

Sue Smith (L) & Michael Joseph (R), People Dancing in The Summer. Photo: Rachel Cherry.



# A 21st Century lifesaver



At the beginning of 2022 People Dancing welcomed **Dr Sue Smith**, Senior Lecturer & Course Leader BA (Hons) Dance & Choreography, Academy of Music and Theatre Arts (AMATA) Falmouth University as Chair. Here, we share Sue's powerful opening address to us all about dance as an essential – especially in troubled times.

**T**his dance is not decoration. Or trivia. Or luxury. Or trite. This dance is felt. It's atomic. It's invisible. It's seismic. This dance affirms who we are, who I am, who you are, who we are to each other. This dance is power. This dance is going to keep us alive.

This world we are in needs us. We know they've got it wrong. Losing dance from school, from youth provision, from FE and HE doesn't help us meet the unprecedented challenges we are faced with now.

Right now.

When we are just crawling out of the pandemic.

When we have been skin-starved, parched of touch and conviviality (from the Latin 'with life' & 'fit for a feast'), now punished with increasingly shambolic (UK) and populist (US) politics and worrying global conflicts.

When we have been Rapunzled away: our young people likely to be even more vulnerable to a digital toxic introspection and ecological fatalism. The crushing inevitability of climate crisis, food and heat poverty and the human devastation of conflict and migration is inscribed ever more indelibly on us by the addictive lure of doom-scrolling.

We can feel lost here.

When we dance we also lose ourselves. We experience feelings of letting go as we dance, a freedom, a creative or expressive release. Going with the flow. This exquisite abandon is also an uncertainty, a delicious not-knowing. We explore our minds and our bodies: emotional, physical, intellectual. We are in relationship with others but free of many social (or verbal) inhibitions.

We assess and try out how we can be in the world. We dance through understandings and misunderstandings of the complex ecologies of which we are a part.

In direct opposition to the helplessness we can feel when faced with overwhelming inequalities and eco-fragility, the uncertainties we seek out in dance give us options, opportunities, decisions. They give us ourselves. Here, in the present moment, we are agents of change, not only by embodying the values and principles of the world we want to live in, but, as our body and mind are affected by movement and music, we ourselves change, as we work out what it means to be who we are.

Making and doing dance gives us a sense of ownership and control that can be an anchor in a storm of uncertainty. Choreography gives us choices – how, when and where we move our bodies and who with: negotiating proximity and consent. Dance has the potential for transformation, discovery, play and co-operation. This is where we can share expressions of our lives, feel understood and safe and where we see chinks of light, hope for a way of living that we ourselves can influence. In her book *Hope in the Dark* (2004) Rebecca Solnit says;

“Hope locates itself in the premise that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognise uncertainty, you recognise that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others.”

Dance's currency is precious. Our methods,

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values and nomenclature are increasingly co-opted by business and other sectors. Marketing machines, global brands and networks commonly refer to the language of creative making: 'improvisation', 'collaboration', 'play'. It is common to see dancers used as symbols of freedom, individualism or togetherness in advertising by financial services or communication brands. But dance is much more important than that. The approaches and possibilities of dance: radical, prone to failure, recklessly generous, diverse and abundant are those of survival. In an increasingly uncertain world, dance can be a true social movement of democratic and liberating action.

As the national and world political temperature fluctuates, threatening global and local harmony, dance can bring people together to create experiences that reflect and inform what matters to us and to instigate and lead change. Within our increasingly fractured communities, there is a danger that kindness and tolerance are lost amid suspicion and fear. Dance can temper this threat and open doors to greater understandings and new relationships. By working together, voices in dance can activate our strength as a potent social force: not only by offering imaginative approaches to community building, health and wellbeing and fairer living, but by simply enacting our agency and imaginations in our art.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold. Its central idea being that by reconstructing the object and highlighting its

imperfections, its fault lines become its unique beauty. This 400-year-old technique is a useful and well-rehearsed metaphor for how our vulnerabilities may in fact become our strength. As we rebuild our relationships, our resilience and our communities piece by piece, dance can be the gold: beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, with the strength and integrity to hold things together.

There are many other jobs that pay more, hurt less (!) and make you less tired than dance, but there is nothing else like it. I am looking forward to being more involved with the communities of dancers engaged with the important work of People Dancing and to work towards more deeply and widely ingraining the potential power of dance in our ecosystems – locally and globally. Progressive perspectives on dance attract passionate, inspired people and create dynamic communities. This is where I like to be.

I am proud to be part of People Dancing and proud to advocate:

- Dance as community
- Dance as democracy
- Dance as care
- Dance as resistance
- Dance as humanity
- Dance as lifesaver
- (and dance just as dance too...)

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#### Info

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