



# Professional practice and practice led enquiry

**Deborah Norris**, Programme Manager and **Phaedra Petsilas**, Programme Leader & Head of Studies, share the vision, ethos and community of people on the MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners at Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance.

**“We all experience the world through our bodies, and acknowledging this brings new conceptual lenses to research practices”** (Lala and Kinsella, 2011) (1)

**T**he intense and focused life of any practitioner within the dance industry rarely allows for personal development time, but as movers, creatives, makers, educators and all the identities we take on in between, we in fact spend a great deal of time in ‘research mode’. Whether for R&D, creations, teaching, facilitating, even leading, our craft requires us to delve deeply into various processes, somatic or intellectual. Our work is in most of its parts embodied, creative, intuitive and reflexive and in all its manifestations, a practice of enquiry into

the what, the how and the why behind what we do. Conducting research is not a detached concept, but our way of being. Enabling dance practitioners to frame their practice as research is, therefore, crucial.

## **Not ‘just doing’**

Having the opportunity to reflect upon and acknowledge our processes as artists and practitioners is vital, not only for the development of dance practice as a whole, but also for the foregrounding of dance as a mode of knowing. Our practices do not only belong to the mute space of ‘just doing’. They are thoughtful, knowledge generating processes that contribute to the arts

All photos: MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners students. Photos: Jez Ward.



and to wider society. As citizens of the world, we are all responsible and accountable for the art we create or engage with, and through the process of our research we can connect and enter into dialogue with wider concerns – societal, cultural, political, philosophical, environmental. Yet, our embodied selves are always in relation with everything and everyone around us. As embodied beings, we are always moving, dancing or not and so foregrounding dance/movement/the body as a research practice is vital for the development of all our endeavours.

As Rambert School, we are a leading voice in the UK and international training landscape and the impact of our graduates is seen and felt across the dance industry. We believe that cultivating a robust, diverse collective of practitioner researchers will enrich art, academia and foreground the body in all its identifying forms.

Current times call for critical thinking and interrogation of hierarchies and structures which exclude and discriminate. Part of the responsibility in creating this collective, aside from widening research opportunities within Rambert School, is to facilitate change in relation to inclusion and anti-discrimination. Many of our students embark on this MA in order to make change. By developing this innovative post-graduate course of study, Rambert School is paving the way for change within the dance sector, enabling new thinking and progressive approaches to teaching, learning and creating.

As an alumnus of both school and company, Principal, Amanda Britton says: “Excellence comes in many forms at Rambert School. We offer a holistic and inclusive approach to dance education and research. Broadening participation at all levels is at the core of our ethos and the MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners invites in people from all areas of our diverse industry to engage in meaningful and innovative Practice Research exchange.” >>





### **A diversity of practice**

The MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners (MADRPP) at Rambert School was developed in 2019 by Professor Sarah Rubidge to facilitate research activities for any dance professional with a regular practice: “It is an ideal degree for mid-career dance artists on the cusp of changing their career path ... from dancer to choreographer, dancer to teacher, teacher to choreographer; from community dance artist to choreographic artist (or vice versa) and for those interested in pursuing (practice-based) PhD research. (It is also a fit) for mid-career artists, who want to reflect on their work to date, and see whether there are new directions to explore.

To this end, the overarching aim of the MA in Research was to develop a flexible research programme for professional dancers, choreographers, rehearsal directors, educators, movement artists, community-based facilitators and artistic leaders within dance and its cognate practices.

At the core of the programme is experimentation and Practice Led Enquiry, with the students’ practices informing the content and delivery. Given that students are at various career stages, the opportunity for sharing their practices within a critical and analytical environment offers them new knowledge and understanding into wide-ranging aspects of

the dance field. Observing, for example, creative practices and discussing the impact of dance as a therapy, or the role of the dance educator in shifting approaches to diversity in ballet education, is not only fascinating, but has a continued impact on the other students’ research, perhaps sometimes unconsciously. A renewed awareness of alternative approaches and practices has certainly raised some original discussion and debate amongst students and staff within the taught seminars.

### **A legacy of innovation**

The idea of curating a dance research ecology feels appropriate and necessary given Rambert School’s position within the international conservatoire environment. Practice as research has essentially been at the core of its existence for over 100 years. Though perhaps not labelled as research, the vision of founder, Marie Rambert, to nurture individual and creative talent, was innovative, original and ambitious, and the school has maintained this responsibility to enhance and develop contemporary dance and choreographic practices. The MA has inevitably attracted contemporary dance artists and each cohort brings more diversity and interest in emerging dance processes. A small example of the breadth of research interests that are being explored include: the idea of avatars as dance performers, destabilising

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traditional and historic teaching practices to create more inclusive spaces and building new business models for neuro-diverse representation in leadership roles within arts organisations

This allows the curriculum to extend to a significant range of subject specific content. In one of the MA students' words: “This course should be mandatory for all artists! That’s the only way we can have more thoughtful dancers who don’t just do what they’re told without question, but maybe challenge and think about the potential impact of their work.” (MADRPP Student, 2021)

### **Curriculum**

The curriculum model is bespoke to each cohort and refreshed each year depending on the professional practitioners who join and delivered on a part-time basis over 24 months.

