

Diversity

Co-Mission, State of
Emergency. Hannah
Anderson-Ricketts
(standing) and DJ
(Omer Housni).
Photo: Hannah
Anderson-Ricketts/
Meraki Fitness



Dance and disabled people connecting through culture



As State of Emergency clocks up 30 years as creators and innovators in the fields of dance and music production, **Louise Katerega**, Inclusive Dance Adviser for their latest initiative, Co-Mission, offers a behind the scenes look at nine weeks in Deptford that made dance history - and an awful lot of people very happy

Co-Mission, a unique, inclusive residency and performance project, was delivered in Autumn 2015, by State of Emergency (SoE), in partnership with The Albany, Deptford. Through the Mission programme, which started in 2001, Black choreographers have the opportunity to work with the company to create new work.

The Co-Mission project included the creation of a new dance theatre show titled Choices and Consequences, by choreographer/ film-maker Michael Joseph (Union Dance, University of Bedford) - a blend of contemporary, hip-hop and martial arts, with an original score by twice Grammy-nominated Steve Marshall.

Steve is one half of State of Emergency, alongside the indomitable Deborah Baddoo MBE. They founded the company together in 1986 and are "proud that Co-Mission has been able to add another group of artists to the hundreds who have already participated in State of Emergency productions."

Resident in Deptford for nine weeks, Co-Mission also delivered an accessible outreach programme for young people. Two films, one by Michael Joseph and one he edited of work by emerging disabled choreographer Laura Dajao appeared alongside the company performance with a curtain raiser by IRIE Dance Theatre's African and Caribbean

dance foundation degree students.

Co-Mission is, as far as we know, the first professional British dance endeavour to feature BAME disabled dancers and dance styles (the term BAME - Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic - is used to refer to members of non-white communities in the UK). SoE's research revealed a definite lack of disabled BAME artists trained and skilled to work professionally, which is reinforced by a lack of training, access and support to grow this demographic. Via a considered, thoroughly prepared workshop-style process, in which detailed references from appropriately knowledgeable dance professionals played a crucial role, a cast of five disabled and non-disabled dancers was assembled: Laura Dajao, Louise Dickson, Ash Goosey, Housni Omer Hassan (known as DJ) and Hannah Anderson-Ricketts (aka Hannah Meraki). The project also championed Laura's development as an emerging disabled choreographer.

As inclusive adviser, I was sounding board and guide for Michael's interactions with the dancers as he was new to inclusive practice. I also mentored Laura and DJ. My role was multi-faceted; exploration in the studio, contact point with SoE, a little dramaturgy and a lot of listening. I aimed to be an ear for everyone, an

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Co-Mission, State of Emergency. L to R: Laura Dajao, Michael Joseph, Ash Goosey, Louise Dickson, Louise Katerega and DJ. Photo: Hannah Anderson-Ricketts

advocate for anyone and on the side of nothing and no one but the art itself. And truly, it was one of the most seminal, fulfilling experiences of my twenty-two years involved in dance with disabled people.

I was not alone in this enjoyment. Co-Mission gave The Albany a sell-out dance show. Those who saw it praised the level, creativity and quality of access for disabled audiences. Laura and DJ describe Co-Mission as 'life-changing'. And yet Co-Mission's producer, venue and choreographer had no history of working with disabled dancers. Where did it all go right? Does Co-Mission offer hope that the perceived leap to making and programming inclusively may be shorter than we think?

More excitingly, as the Creative Case for Diversity (<http://bit.ly/1vzdRyo>) gains momentum, are we finally beginning to deal in culture not colour, personal history over medical history and address 'diversity within diversity'?

Co-Mission confirmed to me, at least, that we share more than divides us and along the way certain realisations crystallised which I believe led to its success:

Your money, your rules

Aside from a small amount of Unlimited funding to support DJ and a small commission from The Albany, all of the hard cash for Co-Mission came from a substantial allocation the company's core Arts Council funds. Unrestricted by the projections and evaluations of a funding application, we were free to adapt as we went - so crucial in this field - designing and refining as people and project developed.

