

Suzanne and children, Interwoven project. Photo: Rebecca Thompson.



Staying Off-Balance

Suzanne Cantwell-Birkin moved to Coventry in the English West Midlands from Philadelphia in 2003 where she met **Alexis Haines** who completed her BA in dance at Coventry University in 2001. Eventually forming the “small but mighty” Off-Balance Dance Company, follow them here though two decades of challenge and triumph in the city they call home, where dance has been their only constant, sustaining themselves and their community

Where we came from

During our time, we have seen the UK and our local arts landscape change in dramatic ways.

In its heyday of the early 2000s, we met while working for a vibrant Coventry City Council Performing Arts Service as part of a strong dance and drama team. We worked in a vast amount of Coventry primary and secondary schools delivering

dance as part of the curriculum. We grew an incredibly healthy youth dance company and have watched many wonderful members flourish in dance and the arts (and other incredible career routes).

Over time, we witnessed the demise of our Service. School budgets for the arts were cut and lack of investment from the local authority meant



Left: Alexis and Suzanne, Interwoven project. Photo: Rebecca Thompson.

that services like ours were left to run into the ground. Although we were made redundant in 2017, the appetite for dance and the value it served in education was still evident. The schools we worked in saw the impact it had on their students, so we continued our journey into the unknown and uncertain territory of becoming freelance dance practitioners.

Little did we know that this terrible thing that was totally out of our control, was the best thing that could happen to us.

In 2018, Off-Balance Dance was born. This opportunity made us ask lots of questions about who we are, what we do, what we want to do and

how can we do that. Our ethos is very much about 'finding ways for people to dance'.

By experiencing the impact that dance has on all people, we are here to facilitate, recognise and celebrate that. The desire to make this impact consistently drives the work we want to do.

Our schools work: a very special education

Part of our company's aim is that any student can participate in our classes.

We have heard time and time again that teachers cannot believe that 'this child' is participating in our class. 'This child' is the child who cannot sit still, who doesn't do well academically, the child who doesn't speak English, or the child who misbehaves are given an opportunity to participate and can often excel and find enjoyment in our classes. We know that children learn in different ways and, given >>

the opportunity, kinaesthetic learners can thrive.

We work in the schools that share our beliefs, they understand what we do and how we contribute positively to the children's learning. We are very grateful for their support, but also understand the tightrope we are walking in terms of the school's budget, particularly in the current climate. The Arts are often the first things to be cut in a school and this is a challenge that we are always up against.

Our goal is to become embedded in the schools we work in, to continue to prove that it is vital to give the children the opportunity to learn in a kinaesthetic way. To bring academic knowledge from the classroom into the dance studio so that we can reinforce it through movement and creativity. Then, both teachers and pupils can take their dance skills back into the classroom and into their lives.

The reward for us is seeing a child in a dance lesson where the lightbulb goes on and the passion for movement ignites. We are the instigators in their creative journey and hopefully, they'll continue this fulfilling and positive pathway throughout their life.

We also work in several Special Education Schools in Coventry and Warwickshire. This work has been fundamental to shaping our company, as we feel we have a responsibility to find ways for everyone to feel included. This type of work is bespoke. Unbeknown to them, the participants are the experts who inadvertently become our teachers. Our role is to continue to learn from the students we engage with. Lessons are driven by their needs, so they can be anything from one-to-one intensive interaction sessions to small groups or whole classes. We design classes based on the principles of Sherborne Developmental Movement (1) for those with the most complex needs, who need one-to-one direct bodily contact from us in order to engage in movement.

The objective of every class is to meet the dancer where they are at and then try to find a way to explore together and engage the participants. But most of all, it is to have a good time.

This work takes time; it takes energy, it takes trial and error (we have all been in the situation where you think you have an amazing idea or plan, and it just flops, so you must think fast and change everything). It takes belief; it takes good days and bad days and all the days in between. It takes amazing staff who support the dancers and you in every session you deliver. It takes conversation with staff, teachers, dancers (the students), senior leadership teams and parents. And props, it takes a whole load of props!!!

