

# Leaving a positive

What, from our earliest dance experiences, stays with us to the other side of our professional training? **Ashley Jordan** (AJ) Artistic Director of Coventry-based Ascension Dance, shines a light on the youth dancer he was to illuminate the professional he has become – one with a passion to both replicate and grow dance opportunities for the next generation in his home city.

**A**s a child, I was always the energetic one. The youngest of three children of Bajan (1) descent, in my infancy, I remember waiting for my sister to finish her dance classes on a Saturday afternoon. Holding the hand of my mother as we walked up the ramp into the community centre, I was allowed to swing around the rail outside as a compromise when I became restless waiting for my sibling. It was inevitable that I would eventually join these classes myself, but I would come to realise that I had little interest in the dance school content that involved learning staple moves to 90s pop songs.

Frustrated at the lack of self-expression, I diverged, taking up football instead, but the love for dance and movement wasn't squashed or hidden. I remember being dancer in the school production of Cinderella and slotting into a piece of choreography as part of a local dance group at the last minute. The key moment of re-inspiration wouldn't arrive until Year 9 though, in a PE session commandeered by three male dancers from beingfrank physical theatre, who lead us through a dance/movement/capoeira session. They were looking for young males with a keen interest in movement to be part of a week-long dance project. Yes, having a week off school was appealing, but, more importantly, the workshop in general sparked something in me. They had a subtle, cloak and dagger approach to dance, drip feeding >>



Main image: Ashley Jordan.  
Photo: Laura Marterere.  
Below Top: Imagineer, Bridge at Dagenham,  
Ascension Dance. Photo: Andrew Moore.  
Below bottom: The Other Side,  
Ascension Dance. Photo: Andrew Moore.

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Imagineer, Bridge at Dagenham, Ascension Dance. Photo: Andrew Moore.



The Other Side, Ascension Dance. Photo: Andrew Moore.

movement in a clever way that disguised the fact that we were all learning choreography. This workshop re-ignited the itch to move. The movement, coupled with the role models and dance style was engaging. They selected three of us to be part of the project. We spent five days working with the artists to create short sections of performance that would support a professional work called Innocents. It was a journey of achievement and personal growth and left us all with a sense of pride and collective accomplishment.

I was sign-posted to the local youth dance

programme off the back of this. The group, Coventry Youth Dance, run by Coventry Performing Arts Service, would go on to perform at Warwick Arts Centre, Laban Centre, London and support a Coventry Police video highlighting the impact of knife crime. As others grew out of touch with dance and developed other interests, for me dance continued to hold strong.

In 2017, after completing my dance training at University of Chichester and performing as a freelancer for a couple of years, I, alongside fellow dancer Ben Morley, founded Ascension Dance Company (ADC). The opportunities to engage in contemporary dance that we had as young people had reduced significantly due to funding cuts, reduction in youth services through the local councils and the amount expected from teachers on a limited budget. ADC had three simple ambitions: to create high quality dance work, to work at engaging young people in dance and develop our own understanding of running an organisation.

Our youth work started with the occasional workshops, exploring what the Ascension Dance way of working with young people was. After a couple of years running afterschool clubs, we made the jump in 2019 to launch Ascension Youth. We had a lot to learn in terms of developing group structures, our

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content of delivery, how to engage young people and how to build a safe space for young people’s development. We knew though, that the essence of this group was rooted in our experiences as young people: creating a space that facilitated creativity, engaged young people with excess energy to use dance to channel focus and to support the growth of a dance community.

During lockdown, we were committed to continuing to serve the young people in our care and our wider community. We delivered weekly online challenges under the project title Create It Share It and set up an online portal for young people to engage with dance tasks in their own time.

On the other side of lockdown, we finalised our group structures, adding two new groups to the Ascension Youth family, creating LEAP, a space for young people aged 4 to 6 to become absorbed in a playful version of our Ascension style of movement, as well as a youth performance group, titled SUMMIT,

for the gifted and talented young dancers aged 14+ in Coventry.

Having started with just one group in 2019, we now have six groups, offering dance workshops for young people aged 4 to 19 all infused with our enthusiasms for creativity, support and focus.

Our goal isn’t to create an army of Coventry based professional dancers, although it would be lovely if some of our students wanted to study dance due to their experience of Ascension, but to demonstrate the versatility the arts have to offer. We want to create confident and creative young people who take the transferable skills from dance into becoming, engineers, lighting designers, costume makers, stage technicians, mathematicians, scientists, and medical students. To develop a city of more connected and cohesive young people who understand the value of hard work and reap the benefits from experiencing the joy of communal success that dance offers. We want to subvert the hierarchy in dance that can present itself through high tuition fees and additional expenses such as compulsory costumes and travel fees whilst maintaining the ambition of performing alongside other young people from outside of our city. We want to subvert the idea that dance for or not for certain people and share the love of movement play, practice, and repetition.

Our ambition now is to re-create the space that gave us so much joy, laughter, friendships and pride as young people. I loved it...trips to London, making new friends and being ‘wowed’ by the talent of others; the knowledge of there being more outside my immediate surroundings; the itch to push myself, see more and break through the ceiling of possibilities imposed by society. Because we all deserve to know that and believe that you can do and be anything you put your mind to and for us, the arts and dance is a perfect vehicle for understanding this.

#### References

1. descriptor for the people of the Caribbean island of Barbados

#### Info

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Imagineer, Bridge at Dagenham, Ascension Dance.  
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