



Choreography Geography

A change of **direction**



Choreography Geography, performance, Bridport Youth Dance. Photo: Brendan Buesnel.

A combination of geography, choreography and a creative response to COVID 19 refreshed the practice and reset the direction of Bridport Youth Dance Company, which is based beside the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site in south western rural England. Teacher, producer and choreographer, **Nikki Northover**, explains how.

In March 2020 Bridport Youth Dance (BYD) put on a production of Orpheus and Eurydice: The Power Of Love at Bridport Electric Palace. The show involved 90 young dancers from aged 5-19 years from our small rural English town, Bridport and its surrounding localities. I wrote, directed and collaborated with European composer of the year, Andrew Dickson, who has also scored for Mike Leigh (Vera Drake, Secrets and Lies, High Hopes). It became a memorable event for many as, just days later, all theatres across the globe went dark. The following week Bridport Youth Dance (BYD), which I founded in 2001, closed its doors too. This Greek tragedy inadvertently became the last live theatre many of the audience were to see for some time, as the world entered a turbulent phase.

In fact, BYD closed, over time, for sixty weeks. But on reflection, almost three years later, what happened feels more like a gift in our particular case.

After the initial shock of sudden closure and the feeling of dread this created, the pandemic became a time of new possibilities.

In retrospect, this hiatus has greatly enriched Bridport Youth Dance by enabling a change of direction.

Bridport is a coastal town, an incredibly beautiful place set in rolling hills with a vibrant arts scene. With the studio closed, the only thing to do was to step out into the spectacular natural world on our doorstep.

During the first lockdown, BYD established a remote programme, but over time what became clear was that the young dancers really needed to connect with each other in real life and real time. For some, lockdown was an introvert's dream, but the connection to their friends and to their after school clubs and activities was an important part of their lives. Dance acts as an important form of release and has a significant impact on their mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. Following each lockdown, we emerged with outdoor dance classes in a beautiful local garden with live music, again led by Andrew Dickson and former London Symphony Orchestra musician and double bass player, Nic Worters. >>



Left and below: Choreography Geography, performance, Bridport Youth Dance.
All photos: Dan Tucker, except top left: Brendan Buesnel.



We continued to dance in gardens and on beaches; we made short dance films – The Dance Weavers series – that are about responding to the local landscape through movement and dance.

Simultaneously, we began to create site-specific work including Cloud Nine on Charmouth Beach, where the dancers moved in the water and on the sand against a stunning natural backdrop of sea and sky. Throughout this time BYD created a new future vision for itself and relaunched with an outdoor programme to become known as BYD's ART and DANCE in the LANDscape dance education programme which fuses movement, dance, nature and land. One of our most recent projects was Choreography Geography, a performance on the spectacular ancient hill site of Eggardon. It was supported by Arts Council England (ACE), Dorset Council, Bridport Town Council and Dorset Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty and was created in partnership with the National Trust

Eggardon is an Iron Age hill fort dating back 2,500 years; a place of extremes, one minute wild and free, the next all gentle folds. The natural landscape creates a mood and atmosphere; an air of mystery and of history. Our site-specific performance was developed through creative tasks and improvisation with choreography interwoven, much of the movement created in response to the landscape, with the young dancers connecting to and honouring the land.





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Choreography Geography moved with the landscape. The audience walked and watched, listened and absorbed. They observed the vast cloud-filled sky and the undulating land with incredible panoramic views over the Marshwood Vale and the Jurassic coast with awe and respect. Many of the audience found the performance deeply moving and were brought to tears. The power of dance runs deep and here the audience were reminded of two powerful things: spirit and earth. No clutter, no distractions... just a reminder of the beauty of Mother Earth and of life itself.

The performance was described as “awe-inspiring” and “unforgettable”. One audience member stated, “The landscape of Eggardon Hill is utterly breathtaking and the performance utilised this perfectly... The weather gods were also extremely kind, providing such a glorious evening, finishing with the most memorable sunset I think I have ever witnessed. Even the mighty highland cattle contributed!”

