

People dancing?

Kate Castle petitions that in uncertain times dance as a community, and ‘community dance’ as a way of thinking about dance, has never been more urgent or relevant

The world feels an uncertain place at the moment. The existential threats of climate change, inequality, hunger and war engender what political theorist Hannah Arendt(1), writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, describes as ‘those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their life’. We see the consequences of this powerlessness in the rise of nationalism, worldwide migration of peoples, and a fear of ‘the other.’

Within this context and amongst such serious and urgent priorities it seems harder, for me at least, to make the case for dance.

Or is it? On the basis that the personal is political – a phrase that was current in the late 70s when the community dance movement first emerged – I’m going to try to argue the case, drawing on personal experience as a dance artist working within communities.

The dance establishment of the

time, which had emerged post-war, consisted of companies such as the Royal Ballet, Rambert and London Contemporary Dance. One might have also danced professionally in musicals, cabaret, pantomime and opera. But there was also X6 dance space at Butler’s Wharf, and Riverside Studios (both London based), New Dance magazine, companies like Maas Movers, and a host of individuals who thought differently, wanted to challenge the status quo, dismantle

Sangeeta Isvaran and the villagers at the Centre Valbio, Ranomafana, Madagascar. Photo: Dr Cassidy Rist



old hierarchies and institutions and bring opportunity.

The increasingly multi-cultural nature of British society made a huge and dynamic impact on the development of dance with communities, thanks to people like Elroy Josephs, Greta Mendez, Carl Campbell and many others.

On the tide of the feminist movement, plenty of feisty women emerged in dance, who supported one another. I feel that women have lost ground since then, both in dance and in general.

But it all felt possible and daring and progressive, as if there were no rules and we were just making it up as we went along, which of course we were.

Within this context, as a child from an impoverished background who loved to dance, I survived a brutal classical training and found fulfillment in dance again, inspired by David Henshaw (Middlesex University), and then in employment as a Dance Fellow by Greater London Arts (1978). I was determined that everyone who wanted to should have the opportunity to take part in dance. And as the first ever Education Officer for the Royal Ballet and Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, I wanted to share the rich resources of those establishments as generously and widely as possible.

In working for what was then the Dancers Resettlement Fund (now Dancers Career Development) I encountered other damaged souls, and this inevitably affected my attitude to training and personal growth. At a time when other things were changing, I wish we could have found ways of developing people working in dance that were more in touch with the 'real' world and frankly more imaginative.

In 2004 I was invited to help create Dance South West (DSW), a new, diffuse model of a national dance agency. I was motivated by a belief that networking and partnership are the key to progress - that by working together we are more than the sum of our parts. DSW tried to challenge the belief that dance could only thrive in the metropolis and that performing artists were more valuable than those who worked locally with people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.



Photo: Rachel Cherry

The core values underpinning my own experience are those of networking and creating partnerships; of experimentation - both structural and aesthetic; of breaking down barriers to give more people a chance; and of having respect for the potential of each individual. This leads me to believe that dance as a community, and 'community dance' as a way of thinking about dance, can offer:

- Freedom of expression
- Cultural specificity and uniqueness, both as an individual and within a group, together with the opportunity for fusion and collaboration
- A level playing field, where being a creator and a participant are of equal value
- Equality of opportunity, regardless of income, gender, age, ethnicity, or any other factors that might create barriers
- Empowerment at a local level, with dance embedded within and developing from the community outwards
- A sense of connection, through a practice that is international and reaches out across the world.

In terms of the existential, even catastrophic threats outlined in the opening paragraph - which might make taking part in dance seem to be either irrelevant or even frivolous - I would argue that

in the global arena, dance offers the chance to see 'the other' as an opportunity not a threat; to tackle social isolation at all levels; to bring human touch, emotion and empathy into an increasingly technological world; to enable renewed connection between body, mind and soul in the interests of wellbeing; and to offer our increasingly ageing population what Charles Handy(2) has described as 'a second curve' of opportunity, bringing the generations together in a common cause.

But I am sure that we all know what lies at the heart of the matter! Dance brings joy. Whether watching the most esoteric of performances or taking one's very first steps, dance brings joy and a renewed appreciation of human potential.

I'd encourage you to trace your own pathway through dance, asking yourself what brought you to this point? What matters to you? And then to decide what more you can bring to others through dance.

For then, we might just start to change the world.

References

1. Hannah Arendt (1973) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harvest Books
2. Charles Handy (2015) *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society*, Random House Books