We know we are a very small part in the busy



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special school week, but we also know the profound impact that dance can have. To witness eye contact for the first time or watching a student being engaged for longer as the weeks progress. To hear students, start to use their voice in a session or track you with their gaze as you move around the room is huge. We really do celebrate the small stuff, because the small stuff is massive, and we see it. To some children, we could be the best part of the week. If someone is having a bad day, this could be a chance to ground them and have a better day. We never underestimate it's potential.



Left: Suzanne and adult dancers, Community dance project. Photo: Off-Balance Dance.
Below: Alexis and Suzanne, 'Try It event', Coventry City of Culture. Photo: Coventry City of Culture archive.

“We want to represent and encompass the people who think: ‘If they can do it, then maybe I can too?’ This is one of the reasons that community dance is so important in our company and it’s something we are so passionate about and strive to develop.”



Community and performance: everybody matters

Making a difference in our community is fundamental for us. We want to provide as many opportunities as we can to make dance happen in places that it may not have happened before.

Our community program consists of adult dance classes in ballet, contemporary and soon to be Dance for Parkinson’s. These classes are more than just dance classes. The participants are from all walks of life and all ages. We have met people who we wouldn’t normally cross paths with and yet dance binds us together once a week. Everyone has their own reason to attend class. We are proud to have grown a dance family where friendships have formed, and social interactions have evolved. We feel privileged to have watched this happen and it’s something we want to nurture, as we know it can’t be forced. It really makes a difference to the class environment when someone is missing, as everyone brings a unique energy that contributes to the dynamics of the class.

We also like to give our community classes opportunities to perform, watch other performances and participate in workshops. It’s so rewarding to see our adult dancers feel that sense of accomplishment and belonging participating in some community event.

We have been lucky enough to be involved in several fantastic opportunities lately. Recently, we were involved in ‘Haus of Kraft’ (Coventry City of Culture) in April 2022, a wonderful collaboration that brought women from different ages and cultures together to learn crafting skills, which resulted in them designing a costume inspired

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by their life experience. We created a dance in response to these creations. Not only was this inspiring, but it was also liberating. We performed alongside other community groups, and it was so refreshing to see people of all ages performing. We want to represent and encompass the people who think “if they can do it, then maybe I can too?” This is one of the reasons that community dance is so important in our company and it’s something we are so passionate and strive to develop.

Where we are going

We are reaching a point where we are at capacity. Our timetables are full of the work we want to do, yet we also want to reach more people in our very own Off-Balance way. In order to do that, we know it is time to grow.

For example, we have an associate artist who is disabled, Steph Sandy, who co-led a fantastic project that took place in July 2022 for the Children’s Olympic Games (some of which was held in Coventry). We worked for a week with an inclusive group of children in Coventry, who created a performance piece that was part of the opening ceremony. This was a truly inclusive experience and something that has set a precedent in the way that we now want to work.

We haven’t chosen an easy route as a company (we often get it wrong before we get it right). There have been many bumps and detours and even sinkholes in the road! We have seen such change in the arts in the city over the years. Yet we have survived and even flourished over the last 20 years.

Dancing has been our constant. We have navigated being busy working mums, unstable freelance careers, divorce, global pandemics and now ageing dancing bodies. And we hope to be around for many, many, more years.

We describe ourselves as being small but mighty as a company. We are so passionate about what we do, how and where we do it, and that passion often becomes infectious. We often feel that we are dancing ‘at the coal face’ or ‘on the ground’ because we are the ones that go out into our community and engage and invest in people. We care less about the number that we reach and more about the impact that we have over the course of someone’s life. There should never be a reason to stop dancing if you don’t want to. Hopefully, we will entice some new faces who share the same values and can come on this journey with us. We are determined to continue the legacy of dance in Coventry and beyond.

References

1. Sherborne Developmental movement is a method of working in which the movement is securely based in the normal development movement experiences. It was developed by Veronica Sherborne in the latter part of the twentieth century and is an inclusive approach grounded in Laban’s Movement Theory. She developed it over a period of 40 years. See www.sherbornemovementuk.org

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  **Off Balance Dance**