A review by Rachelle Green, whose three children have been a part of BYD’s boys’ dance programme, takes us inside the event:

What a journey this show was for the audience. From the beginning we were completely consumed by the commitment of the dancers, varying in age from 10-18 years...well-rehearsed, confident and showing a depth of understanding in the nuances of the land they moved along. It isn’t easy to dance outdoors, but they negotiated the spaces beautifully, illustrating their level of fitness, exercising jumps, lifts and intricate footwork on rough terrain.

The choreography took us on a journey from high views to flat spaces, choreographed pieces with hilltop dancers improvising and framing the performance... intense dark sequences, improvised butterfly puppetry, intimate, playful duets, beautifully framed by the pink sky.

A tap soloist delighted the audience with her commitment and skill then led the audience to a ridge. Here, the company of dancers ended the journey with four repeated shapes, performed in slow contemplation as the sun dipped in the sky.

A peaceful, serene ending, performed with beauty and reverence, honouring the land and the space. As the dancers exited over the hills, a reminder to celebrate the earth and its history, Nikki and her team have again successfully captured the power of dance and all that is to be celebrated in this world. Even a week after the performance, it is still resonating with me.”

The Dance Weavers films were also created in response to the pandemic. The first and second films (Emerging and Freedom/Connection) were selected to represent South West England at the U Dance national dance platform, a celebration of youth dance across the UK. Freedom/Connection was selected as a part of their screen showcase and shown at selected cinemas including a première at the British Film Institute on London’s South Bank. The third film in the series, From the Boards to the Earth, focuses on celebrating BYD’s new work in the >>

land, but also gives a nod to its roots and to its work in the theatre.

Above all, the films are a celebration of dance and of the young people themselves. They have shown enormous resilience at a challenging time, but their passion, dedication and commitment to dance have been unwavering. BYD gives them happiness and confidence and has created a company where artistic young people can form friendships with like-minded others in a safe, creative and educational environment.

Bridport Youth Dance continues to inspire and encourage young people to dance, enabling them to experience its empowering nature and forge ahead as future dance lovers, makers, shifters, creators. Past members have become film makers, theatre directors, dancers, dance academics, artists and lovers of the arts. Some have gained places at various universities to study dance and recently some have successfully auditioned for CircoMedia, Northern School Of Contemporary Dance and London Contemporary Dance School.

This year we are celebrating 21 years of Bridport Youth Dance and for me 30 years as an arts supporter and promoter in Dorset.

Our outdoor dance education programme continues alongside work in the studio on the Symondsburry Estate and into the future, we will continue outreach work based around the theme of connecting to nature through dance in local primary schools, with a Forest School and ASCape, a group of young autistic adults once again supported by ACE.

The Dance Weavers films continue to evolve, with the fourth film *Choreography Geography* being premièred in January 2023 and another site-specific production in September.

Our story shows how artists always find a way to create, even when the world appears to turn upside down. The work of BYD is a celebration of young people, of art, dance, land and community, and brings value to the local community. And after twenty-one years it has reached a new beginning by reconnecting to nature. BYD's aim is to continue inspiring and empowering many more young dancers to follow their hearts, to experience the joy and the power of dance. Its outdoor work is now an integral and important part of its future vision.

Info

The generous support of The Arts Council has helped BYD enormously in this shift to working in the land with the talented young dancers. At the same time BYD has forged fantastic and important partnerships with the Local Authority and with Children's Services, Activate Performing Arts and The National Trust. Many local businesses have also come forward to help ensure that this valuable work continues in the local community. Receiving both national and local support has been vital for the group's very survival and has ensured BYD can keep inspiring local children and young people to dance and experience its many benefits.

www.bridportyouthdance.org.uk/upcoming-shows--projects-and-the-dance-weavers-films.html



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