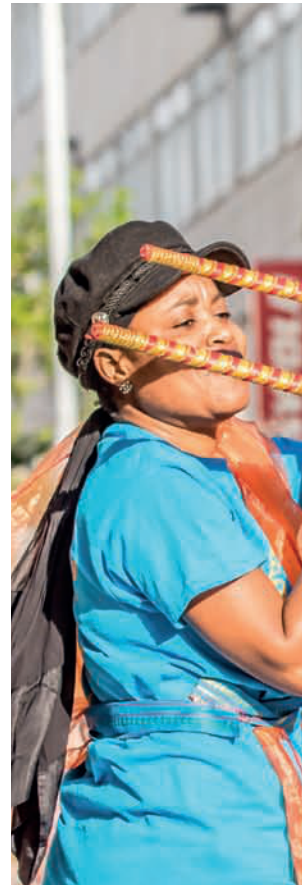


Global Folk for global folk

Maria Malone, Co-Founder and CEO/Executive Director of Movema (pictured below), gives us a fascinating insight into their Global Folk project, where Morris met Ukranian and Indian dance leading to revelations about what English culture can learn from its past identity and that of others to heal its present and embrace a more peaceable, diverse future.



It was a project idea that had been stewing in the back of my mind for a long time....

In 2009, after a year in Brazil training in Capoeira and Brazilian dance, I co-founded Movema with three other women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Movema is now a multi-award-winning charity based in Liverpool and Bristol that brings people together through world dance styles.

Primarily, we work with inherently accessible and joyful, social and folkloric dance forms that traditionally happen at social gatherings, seasonal or life events. We also work with styles like Bollywood, fusion forms encompassing folk and western styles such as jazz, hip hop etc. - which, themselves have their roots in African peoples dances from social settings, and create professional shows using contemporary dance theatre.

We have engaged over 100,000 people since 2009, working regularly with Britain's National Health Service and Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. We receive project funding from Arts Council England and our partners include Milap, the UK's leading dance Indian dance development agency and Cheshire Dance with whom we run artist development, community and education projects. Our activities are open to all but often focus on the needs of specific groups including refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants, children & young people, older people, people with mental health problems, people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The Project: Global Folk

In previous work with refugee and asylum seekers, when asked what dance styles they would like to





All images throughout this article are from Movema project 2019-23. Photos: David Leeke Photography.

learn, they often replied: “We’d like to learn a dance from this place, from England.” In other consultations with our communities in Toxteth, Liverpool answers to the question: ‘What can Movema do to help issues in your communities?’ yielded the feedback:

“Something to help white (1) people understand about their ‘own’ identity.”

“More folk dances please! Polish or Morris to help to connect us to our roots.”

“...white people have forgotten their roots.”

“...white community is being homogenised and threatened.”

All this confirmed my long-held feeling that more education about and celebration of English traditional dances could help tackle racism and xenophobia. I’d often say to people (who looked at me strangely): “We need to get English dances back into schools and communities to help tackle racism”.

In my opinion, the more connected people are to their roots and cultural identity, to practices that connect them with their communities, that bring them joy and allow them to express themselves, the less space there is for hatred and the stronger and more fully realised they can be as human beings.

This long-held desire to address the gap of English folk dance styles in our ‘world dance company’ was finally realised in Spring 2023 in a pilot project funded by English Folk Dance and Song Society.

The folk of Global Folk

I have been following Boss Morris, twelve self-proclaimed ‘Morris nerds’ from Gloucestershire,

with a unique take on the traditional English Folk dance, for a while now.

My imagination was caught by their new costumes, use of face paints and electronic music. Like Movema, they honour traditions whilst bringing their own creativity and innovation to the forms. Their wide appeal has seen them featured in The Guardian, Grazia and alongside band ‘Wet Leg’ in the televised 2023 Brit Awards ceremony.

Lily from Boss Morris said: “We’re really excited to work with Movema to share Morris Dance as a means to increase social engagement and interest in this unique and ancient folk dance. We share a lot in common. Boss Morris are part of a wider movement which is reclaiming the narrative around our culture and past and how we feel about ‘England’ and ‘Englishness’ and rejecting nationalistic values.” We ran two free masterclasses with them in early April 2023.

The first was attended by 20 dance artists, to enable them to add simple English dances and cultural information to their repertoire of school and community work and to inspire them creatively for future performance projects. Local Morris sides also attended to learn from Boss Morris’ approach. Many of these groups have disbanded or are under threat, as they have no new members. They were interested to meet new people, attract new members and be more diverse and inclusive and saw our call out as the perfect opportunity to make the changes they need.

The second class, attended by a diverse group of around 60 community members, introduced Morris >>



“With longer-term investment, we hope to better evidence the effects of our company co-creation approach on breaking down social barriers and increasing cultural understanding and community cohesion, which is so hard to evidence in short projects.”

dance and improved participants understanding of English traditions in a safer space. The feedback was great; “I’m buzzing!”, “such great energy”, “so interesting to learn about this dance”.

