

Rosemary Lee, choreographer and Associate Professor at Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE), became involved with Chisenhale in the 1980s and was a board member 2010-15. **Rachael Davies** is a curator and PhD candidate at C-DaRE in collaboration with Chisenhale Dance Space. Here they have a conversation on Chisenhale Dance Space's contribution to community dance within the context of the New Dance movement



In conversation: **Rosemary Lee and Rachael Davies**

Rosemary Lee (RL): So far in your research with Chisenhale's archive, what have you come across in regard to Chisenhale's relationship to the community and community arts?

Rachael Davies (RD): My research is concerned with the formation and early history of Chisenhale, 1980-88. Recently, I've been looking at records from the NODM/New Dance weekend, which took place at Chisenhale in 1986. One of the records for this event is a paper written by the Chisenhale collective. As an event that reflected on the development of New Dance and the formation of Chisenhale, this document has been a useful starting point when thinking about Chisenhale's relationship to notions of community.

In this paper, questions asked to the collective

in 1982 by Ros Dodd, Chisenhale's Administrator, have been reproduced. These questions included: who is the community? How do the collective view themselves and their dance activity in relation to the community? As well as questions about the relationship between art and politics and dance as a communicative form. Posing these questions was part of a strategy to help consider the organisation's position and develop its objectives. As a historical document, I think this paper is interesting as it provides a great deal of insight into the conversation had by and concerns of the collective at the time.

For me, the paper demonstrates an awareness of Chisenhale's social, political, artistic and geographic context and thus a recognition of its role as a resource for the community, both in the context of



Rehearsal of *Memoirs of a Cast of Thousands*, directed by Rosemary Lee in collaboration with Sally Sykes, performer Gladys McGee held aloft, Chisenhale, 1989. Photo: Catherine Heatherington.

its immediate locale and wider artistic community. This then provides some context into why and how Chisenhale's programme, policy and objectives were developed. In the NODM/New Dance paper, the collective write they feel strongly that community and art are mutually inclusive, not exclusive. This is evident in the centrality of the notion of community within Chisenhale's concerns but also through the work that had been carried out up to that point, of 1986, and work that continued to be done across the programme. More specifically, Chisenhale supported collaborative modes of working between practitioners as well as with community partners and members of the public. This leads me to think about *Memoirs of a Cast of Thousands* – a piece you made in 1988 with Sally Sykes at Chisenhale. Did you want to talk a bit about the development of that work?

RL: *Memoirs* was our second work together; we would go and work with any community at all to create the full-length work over a week that featured the performers individually within the ensemble. It toured the UK but Chisenhale fundraised for it and supported us to create the work in London. Work that was labelled 'community work' was rarely, if ever, featured in the London dance scene but was supported regionally. I believe the cast all resided in the borough and we worked with a range of independent dancers as well as others who wanted

to have a go. The two cast members I will never forget were Gladys McGee, a renowned feisty East End poet in her 80s and Harry Grant, formerly a tailor, an eccentric elderly man and one of the last of the Jewish community who resided in the East End.

Equally, Chisenhale supported a community of dancers, often a mix of those who had a conservatoire training like me and those who didn't. Artists like Sue MacLennan made works through an intensive workshop period with this community of performers so there were enriching performing opportunities for artists.

RD: Yes – I've come across Sue MacLennan's piece *Twister* (1985) in the archive.

There is a quote in Chisenhale's 1987 Newsletter from Naseem Khan, taken from *GLA Quarterly*, that says: 'All members of the 22-strong collective are determined that Chisenhale has to have an operative and dynamic relationship with the area in which it is located. Its programme – albeit based on experimental performance work – derives from that determination. Its main priorities reflect the desired balance between community and professional concerns. It works with initiative, effort and imagination.'

This reiterates the centrality of collaboration and community to what Chisenhale was doing, both on an organisational and artistic level. It was through this approach that Chisenhale supported and nurtured an exploration of dance and performance practice and, as you've said, unlike many dance organisations this support was not just limited to professional dancers with conservatoire training. Artists and audiences alike seemed to be attracted to Chisenhale for this very reason – it served a very important role outside of larger dance institutions and traditional dance companies.

RD: How did your interest in collaboration develop?

RL: My interest in participation stemmed from a number of influences, not least my early experience in dancing in amateur dramatic productions that involved such a cross section of my hometown Lowestoft's inhabitants. I grew up through the 70s folk revival too and attended the amazing Albion Fayres that were created by people for people and was so moved by this grassroots communal endeavour. Then, in the late 70s and 80s, I witnessed Welfare State and other brilliant theatre companies and worked with Major Road Theatre Company on two large-scale community shows. I also spent a few years dancing and helping create communal events with Elise Long and Spoke the Hub Dancing in New York City (NYC). On June 12 1982, we danced >>



for peace at dawn across Brooklyn Bridge with 50 or more participants with no permission, and then I performed with Bread and Puppet Theatre company up 5th Avenue for five hours. That was a seminal day for me.

I wanted to make work that was as epic in scale as these spectacles I had experienced but that featured and highlighted the performers themselves as both individuals and as an ensemble, with a kind of intimacy I missed in these large-scale events. When I returned to the UK, I worked with Sally Sykes (formerly of Cycles Dance Company and then one of the first animateurs based in Basildon), making work like *Memoirs of a Cast of Thousands* that could tour and involve local people wherever we went.

