



# Human first, dancer second

“Human first, dancer second.” This is the ethos and motivation behind Birmingham’s Linden Dance Company, with professional artists, young people and communities alike. How, co-artistic director **Sara Macqueen** asks, can we create a safe and motivational space for people to thrive both physically and mentally?

**M**y husband and co-director, Christopher Radford, and I started Linden Dance Company and Linden Youth in 2020 based on three principles: positivity, individuality and empowerment. We seek to inhabit and exhibit those values in all that we do.

**It began as an idea to prioritise people within artistic experiences.**

We had both danced from a young age and have successful professional careers, but, within those

years, were experiences that have had negative effects on our wellbeing and ability to perform to our best. These experiences were echoed in talk with other artists. There was a recurrent, scarily casual, memory of comments such as: “If it hurts, you know you’re doing it right...” and “I survived.” Adult dancers could too easily recall things, said to them at a young age, attacking their appearance, work ethic and ability - which goes to show what a lasting effect they had. Dancers are typically high achieving, diligent people, so such destructive

All photos: Dani Bower.



comments affect not just their confidence within dance, but also the way they view themselves as humans.

In my work as a dance practitioner in schools, I was shocked when, in preparation for performance, a group of young people begged me to shout at them. My question was: "Why do you need me to? What in your previous experiences has led you to believe that you can only achieve your best if you are bullied into it? I want you to want to do your best because you want to, not out of fear or external pressure."

The emerging theme, for Chris and me, was that dance training and experiences are often built on the premise that the art is the important thing, no matter the detriment to the dancers involved.

**We believed that there must be a different approach.**

One with a greater focus on the person first, giving that individual what they need to thrive and then see what art emerged, rather than the opposite way around. That led us to consider what those individuals might need and what things are often abused in the pursuit of artistic and physical excellence? Our answer was body and mind. The two are interlinked yet often treated as separate entities. Each feeds, enables or damages the other and one cannot be prioritised over the other. Dancers often start at a young age, at a point where both physical and mental development are key, so if delivered in a toxic or extreme manner, the damage can be lifelong. Personally, I have spent years in counselling and recently underwent a total hip replacement at the age of 32. If there was ever a sign that the experiences, both physical and mental, that I have had, have not served me to the best effect, it was this. Linden are passionate about learning from our own history and providing a different platform for the younger generation.

**Aware that the topics we were addressing were beyond our own understanding, we sought help from outside the dance sector.**

We formed a close working relationship with Helen Frewin of Totem Consulting, a chartered business psychologist, 1:1 and group coach, working to unlock people's potential and provide training that makes for better working conditions. Helen works with leading corporate companies such as Warner Brothers Discovery, BAFTA, KFC and Dyson and disseminating her knowledge into dance experiences became vital in how we built Linden's >>



ethos and working patterns. Understanding how the brain works and processes information, the effect of language and delivery, different coaching approaches have been invaluable creating environments that feed and benefit individuals. Helen says:

“I spend my days teaching office managers how to help their people thrive and perform at their best. Seeing this translated in the arts is incredible. If young people could experience safety, encouragement of their wellbeing and awareness of their mind and body to thrive in a dance class, wouldn't we see that flow through in their performance? And in their lives? It excites me to see Linden having this impact.”

We also began mentorship with Darryl Canham of Kaizen Centre is a 7th dan martial artist (1) and elite physical training coach, who works with professional and young ballet dancers in international and UK based companies like Birmingham Royal Ballet and in vocational schools. He has a unique approach to movement that prioritises intelligent working and understanding



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the body and mind as a whole entity. It highlighted how dance training, although strong in certain aspects, does not always engage the muscles required to achieve the heights of physical prowess that we seek. Through working with Darryl on plyometric athletics, proprioception and focused muscular working, we are developing an approach that provides technical dance training alongside an understanding and awareness of muscularity. Darryl says:

“Sara and Chris' embracing of skill bases and training outside the traditional realms of dance tuition has greatly improved the abilities, confidence and self-worth of the many young dance athletes that they work with. First hand



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witnessing of lives changing through self-expressive movement is evident at every Linden class and their combined commitment to creating positive change where it is needed, is both profound and greatly appreciated by their students, patrons and supporters.”

Our continued work with Helen and Darryl feeds and inspires our approach to young people. Linden Youth runs weekly training sessions that, while holding dance at its core, seek to build and support young people in their lives generally. We don't see any difference between Linden Youth and our work with professional artists. They have just as much to offer, and we have just as much to learn from them. By treating them with maturity and respect, they too mature and respect themselves to a greater degree.

Linden Youth is a diverse mix, including physically and learning disabled young people and some with neurodiversity. All are blessed with unique and incredible bodies and minds, but they are each different. One size does not fit all, so there is no one approach that is going to fit everyone. This is not just an important value to hold, but also an important lesson to share with young people; we are not all the same, we all need different things and it's OK to ask for what you need. This

knowledge consequently helps that young person build autonomy and understanding of self, so they can help themselves as much as external influences can. A large part of what we aspire to do at Linden is to understand what each young person needs and provide training that supports them personally. One participant told us:

“Linden Youth gives me a space to grow as a dancer in terms of technique and creativity, as well as an inspiring space to grow as a person, to improve myself.”

We always start Linden Youth sessions with check-ins, which gives the young people not only a chance to be honest about how they are arriving to the session, but also encourages them to talk about how they are feeling. This empowers them with the knowledge that they are seen as a person, not just a participant, and with the overriding message that their emotions are valid and welcomed. Feedback is given in a positive and fun way and we consistently remind ourselves that if young people are not developing, it is a reflection on the way we are conveying information, not on them. We cultivate an environment that encourages peer to peer mentorship. Our younger dancers take class with the older, more experienced ones and they often work in partners to give more individual help and >>

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develop their own skills in leadership and teaching. We don't want to train young people to be only dancers, we want young people to see how the benefits that dance and connecting creatively to themselves can inspire and help them in whatever career pathway they choose.

Dance, at its heart, is a social, empowering skill but somehow in the pursuit of excellence and competition, it can become something that degrades and diminishes people. True support and teaching involves seeing the person for the whole they are, understanding their background and that the output is only ever as strong as the input. If a young person is struggling, then the way they are trained needs to be adapted. Pushing through, being shamed for the way they are feeling or belittling what they are feeling does not work. But listening, adapting and providing a safe space does. Parents deeply appreciate this too:

“The ethos of Linden... goes far beyond just dance, cultivating an environment where my daughter can grow as a performer and choreographer, but more importantly supporting

her social and emotional wellbeing. The commitment to every one of their dancers is unrivalled...”

“Positivity, individuality and empowerment in dance are not just words to Linden Dance, they are core values. Having sustained a head injury resulting in debilitating symptoms, my son encounters many obstacles on his dance journey. Their holistic support has allowed him to grow in strength, confidence and technical ability. The support he receives is unparalleled!”

We cannot change the industry overnight, but what we can do is empower the young people we work with, to value their bodies and minds and expect more from the employers or choreographers they engage with. There is an old wives' tale that, to be an artist, we must suffer...Here at Linden we do what we can to ensure that we are not the cause of such suffering. There's enough elsewhere in the world.

**Info**  
[www.lindendc.com](http://www.lindendc.com)

Photo: Dani Bower