Quality information helps a new situation

Though it was his first encounter with disabled dancers, Michael's leadership experience, his expertise in a number of techniques and his verbal clarity in teaching and task setting made him a very easy fit for Co-Mission. He and the dancers clicked instantly and my input reduced exponentially in three weeks.

Listen to and act on the voice of experience

Our disabled dancers were our respected consultants and most valued

resources, their influence stretching from audition to post-show discussion. Similarly, if Project Manager, Louise Brown, also vastly experienced in inclusive work, or I advocated extra resources were needed on the access front, SoE did not question us.

Seek the person in the performer

We also interviewed dancers to check that their values and aspirations, alongside their performance ability, matched those of Co-Mission. Our whole recruitment approach resulted in high levels of trust all round. They were a company at first rehearsal. They went on to enrich Co-Mission beyond expectation variously offering us fitness training, outreach participants, management support and marketing muscle. Our full house at The Albany is owed, at least in part, to their efforts on social media.

What the system divides, culture can unite

There was an extraordinary crossover of artistic tastes and references within the company - whether in our 50's or our 20s, disabled or non-disabled, this ethnicity or that ethnicity, the music and dance styles we all loved meant that divisions were left at the studio door. Most of us spoke at one time or another of how 'like a homecoming' Co-Mission felt. I believe I saw in action Melvyn Bragg's proposition that culture in our information age depends less on class or geography than on what we consume or access. How profoundly does that allow us to re-imagine who we are or might feel bonded to?

Collective passion fuels that extra mile

It does not necessarily follow, for me, that a joyous project equals an easy one. Co-Mission contained immense moments of challenge. Almost everything demanded unanticipated time and effort to get it right by our people, our audience, and our own standards. The thought of our amazing dancers and how this work would impact on our historic contribution to dance always kept us going. Because we shared the same commitment to an idea, any moans and groans would morph, in conversation, into re-statements of conviction.

The crystallizing moment of the nine weeks, for me, was two primary school age sisters (one visually impaired) circling round me on our pre-show touch tour asking over and over where Laura, who had taught them an outreach workshop, was. Here, at last, is a NEW generation of disabled arts participants who need go no further than their own doorstep to find a role model or accessible performance.

And many people over many years made that moment possible: pioneers



of multi-culturalism like SoE and Union; the 90s - born inclusive companies like Corali, StopGAP and CandoCo who trained our disabled dancers; and individuals like Adam Benjamin who encouraged Louise Brown and myself as leaders. The moment that gave me such pleasure belongs to us all. May we look forward to many more.

Info

SoE are now reviewing, evaluating and taking feedback to refine and develop Co-Mission ready for performance residencies across the UK in 2017/18. Interested in bringing Co-Mission to your area? contact Deborah Baddoo, deborah@stateofemergencyltd.com <https://vimeo.com/158174346> <http://bit.ly/1ox5ZwS>

Co-Mission 2015 was supported by The Albany Deptford, The Deptford Lounge and ACE Unlimited. State of Emergency is a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England.



“The thought of our amazing dancers and how this work would impact on our historic contribution to dance always kept us going.”



Clockwise from above left. All photos: Co-Mission, State of Emergency (SoE). L to R: (back row) Louise Dickson, Ash Goosey, DJ, (front row) Laura Dajao, Hannah-Anderson Ricketts. Photo: Hannah Anderson-Ricketts/Meraki Fitness; Laura Dajao. Photo: SoE; L to R: Hannah Anderson-Ricketts, Louise Dickson, DJ and Ash Goosey. Photo: SoE; L to R: Laura Dajao, DJ and film-maker Roswitha Chesher. Photo: SoE; Laura Dajao. Photo: Hannah Anderson-Ricketts; L to R: Michael Joseph, Ash Goosey, Hannah Anderson-Ricketts, Laura Dajao, DJ and Louise Dickson. Photo: SoE and L to R: Film-maker Roswitha Chesher, Hannah Anderson-Ricketts, DJ, Laura Dajao, Ash Goosey and Louise Dickson. Photo: SoE