

Drawing: Marcia Porto.



A very contemporary dance project

Sharon Scaniglia, previously manager of ArtsSpeak in Nottingham, shares her appreciation of supporting artists, how creativity combats loneliness and her passionate belief in older age as an important time of rich self-expression. These come together, for her, in the magic of Cool Company, a gallery-based dance project for over 60s led by choreographer, Deane McQueen.

“As women, we find ourselves performing all the time to meet society and the culture’s expectations about what we’re supposed to do, how we’re supposed to look, what we’re supposed to think.”

This quote, by Martha Wilson, sets up a series of images that ring true with me, as a woman in her later life, reflecting on her younger self.

I came to work in the arts in the 1990s, feeling constrained by society, into the archetypal ‘Administrator’. I worked as an Arts Officer in local government, commissioning and supporting inspirational artists who, I realised, lived and interacted with me in a very different way to my work colleagues. I always feel humbled and privileged to be able have this role and, throughout my career, I learned the deep debt we owe to the contribution artists make in our society. Not only do they see things differently and experiment to produce work that challenges us to look at the world from their perspective, but they also give themselves continually and question most things.

Leaving the constraints of local government and securing funds to work with people over 60, I also wanted to work with older artists to address several issues.

Firstly, using the arts to challenge what we encounter as we age including stigmatisation, social isolation and loneliness. If you have worked all your life then retire due to age or ill health, finding your

way in a fast-changing society can be daunting. Likewise, if you take time out as an older person to care for someone – grandchildren or an older relative or partner. It’s easy to lose touch when social networks fold.

Another consideration, was lack of affordable opportunities and places of welcome and understanding. I was also aware of how older people were seen as a drain on health and welfare budgets, overshadowed by more vocal generations and had limited opportunities to voice opinions. Many become silent, lonely and unseen.

In 2017, when working with The Baring Foundation, on a beautiful, person-centred, one-to-one project for people living in care with dementia, the realisation dawned that this population in particular had even less opportunity and no choice as to what we asked them to engage with.

Once this funding finished, I felt there must be a better way to work with older people to help them stay connected socially and stave off dementia by keeping engaged and active. Hence ArtSpeak, a bespoke programme of arts aimed at over 60s materialised.

ArtsSpeak

At this time, I was a trustee of Radford Care Group, a centre offering day provision for older people. I secured Big Lottery funding and used this to set up the project, which employed me, alongside

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Photo: Sharon Scaniglia.

Hannah Stoddart, as full time project coordinator and, together, we started to create this affordable, welcoming, bespoke arts programme for anyone over the age of 60.

I met Deane McQueen, a workshop facilitator, choreographer and movement specialist, when she joined our theatre group Kindred Spirits.

As she is also an older artist, we discussed hosting a project that would be an opportunity for our members to come together to experiment, hung loosely on the term 'dance'. We also wanted to work at city centre gallery Nottingham Contemporary where, over a few years, we had various discussions about having a group meet in their 'Space' a large performance and workshop facility with state-of-the-art digital tech.

So many older people living in and around Nottingham never visit this gallery, which seemed a great shame to me. Much contemporary work they exhibit is stimulating and challenging, should appeal to all ages and it's free to access. It was always my aim to see older people own an element of what happens there and feel they want to visit because they enjoy and value the venue as part of the city's cultural offer. We felt working with Deane would be a great way to start something that might contribute to shifting this stigma, bring down barriers and add

an enjoyable complement to ArtSpeak's growing programme.

Cool Company

We therefore established Cool Company as a rolling programme of sessions based at the gallery: a dance improvisation ensemble for people aged 60+ with or without prior dance/movement experience to come together to experience how we imagine, watch, think, share, and move in our everyday lives.

The sessions have not been set up to teach or recreate/learn dance steps or routines - it's a much more radical approach, using contemporary methods externalising thoughts, memories and ideas. This might sound scary to participants, complex even, but Deane is asking them to recall their own experiences and not become someone they cannot relate to.

Each session is managed delicately, with attention to all and the aim of integrating a social and creative element whilst enabling individual participation. This allows participants to work together, supporting each other and including collective experiences and differences. Each element becomes valued, all learn new skills, break new ground, develop confidence, share life experiences and build positive relationships. Deane's process is to experiment with ideas which change constantly depending on



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response and regular feedback. Participants say of her approach:

“(She is) fantastic!! Considerate, passionate, understanding, imaginative, encouraging and FUNNY!!!...Her effortless, strong, witty and gentle leadership gets a whole room of non-dancers dancing without them even realising!”

