

More than just a number

Credit: Margaret Williamson



Home From Home was a large-scale participatory project which led to a performance, *In the End we Begin*, directed by Protein's Luca Silvestrini. Characterised by ambition, innovation and collaboration, it was produced by EncoreEast, a company of older dancers in the East of England and brought together three venues, six dance-makers and 50 performers aged 56 to 82.

Jeanette Siddall CBE, a member of EncoreEast and one of the UK's most respected dance leaders, offers us the joy and passion of her perspective as a participant.

Numbers can give us a sense of scale, provide a tool with which to measure and compare, and they can evoke images that may, or may not, be accurate.

What do the numbers in the phrase "aged 56 to 82" conjure for you?

An image of people who are fragile, need protecting, deserve rewarding for showing up and are incapable of making decisions?

Or do you see a diverse group of self-determining adults, with a lifetime of knowledge, experience, skill and responsibility, capable of leading artistic projects and making decisions about their own capabilities?

As dancers in this age range, we have met attitudes at both ends of this spectrum. We do not dance as occupational therapy and do not want to be infantilised or patronised. We dance to create art that is meaningful and of which we can be proud. Given a chance, we are brave, tenacious and responsible. We want to be seen for what we can do.

Home from Home did all of this.

It was ambitious; directed by Luca Silvestrini, produced by EncoreEast, an Ipswich-based performing company of older community dancers and project managed by company member Stella Eldon.

It grew from a biennial event HOST, co-curated by EncoreEast and national dance agency, DanceEast and responded to questions about how older dancers wanted to be seen, whether there was an audience for dance by older people, and how dance is made. It involved four different companies and their 'home' venues, with the resulting performance, *In the End we Begin*, premiering at DanceEast in Ipswich then touring to Norwich Playhouse and The Place in London. The venues were hugely significant partners: co-commissioning the choreographers, providing rehearsal space, advice, performance dates and fees.

Each company at each venue commissioned a choreographer to create a short piece: EncoreEast - Alethia Antonia; Cadenza - Laura Anderson; Damn Fine Dance - Molly Wright and Luke Birch; The Place Dancers - Alleyne Dance. Under the artistic direction of Luca Silvestrini, all the companies came together to share their work, then worked in pairs of companies before spending three days together creating a single piece performed by one newly merged company of 42 dancers.

Rather like a relay race dependent on passing the baton, this approach enabled all the dancers to participate in the creative process, yet also challenged them and the choreographers to let go





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and embrace change or ‘developments’, with Luca being final custodian of the resulting composite work, *In the End we Begin*.

Bringing different groups of dancers together to share and challenge each other’s culture and practice was a major focus of the project, as was the aspiration to make the performance experience as good for the audience as for the dancers. Many of us found the audience response overwhelming, ranging from individuals being lost for words and a

bit teary to a standing ovation for a sold-out show at *The Place*.

Luca raised our artistic ambitions from the beginning. His career with and beyond *Protein* has been characterised by a sense of adventure, having the courage to try something different, taking people on a creative journey, and re-inventing the notion of touring. As a choreographer he has made work with professional dancers, refugees, community groups, for film and an opera company, >>



so why not a large group of older people?

It was his idea to bring everyone together to create one company and a single coherent piece. He discussed ideas and progress with the choreographers, led a creative consultation with the dancers and pulled together the creative team. He held the vision with care, collaboratively and without compromise. He excelled at managing and motivating the dancers to go beyond what they thought they could do.

A project this ambitious is not for everyone, but that is not a reason to lower ambitions across the sector. The evaluation showed many dancers welcomed the rigour and high expectations, and most want to take part in a similar project in the future. Many of the dancers were proud of the final piece and an audience member described their experience as "... an empowering, joyful and thought-provoking performance ... Luca managed to blend all the groups so seamlessly and



ingeniously - the skill, care and thoughtfulness of all of the team was so evident."

Home from Home was firmly participatory and rooted in communities from different parts of the country united by their passion and ambition for dance. It merged and inverted traditional roles of professionals and volunteers, including in making the project happen.

EncoreEast was set up and managed by DanceEast until the pandemic closed arts organisations at which point it decided to continue as a self-managing group. We have not followed the more established model of having a single leader or artistic director, but commission teachers, workshop leaders and choreographers on a project basis. As a group of volunteers, we have reached beyond ourselves to provide opportunities for others and managed a range of projects for theatres, outdoor spaces and film, but 'Home from Home' was the largest, most complex project yet. It has been an empowering but exhausting process that also raises questions about whether self-determination by communities undermines the professionalism of the arts?

Home from Home created and solidified new symbiotic relationships and new ways of



EncoreEast, Home From Home. Photo: Roswitha Chesher.



Above LtoR: Home From Home. Photo: Roswitha Chesher. Inset: Luca Silvestrini. Photo: Josh Furness for London Dance Photography.

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working between artists and communities that recognised mutual strengths and capabilities. It created something special, as one of the dancers summarised: “(it was) a life affirming, joyful, exuberant, explosion of the possible.”

Is age more than just a number? Is it also somewhat opinionated and annoying, proactive and responsible, less visible than it should be, messy and creative? These questions don't need answers, but they do help us stay curious. I leave you with final words here in the form of Luca's message to the dancers: “Well done beautiful people! And may your dancing life continue to surprise you and inspire others.”

Home from Home was supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England and co-commissioned by EncoreEast, DanceEast, The Place and Norwich Theatre. The creative team was Luca Silvestrini (artistic director), Stella Eldon (producer), Andy Pink (music), Elizabeth Barker (costume), DanceEast's Conor Farthing (lighting), Roswitha Chesher (photography and video), and Chelsea Gordon, Laura Hague and Tom Bowes (choreographic and rehearsal assistance).

Info
www.encoreeastdance.co.uk