Chisenhale became a home-base for me in the late 80s, a place where I felt local people were respected and valued as contributors to the programme and as audience members. I loved the way Chisenhale saw itself as part of the locality. It had a brave attitude of fostering experimentation and nurturing artists whilst doing the same for the community. I loved that I could see other dance genres and groups there alongside the avant-garde work members were exploring. To me, that seemed the right way, it felt messy at times and it didn't always work, but was well-intentioned and principled and I didn't see that happening in the other more mainstream venues at that time in the same way. I felt it was a place where I could bypass mainstream models of practice.

RD: I think bypassing mainstream models of practice encapsulates Chisenhale's methods very well. You also mention the plethora of dance genres,

styles and techniques that Chisenhale supported – I've been struck by the diversity of Chisenhale's early programme and the range of workshops, classes and performances on offer. This includes things like contact improvisation, Arabic dance, Caribbean dance, ballroom/Latin American dance, acrobatics, physical theatre and creative composition classes. Classes and workshops were led by Chisenhale's members, teachers from the local community and Tower Hamlets' dance animateurs – Mary Prestidge, Cris Cheek, Lynda Agaard and Norman Stephenson.

I think it's significant to note that Tower Hamlet's dance animateurs or community dance workers were based at Chisenhale, which further supported Chisenhale's relationship with artists and the local community. The animateur programme was an initiative founded in the 1980s and, supported by the Greater London Council, Chisenhale advocated for the importance of community dance workers in the borough. Green Candle Dance Company, founded and directed by Fergus Early, was also based at Chisenhale during these early years.

Peter Brinson was an important figure within community arts and dance education at the time. I think it's significant that Peter Brinson was one of your tutors at the Laban Centre on your Sociology of Dance course. To me, it seems that at the time of Chisenhale's foundation in the early 80s, conversations around dance in education, dance and sociology and the community were important and had a direct impact on dance practice. How did your dance education/training influence the way you work and your engagement with people in your practice?

Rehearsal of *Memoirs of a Cast of Thousands*, directed by Rosemary Lee in collaboration with Sally Sykes, performer Harry Grant in center. Chisenhale, 1989. Photo: Catherine Heatherington.

RL: I think Peter Brinson was influential for many. I was impatient to be studying dance as an artform in relation to the wider socio-political context. Peter introduced us to sociologists like Durkheim and Weber but equally let us follow our interests too. We wanted to find out more about the students at Dartington and were envious of their opportunities to experience more experimental forms of dance and dance making. Peter helped organise an exchange between the third years at Dartington in rural Devon and his students in Deptford, London. That exchange not only opened my eyes to other ways of dancing but also introduced me to the Rotherhithe Theatre Workshop. The Dartington students studied for four years with one year out working in the community. In Rotherhithe, the students worked at the Theatre Workshop in an old warehouse space, devising, performing and facilitating with the local people there. I was curious about the mix of experimental work and community involvement and wrote my thesis on the workshop. Chisenhale felt similar.

What I had seen in NYC in the early 80s in the lofts and works of Meredith Monk, Kei Takei for example, was that dancers could be any age and from any background and didn't all have to come through ballet or through mainstream contemporary training. I realised early on the value of the improvisatory, somatic and release practices I experienced. It was through harnessing fundamental elements of these approaches to dancing and creating that could empower the participants of any age and experience. I think this belief and trust that a creative approach to working with people should be at the heart of community practice is perhaps where the New Dance movement and the community dance movement overlap somewhat.

I was busy trying to find every opportunity to dance and make dance in the 80s and though I am sure we discussed socially engaged practice avidly, I can't remember those discussions. What have you discovered in the archive and your reading of that period about New Dance and socially engaged practice?

RD: Yes, you're absolutely right about the overlap between the community dance movement and the New Dance movement. I think it's by no coincidence that Chisenhale was home to an emerging experimental dance scene (New Dance) as well as being an important part of the community dance movement. Emily Claid's statement on New Dance in an early issue of *New Dance* magazine encapsulates this:

"There is nothing new to be discovered in dance movement. A provocative and controversial

statement. What is new is now, and what is happening now. How the social, financial and political conditions affect each other at any given time, and where the dance artist stands in relation to them, is what affects the work, and its 'newness'.

If the artist does not consciously connect her work to the external conditions, then dance art becomes a reflection only, a static end product, tending to become established as a social goal, and continuing long past the time when it was an expression of the times.

If the connections are made consciously, then dance art is new, it belongs to now. Making conscious connections begins with an awareness of the personal state of each individual in relation to her needs, in relation to others, in relation to the environment, to the social context, to the city, to the financial context, to the country, to the political context, to the world. This approach does away with static end products, social goals, and leaves a constantly changing and developing process co-existing and working with the constantly changing external conditions." (1)

The conscious connections Claid describes – between the person and their external conditions – were explored by New Dance practitioners through various working methods, including dance practice but also teaching, learning, performing and writing about dance. I think what Chisenhale harnessed and supported within these various methods was the exploration of a developing process which, as Claid writes, is central to working critically within one's socio-political environment. But I think what makes Chisenhale unique in the context of socially engaged practice is precisely its location and immediate environment. In her book *'Artists and People'* (1978), Su Braden describes Tower Hamlets' established and integrated creative community – the original music halls and some of the first community festivals were founded in the borough. Therefore, to end this conversation about community and Chisenhale, I think it's fitting to reflect on the community itself. It's the engagement, interest and support of the community that contributed to Chisenhale's development and made possible many of the artist projects, classes and workshops that happened there. It drives right back to the sentiment shared by the collective in 1986 – that art and the community are mutually inclusive, not exclusive, and thus contribute simultaneously to one another.

Reference

(1) Claid, E. (1977) *New Dance*, (3) p.2.