This allows for both individualised experience for each student/practitioner and time and space for experimentation and reflection on professional practice. A seminar series runs consistently throughout the programme facilitated by Rambert School faculty and a range of guest lecturers. Each seminar encourages students' understanding of dance research, its methods, approaches, history, and the individuals responsible for its ever-changing landscape. It also builds relationships with current scholars, academics and practitioners. Guests are invited from across the field of dance and have presented on phenomenology, philosophy and ethnography, alongside robotics, neuro-diversity, somatic practice and writing for dance. The opportunity for dialogue and exchange is hugely valuable and has had a substantial impact on the development of the postgraduate student community and their ability to articulate, frame and position their research within both an academic and professional context.

### **Supervision**

The role of the Mentor (Supervisor) is crucial to the programme and, as the students commence their first year, they create and develop a unique learning plan, which allows them to frame their aims and objectives for their research journey.

Each student has a mentor, who works with them independently to support their progress, cultivating a safe and open rapport enabling students to challenge, question, and act upon their research enquiry. Mentors are selected in response to students areas of interest and each brings their

own professional experience as practitioner / researcher which speaks to the trajectory of each student's research enquiry. This enhances the dance ecology across a diverse spectrum of practices on an international scale.

### **Breadth of research**

There is no better confirmation of the value of our programme, than seeing the development of its students, their confidence in articulating their practice(s) and the innovations that they are bringing into the industry.

Our MA students' breadth of practice research has spanned a range of areas of enquiry so far: performer agency, somatics, choreographic methodologies, Neuro-linguistic Programming and motivation, digital dance avatars, de-colonisation of the private dance sector curricula, inclusive practices, development of regional dance provision, neuroscience, the politics of the body and dance institutions, cancel culture... and there is so much more to come. The diversity of approaches nurtured within this MA programme, result in a deepening of the embodied practices, but challenge norms and structures in our wider industry. Our students are actively contributing towards innovation and change. The core of our programme is facilitating and supporting our students to transform their practice, which results in a profound change in how they view their work and themselves as practitioners and scholars.

### **(The importance of) equitable exchange**

“The MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners operates socially on the principle that lecturers, mentors and students are all practising professionals in their chosen field, and, therefore, in an important sense, peers. It is recognised that each member of the community will have more knowledge and/or expertise in particular areas than others, both students and lecturers (Professor Sarah Rubidge, 2022).”

Throughout the MADRPP the students develop an awareness of themselves, their practice and that of others.

“Through the facilitated exchanges, we don't only build dance research engagement, but also valuable social engagement, enhancing the skills to articulate dance practice in all its forms. These do not just belong to the academic sphere. Through research experimentation and exchange we are also activating 'soft-skills', such as empathy, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, care, dealing >>



MA Dance Research for Professional Practitioners students. Photos: Jez Ward.

with uncertainties, understanding and appreciating differences, active listening, just to name a few” (2)

### Student voices

Our students enter a space of exchange that is open, inclusive and empowering. In their words: “To be back studying in an environment where vulnerability is not only aired, but accepted, and is used as a tool to forge a way forward, is honestly mind blowing.” (MADRPP Student, 2022)

It is humbling to know that from day one, students feel at ease and the course allows them to connect practice with scholarship in a positive and productive way: “...you bridged the gap between creativity and academia beautifully, giving me a way to navigate the minefield and find my own way. I do not see myself as an academic, and, if I’m honest, I’m a little fearful of it. I think of myself as person who just loves to connect with movement and dancers, to express myself and find myself through the creation of dance. I may begin to see this differently now.” (MADRPP Student, 2022)

From a dancer’s perspective, the course has facilitated a process of reflexivity and an ability to articulate their authentic voice as a performer:

“I would definitely encourage everyone to engage with this course, especially practicing professional dancers like myself. It’s been really important for me, as I think often we get caught up in the momentum of the profession and what the MA gifted to me was an opportunity to just stop. It supports you in a really wonderful way to take those moments to reflect, to understand yourself, your practice and thus move forwards in your career with more clarity.” (Second Year Student)

Some of our students work within educational and supportive settings, and this MA encouraged them to bring their professional practice into a focused framework, whilst still doing what they are passionate about: “The work that I do is with some of the most vulnerable children, who are often wheelchair users unable to communicate, so I am very passionate about giving dance opportunities for them.” (MADRPP Student, 2020)

We want to invite colleagues from the broadest spectrum of our industry to join this bespoke MA programme. To join the Rambert School family. Our industry is nothing without its people...without its ‘people dancing’, creating, teaching, leading and everything in between. Our people express their identities in many forms, they experience the world in multiple forms of embodiment, their practices are varied and multifaceted. We want to celebrate and amplify this diversity in identities, experiences and practices. Join our collaborative of practitioner researchers. Make research happen, make change happen.

### References

1. Lala and Kinsella, ‘A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Embodied Nature of Occupation at End-of-Life. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 78(4), 246-254.’
2. Empowering Dance, 2020, p.10). Empowering Dance: The Soft Skills Teaching and Learning Approach (2020 - 2023). [Available at: <http://empowering2.communicatingdance.eu/guidebook/en/>]

### Info

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