



Project participant,
Boys Dancing.
Being Frank
Physical Theatre.

Reimagine: Dancing Through The Lens

Embracing the age of digital photography, **Mark Anderson**, of West Midlands-based infuseDANCE, contemplates the power of fusing dance and photography for young people, offering instant inspiration, increased engagement, mental health survival strategies and wider audiences.

There came a clear moment for me of realising the impact that photography could have in engaging young people in dance during a project delivered in a pupil referral unit with a group of young people with complex behavioural and emotional needs.

It was certainly a challenge to engage them in a dance workshop, but the camera offered a way in. If you understand how to use it (the camera) to capture movement at its best, choosing the right angle, distance and composition to your subject, then you have a tool which offers almost instant visual feedback to the participant. They no longer had to take my word for it that they were doing well, that they looked great, they could see it for themselves on the camera screen. And once they saw it, they were hooked. This camera then became an artistic device for them to explore, get curious. It was an invitation for them to be actively involved in the creative thought process: what other angles might we try? Where else could we use as a location, a background? What about costume? Facial expression, performance? It also became a reflective tool for them: was that the best they could do the movement? Did they need to straighten one of their legs a bit more? Reach a bit higher?

This moment occurred during the time I was fortunate to have been one of the lead artists for Boys Dancing, a large scale annual project initiated by Warwick Arts Centre and led by the brilliant Dave Mckenna (Being Frank Physical Theatre). Aside from working with groups of boys/young men to create



Mark Anderson.

performances in more traditional settings, it gave me the opportunity to work alongside Dave to deliver dance work in a prison with young offenders. We were there to create dance films, but I was also given another chance to further develop my practice and use photography to document the process.

Some wonderful images were created during breaks between filming, allowing the participants to be creative with the space, experimenting in a more relaxed, informal way, with an autonomy and freedom that allowed that all important 'creative flow' to happen. And again, being able to view the images back on the camera reinforced that what they were doing looked good, that they could trust us.

As time passed – ten years or so – photography became an integral part of infuseDANCE, the company I went on to lead with my wife Esther. It >>



Ace Dance and Music Youth Company, Reimagine Worcester.



naturally fitted within our projects. Certainly, the lines blurred across the art forms of dance and photography, but the thought process was the same. There were so many creative parallels, especially around what we were trying to say with our art and its meaning. As a result of this fusion - our first taster



Project participant, infuseDANCE Arts Connect project.

of the Reimagine project was born. Our idea was to create site specific images that used dance to explore the local area and reimagine how a dancer would use it and our first invitation to dive deep on this was a project based at the Orchard Theatre, Dartford, Kent in the South of England.

At the start of 2020, we were working with the wonderful Dancefest in Worcester. After the success of Reimagine Dartford and an intervening project back in the Midlands with Shropshire County Council, creating a touring exhibition for the centenary of the end of WW1, we were excited to get started on a large scale outdoor exhibition called Reimagine Worcester. We were set on exploring the spaces across the city: its famous railway viaduct, the racecourse, the nooks and crannies of the city streets and ready for working alongside and with a myriad of cross-generational community groups ...when the pandemic hit and everything closed down. Social distancing was the new norm and, as an industry, we were all desperately trying to figure out



Left: Project participant, Shropshire Council Boys Dancing Prison Project.
Below: Project participants, Boys Dancing. Being Frank Physical Theatre.

“They no longer had to take my word for it that they were doing well, that they looked great, they could see it for themselves on the camera screen. And once they saw it, they were hooked.”



Project participants, Reimagine Dartford.

how to keep dancing alive and well. We immediately responded to the covid lockdown and adapted, shifting Reimagine online.

We tentatively set an online challenge asking people to get creative and submit their own reimagined lockdown spaces that would create an

online gallery on Instagram. We received so many fantastic images that really captured the sense of community, people were connecting, were still out there and wanted to get involved in a cohesive aim – something positive amidst the tremendous challenge that covid had presented us all with. And as time progressed, so did the volume of responses, people reached out, creativity grew, dancers, movers and makers would not be stopped!

We had images of participants from across all ages, upside down in bathtubs, en relevé (tip toe) on a tree branch, playing the piano whilst balancing on a stool in splits, riding broomsticks in mid-air wearing full motorcycle gear, loading the washing machine in a penchée (split leg balance), exploring the spaces around them and being inventive with their images. That’s the aim of Reimagine, for people to think creatively about how spaces can be used and specifically to dance whilst doing it! Each photo really helped us through that surreal time, as we felt part of the wider community and that we >>

Right: Project participants, Boys Dancing. Being Frank Physical Theatre.
Below: Project participant, Reimagine Dartford.

were engaging with people. When we were able to restart in real life site-specific delivery (social restrictions still in place), we used the pandemic as our inspiration and the participants were full of ideas on how to create images on social distancing. The final exhibition of our work manifested itself across Worcester with large scale images across bus tops, shopping malls and arch ways - it really was a special project and truly highlighted for us the importance of creating and giving the community a voice to express how they felt during (and reemerging from) such a difficult time.

The current generation of dancers who are training have grown up with digital technology as commonplace. They're the 'selfie generation'. They don't have the same technical barriers to overcome that we did, there's an abundance of photography tutorials online and, whilst professional camera equipment is still expensive, you can now create incredible dance images with equipment that is a fraction of the cost compared with 15-20 years ago and nearly every young dancer or professional now has a camera in their pocket all the time. Their Smartphone cameras are constantly improving and many young artists are entering the profession, already embracing that technology and incorporating it into their practice. It's so exciting to see where that will go.

I am of the belief that the technical side of photography, in terms of camera operation, the settings to use and what they all do, is about patience and investing time, which pretty much anyone can accomplish. We can all learn the rules around taking images: 'the rule of thirds' (1), 'centre



framing' (2), use of shutter speed, aperture etc.

Anyone can learn or instruct others to make choices about these things and implementing them will generally result in better images, but the most important thing for me, one which is much more instinctive and something we all know as artists, is that it is the artistic vision that is important. How you see things, your creativity; what it is that you want to express through your imagery. For me, that's where the lines blur between the dancer, choreographer and photographer. As artists, we all have something to say, we view things a little bit differently or perhaps we see things a little bit clearer, the camera is just another tool - and an incredible one - that allows you to create art and speak to and reach an



“I still love creating performance work, but I find photography allows me to create something that isn’t so easily forgotten, it allows me to capture a fleeting moment and preserve it, to share it to a wider audience.”

audience (particularly in this modern online world). I still love creating performance work, but I find photography allows me to create something that isn’t so easily forgotten, it allows me to capture a fleeting moment and preserve it, to share it to a wider audience. I love the fact that so many people have engaged with Reimagine, thousands of people walking through Worcester city centre on their way to and from work, some of whom may not usually actively engage with the arts, walking past giant banners, shop windows and bus hoarding with these images on them. They’re engaging with dance, it’s making them question what dance is, how that space has been used. Even if only for a moment, it’s making them think and engage with the arts.

References

1. ‘Rule of thirds’ – the rule of thirds in photography is a guideline that places the subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two thirds more open
2. ‘Centre framing’ – where a character or object is placed in the centre of the frame. For example, to show immersion into the characters environment.

Info

[infusedanceuk](#)
[@infusedance](#)
[infusedance](#)
infusedance@yahoo.co.uk
www.infusedance.co.uk
www.dancefest.co.uk/reimagine