Folk dance and safer spaces

Movema aim to create safer spaces, where people from different backgrounds can come together and to meet as individuals; to deepen their understanding of each other’s cultures through fun

and joyful activities that start to build the positive, unified communities we all want to be part of.

In the run up to the project, our community was shocked when, in February, refugees were subjected to attacks and abuse outside a Merseyside hotel where violent anti-migrant protests took place. It was a stark reminder of how important it is for communities to come together at a time when we are bombarded with divisive rhetoric and communities are isolated due to the closure of many



free, public spaces, for example libraries, which would otherwise enable people to meet.

It all set me thinking about my years of intensive Capoeira training in Brazil and Europe.

At events, as well as playing Capoeira, we would perform other Brazilian cultural dances including Maculelê, a warrior dance originally done with machetes, but more widely practiced with sticks. I always referred to it as 'Brazilian Morris dance' and would say to people: "This is what Morris would look like if it was danced by young people!" No-one got it! We have been used to seeing Morris danced by older people therefore don't appreciate how physical and athletic it is and can be.

In my experience, young Brazilians also have a strong sense of national pride, not based on a belief of superiority, but appreciation of their unique strengths, epitomised in their cultural manifestations, samba music and dance, carnival etc. Prior to the Bolsonaro era, this was symbolised by their flag,

but unfortunately this has been co-opted by the far-right, a terrifying move, creating a situation that perhaps now mirrors how English or British people can feel conflicted, ashamed of or ambivalent towards flags and cultural identity.

In the UK, I really feel it's time we heed the wisdom of the Akan people of west Africa, represented by the Sankofa bird, one of the adrinka symbols, which means: "It is not taboo to go back and find what you have lost". Indeed, it's the only way to really move forward rather than stagnate, to remain open to connection rather than closed and defensive.

For example, in the Boss Morris masterclass, we had interesting discussions about how dances with hankies are also ubiquitous in folk dances around the world. As a company and as freelance dancers we've previously trained in and performed Indian Bhangra, Caribbean Soca and Chinese Yang Ge all using some form of 'hankie', 'rumal' or 'rag'. These similarities are a reminder that "there is more that unites us than divides us", people are people all around the world and in folk dance we find whatever is readily available to use as props!

Next moves

The Boss Morris masterclasses kicked off our 'Global Folk' project which combined, through a small grant from Liverpool City Council, the stick dances Indian Dandiya (2) and Ukrainian Bereznyanka, alongside our newly developed skills in English Morris stick Dances.

The response to this brief, five-week project has been great. Artists, participants and audiences have been intrigued and excited. Such a great diverse group showing interest in Morris was encouraging and were really touched by the experience and interactions we had. One of the teenage participants told us she and her friends had started a Morris dance club in their school inspired by Boss Morris' performance at The Brits, which brought tears to the eyes of the team.

Since the workshops there have been other lovely developments and legacies:

- Members of Mersey Morris have participated in Global Folk project to learn more about different styles of dance from around the world
- One of our regular freelance dancers, Stephenie Wiggins, mother of three from the Wirral, who did 'Carnival' or 'Fluffy' Morris as a child has become one of the creative leads on the Global Folk project, an exciting progression for her
- Boss Morris performed at the Refugee Festival we organise with our partners in Bristol
- Our Co-Creations community group performed 'Global Folk', including English folk dance in the streets including in the Eurovision Parade, featuring on the BBC.

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In future, we aim to re-run the project over a longer period to have a deeper impact, leading to co-created performances with our community and professional dancers that celebrate Morris alongside Maculelé, Dandiya and Bereznyanka. With longer-term investment we hope to better evidence the effects of our company co-creation approach on breaking down social barriers and increasing cultural understanding and community cohesion, which is so hard to evidence in short projects. It will also lead to stronger progression routes for all involved and become a hotbed for innovation as these groups come together to share skills and fuse styles.

We want to engage deeply with diverse communities to create safer spaces to meet and share in a relaxed, supported environment with activity that strengthens their knowledge and skills in their dance forms. Last year, members of our team engaged with training in the Affinity Groups

approach with international equity, inclusion and anti-racism expert Mariama Richards (from Channel 4's 'The School That Tried to End Racism'). We want to use this learning and monthly anti-racism training our staff and freelancers have been engaging with, to build an approach which both safeguards our communities and really prepares them to engage in deeper, more meaningful conversations when they begin the often difficult work of sharing their cultural artforms and experiences.

As a company, we are looking forward to opening these conversations in which we can talk, move and dance through the complexities of our identities as people from or living in the UK, to connecting deeply with our diverse folkloric roots and feeling proud of our identities and the communities we are creating for ourselves through this work.

In the words of Global Folk dancer and Movema trainee Diane Tan: "We learn about each other, we grow together, we can get together to celebrate all the beautiful cultures of the world"



Global Folk 2023. Photo: David Leeke Photography.

References

1. By 'white' we mean the people who have come to be racialised as white. See www.aclrc.com/racialization
2. A stick dance form from Gujurat, northern India. [As the Gujurati community has been present in the UK for over a century it is likely this dance form has been practiced across England for a similar length of time so I feel it should be identified and valued as part of modern Britain's cultural heritage.]

Info

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