We ensure the space is safe and the environment is closed and comfortable. No-one is asked to dance, although some members move more than others, in what is seen as a contemporary dance style. However, the major factor is the performances: some simple, others more rhythmic and complicated, but always from the heart, leaving an emotional mark regardless.

Many participants have been emotionally moved, others less so, but there is always a joy and contentment within the group, a willingness to learn and eagerness for the next session.

The majority of the group have been female, however, there are some men who also come along, and the mix is interesting in terms of everyone’s background and experience.

Performance

On Tuesday 20 December 2022, there was a performance/sharing on the last session of this phase of workshops and I was privileged to witness a series of individual solos

Using the exhibition, Hollow Earth – and after visiting some caves under the National Justice Museum (in previous sessions) – each participant responded to this brief: *You are discovered sitting still, silent at table surrounded by possessions occasionally lit, revealed through deep darkness. The silence is punctured by the faint sound of music, changing, fading in and out. Occasionally you rise to repeat a strange, illogical ritual the purpose of which is known only to yourself.*

The work was also inspired from ‘Invisible Cities’ by Italo Calvino (1997). Deane used this as a starting point and Cool Company members were asked to curate from the list below to generate rituals:

1. An item of clothing
2. A book
3. Uncooked ingredients of a favourite meal
4. A secret in a box – something you regret
5. A map marked with significant places visited/ events
6. Your favourite song/music/sound effect
7. A photograph
8. A piece of fabric impregnated with your smell
9. Your favourite shoes
10. Something that is very precious to you

Marcia is a Brazilian artist who has been working with Deane to visually catalogue each session. She takes photographs, sketches and video. Some of her images and photographs, of this session and others can be seen on our website www.artspeak.org.uk/cool-company-dance

The feedback we have gathered is an excellent testimony to what we set out to achieve with the project. Many of the participants stay after the session to have coffee, lunch or both before leaving and some have formed new friendships. A similar story comes from several when speaking: themes of loss, death, caring and lost youth, but it’s always uplifting to learn what they have gained from being able to be part of the group.

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Photo: Sharon Scaniglia.



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Here are some comments gathered in evaluation from different participants:

“The sessions are perfectly and inclusively paced, with a lot of encouragement and opportunities to work appropriately to each person’s needs. Including a time to sit and draw our responses and feelings about the dance is a very welcome part of the morning.”

“Dance has brought sheer joy to my life since I was affected by a life changing serious illness some years ago. My body stopped working in a way that was very hard to navigate and dance was part of my recovery. I have never taken the sheer joy of being able to move for granted since. So, the opportunity you have given me to share this joy with others is priceless and I am hoping there will be more like the sessions with Deane.”

“As part of Cool Company, I could, at last, be myself in the company of others and freely express myself. For too long, I had lost myself in illness, grief, pain and recovery. My identity had been wrenched from me and here was the space I needed to reconnect with myself. I cannot intellectually explain the effects of the light, the room, the music, the calm instruction of the leader, the presence of 16 others, but they all came together to create a safe, creative and supportive space where I could find some healing. I realise now that I had instantly signed up for this course weeks ago because I instinctively knew it is what I needed; it was an atavistic urge to move my body to music in a safe environment.”

We have also gathered visual images along the way as each participant has been given a sketch book at the start of the sessions to make markings

from work they do. Some have found this an excellent way to document their feelings and work. We have a body of images that underpin the work and in March 2023 some members contributed to a retrospective exhibition that Deane put together about her work over the course of her career.

For ArtSpeak, Cool Company embodies the ethos of what we set out to achieve for the whole project. The participants have become co-creators, investing in a creative drive and energy they never imagined they had and this has been shared. Deane acts as a facilitator, mentor, friend, collaborator, and it’s been beautiful to watch. The Company has grown together, in their confidence and have found comfort from being in a group of older people. The sessions have given them the opportunity to create with honesty by exploring their thoughts and feelings of life and its complex layers. They have been challenged in a way that has opened doors for them that growing older closes. During the sessions they have had permission to reflect on subjects, emotions and elements of life that too often become taboo. The outcome has been enlightening.

I believe there is something very special that has been harnessed by the work in the sessions and I know it’s not something that happens every day or by accident. We have been gifted this opportunity. It’s magical.

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