative

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Bookings are open for our inaugural international event, People Dancing, taking place in Cardiff from 13-15 November 2014. With a first preview of the programme, delegate packages of between 1-3 days are available to purchase online. Book early to secure your place at the event, essential for anyone working with participants in dance.

visit www.communitydance.org.uk/peopledancing