

So, what's your REAL job?

Rebecca Thomas reflects on life as a freelance dance artist and her journey, embracing the highs and lows of the lifestyle with a sense of purpose and drive



Participant with Rebecca Thomas, Sense dance workshop, Birmingham Hippodrome. Photo: Rachel Smith

After delivering an outreach session in a school recently there was time for a quick question and answer. A smile spread across my face when a child asked: "So, what's your real job".

I have been working as a dance artist for about ten years, and at some moments it has been easier to explain what I do for a living than others. For four years I was a dancer/teacher with Ludus Dance, under the guidance of Head of Touring, Gil Graystone. This was where I learned my trade as a performer, teacher and much more. I worked alongside dancer/teachers Debbie Milner, Johnny Hate, Iain Payne, George Adams, Neb Abbott and Ellen Turner and toured in works by choreographers Nigel Charnock, Yael Flexer, Ben Wright, Rosie Kay and Dylan Quinn. I had a full time job. I had holiday pay and if I'd needed it, sick pay and maternity pay. I was in my mid twenties and I had no idea how lucky I was!

Now that I'm in my mid thirties, I

work on a project-by-project basis for a range of organisations. This means I often don't know where the money is coming from next, or if I'll be able to pay my rent. But I have found the methodologies I picked up during my time at Ludus Dance equip me well when navigating the freelance landscape. There, I experienced a collaborative approach to all aspects of company life, not only in the studio but also in the day-to-day running of the company and in higher level, strategic decision making. Ludus Dance was established in the 1970s and is still going strong today but, due to funding cuts, I was part of the last touring company and I feel it is important to recognise the ethos that was handed down to me, embracing collaborative and non-hierarchical philosophies.

Perhaps it is the legacy of artists devising new ways of working during the 1970s, such as the founders of Ludus Dance and also the likes of

the X6 Collective(1), combined with my drive to be part of a vibrant and thriving dance community that has led me to invest a considerable amount of time and energy into Birmingham Dance Network. With this new organisation I am part of a team creating professional development opportunities for dancers in the city. Our existence stemmed from a professional level technique class established by Patsy Browne-Hope in summer 2013.

Patsy had recently returned to the city and was searching for opportunities for her own training. When she was unable to find something suitable, she started a class herself. Using social media, word quickly spread among dancers and it wasn't long before a group was meeting after class to try to establish more opportunities for freelance dancers in Birmingham. Patsy, myself and Genevieve Say now run performance platforms, discussion >>

forums and intensives as well as a weekly professional class delivered in partnership with DanceXchange. We have established partnerships with venues and dance organisations across the city and it is feeling like an exciting place to be. Collaboration is something that we associate with our job as artists in the studio but I believe it is essential to take a collaborative approach to working in all areas of practice.

I'm lucky to be based in Birmingham. Here, there are three large dance organisations situated within one building, Birmingham Hippodrome, and I work on a freelance basis for all three. For DanceXchange I deliver evening contemporary dance technique classes and teach technique for pre-vocational dance students attending the Centre for Advanced Dance Training. I work as a freelancer for Birmingham Royal Ballet's Learning and Outreach Department, most recently choreographing a short ballet *Spring to Life* with a group of adults aged from twenty to seventy-six, funded by Birmingham City Council's Arts Champions scheme. I also deliver movement sessions to deafblind adults through the charity Sense at Birmingham Hippodrome. Despite the highs and lows of the freelance lifestyle, it is through these sessions with Sense that I have found myself able to identify a sense of purpose and drive enabling me to remain motivated in all areas of my practice.

I deliver these sessions with my good friend and colleague Suzanne Grubham, through Sense's statutory and trust funded Arts and Wellbeing Programme. It is fair to say that the first time we met the group, we were pretty much out of our depth. Sense is a charity providing support and specialist services for people with sensory impairment. Many of the people we have met through the charity have significant or total impairments in both sight and hearing. Some of the people who attend our sessions have never seen or heard anything in their entire lives.

When we began, we simply didn't know what to expect or how to communicate with participants. We genuinely felt that we did not know what we were doing and were ready to write the whole thing off. But the team at Sense had faith in the importance

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of dance and movement. They gave us some very useful advice about how to approach people who can't see or hear – we talked about using 'hand under hand' as a way of inviting people to use props and were encouraged to understand that any progress would be likely to be gradual and take place over long periods of time.

So, we went back to the drawing board. We established a rigorous approach to evaluation, making notes each week about each participant, trying to understand their experience, their own unique means of communication and recording any significant moments. In many ways it was a strength that Suzanne and I had been friends for a number of years because in order to plan for these sessions we spent a lot of time in her living room, in silence and with our eyes closed. Our close working relationship was a vital attribute as we gradually developed an approach that seems to be successful. Each week, we work very slowly, shifting between one to one and group tasks, allowing time for understanding and relationships to build gradually between individuals and the group as a whole.

Two years later, we still keep detailed notes after each session. We are now regularly joined by dance artist Rebecca Pringle and, when possible, dance artist Katie Albon. The positive results that we have seen are down to the longevity of this project and the support of staff both at Sense and Birmingham Hippodrome. Again, it is collaboration and strong partnerships that have allowed this project to overcome the initial challenges. In December 2015 some of the regular participants danced in front of an invited audience including HRH Princess Anne. Over the course of the sessions I have seen first hand the phenomenal impact that movement can have as a form of self-expression. A sensitive non-verbal approach to communication is so essential in this context. This now informs me any time I enter a room to dance with others.

At Ludus Dance, when teaching in schools we would repeatedly say, “There is no right or wrong way to do it” and now more than ever I say this with absolute conviction. It is essential that wherever possible, people are given space, time and opportunity to express themselves, in their own way, through movement.

So perhaps there is no simple answer for the child who asked me about my REAL job. Any working day might include teaching children, adults or professional dancers, as well as project management, curation, attending meetings, training, rehearsing or choreographing – the list goes on! As a freelancer, it is certainly very easy to feel pulled in many directions. But, as creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson says, “we all have bodies”², and the more groups I work with the more I understand that every body needs to connect and communicate with others, and for many people movement is the best way to do this.

In fact, I'm beginning to see that all of my practice is rooted in a desire for people to use movement as a catalyst for connection and communication. Every working day I collaborate with many different people to ensure that opportunities to engage with high quality, positive dance experiences, in workshops, as performers and as audience, remain a significant part of our culture and communities. I'm a freelance dance artist. This is my real job.

Info

www.birminghamdancenetwork.co.uk
www.ludusdance.org
www.sense.org.uk
www.brb.org.uk
www.dancexchange.org.uk
www.birminghamhippodrome.com

References

1. Claid, E. (2006) *Yes? No! Maybe... Seductive ambiguity in Dance* Oxon: Routledge
2. <http://bit.ly/1MQRSYI>