





Dance Transport Workshop at Yorkshire Dance. Photo: Dani Bower.

# A Wondering Willow Dreams: a directors reflection

**Sara Dos Santos** is a London-based artist, cultural producer and policy advisor passionate about raising the profile of underrepresented voices in the UK and beyond. Here, she contemplates the nature of professional and community dance alongside the results of a first foray into dance she led with Clean Break, an acclaimed women's theatre company, who change minds and lives in performance, prison and the community.

For many of us, movement was introduced into our physical vocabulary long before we could articulate with words.

Movement, for me, provides an opportunity to tap into what is known and unknown – feelings, emotions and expressions – offering a chance to connect to self and others around me. From personal experience, movement has been found to bring solutions in moments of confusion, joy in moments of sadness and unity in moments of division.

Growing up in a household where movement, music, faith and food were at the heart of everyday life, practices such as these seeped into my professional career almost instinctively. Whether working with a community group or developing a production with dance professionals, I often find myself refining and reshaping these nurtured practices of connection and conscious motion into the spaces and places I operate within.

I do not seek to address the long-standing debate on what 'community' dance is and what 'professional' dance is, which requires debate beyond the scope of this article. With this in mind, however, I want to anchor us in response to a survey by Diane Amans circa 2006 around defining community dance. A particular participant's response stands out: "(Community dance) creates opportunities for everyone, regardless of their gender, race, religion, physical or mental health, and ability,

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preconceptions (their own or others) or anything else.” (1) For me, these reflections offer a utopian perspective, not yet fully realised in practice. There is an undeniable reality that not everyone can yet participate in such activities due to barriers such as access or socioeconomic challenges.

Linda Jasper also challenged this notion during the 1996 ‘Current Issues in Community Dance’ conference at Surrey University with the question: “How is it possible to define something that by its very essence is individual to different geographical areas, funding structures, populations and aspirations of practitioners?” (2)

Both provocations lend themselves to my dual lenses of professional and community practices – through which this article is written – inviting inclusion (in both thought and action) and propositions of celebratory individualism. For me, community dance and the professional practices of dance go hand in hand. They are reflections of one another. They co-exist and influence each other in inseparable ways, regardless of the participants’ background and individual nurture. My collaboration with Clean Break in Partnership with The Place, during the summer of 2023, offered a tangible opportunity to explore this.

### **Beginnings**

The Place approached me in 2019 to explore the possibility of working alongside theatre company, Clean Break. Elated, I jumped on board. As a secret admirer of Clean Break for many years, this was a long-awaited chance to combine my movement psychotherapy curiosities alongside my more established practices such as choreography and storytelling methodologies.



Clean Break began in 1979 and, through thoughtful and captivating performances and community projects, helps impress profound and positive change in the lives of women affected by the criminal justice system. With a focus on building confidence, resilience and well-being to cope within and thrive beyond it, the company offer opportunities led by esteemed female identifying arts leaders.

Our project was the company’s first exploration into dance. Not long after conversations of design and outputs commenced, COVID-19 placed a hold on our plans in 2020. To my delight, both organisations reconsidered a collaboration in 2023 as part of the Clean Break end-of-year members programme.

### **The process**

Following an anonymous selection process, 12 participants joined the project to work alongside me as Choreographer and Director, Creative Assistant, Darinka Bojarquez, a London Contemporary Dance School student and Celeste Cahn, a Clean Break Volunteer.

“It’s been like a healing journey and the connection I’ve had with myself has been amazing and just the interaction with the other women has been great for my mental health, my confidence and my body in general.”



Above: Dance Transport Workshop at Yorkshire Dance. Photo: Dani Bower. All other images: Clean Break and The Place Project. Photo: Tracey Anderson.

With only four days set out for exploration, curation and delivery, we set the scene by building a foundation of trust and allowing room for free-flowing creative expression.

Our movement investigation process commenced with individual exploration – testing the participants’ limits and making space for what is comfortable, known and achievable – then branched out to group exercises, keeping play at the heart of it all. The group were encouraged to draw inspiration from images, text and sound. From there, we started creating.

### **The piece**

Using impetus from nature – and more specifically, trees – participants started exploring abstract and literal movement, reigniting a child-like freedom to tap into the wonder and beauty of nature in all its forms. Each exploratory step edged us closer towards the building blocks of the final piece and offered participants the autonomy to create and articulate freely.

In those four days, we created a 20-minute immersive performance, *A Wondering Willow Dreams* – the first of its kind at Clean Break. The piece involved a mixture of pre-filmed movement by videographer Nur Hannah Wan and live performance. It travelled through the building, beginning in the courtyard and ending in the black box theatre space.

### **Voices**

Róisín Clancy, performer and Clean Break member said: “I have learnt so much about myself. It’s been

like a healing journey, and the connection I’ve had with myself has been amazing, and just the interaction with the other women has been great for my mental health, my confidence and my body in general.”

Maria Ryan, Creative Learning Producer at The Place echoes this: “The group performed with such clarity and confidence, which I could see had been gently nurtured throughout the rehearsals, and I was so proud of the maturity and professionalism of the performers and the movement they created.”

Clean Break, were delighted with the way dance achieved their core aims and are considering it as a basis for future projects.

### **Endings...?**

The best and worst part of a project is its ending, when mixed feelings of pride, joy and a sense of accomplishment for all those involved arise, yet there is also a bittersweet realisation that the process is over and deep gratitude overflows – such a juxtaposition!

*A Wondering Willow Dreams* is just one of many exceptional opportunities that have further ignited my interest in combining interdisciplinary art practices and community-led initiatives to develop high-quality artistic work for all. I remain interested in collaborating on national and international multidisciplinary projects, getting stuck into grassroots initiatives and joining the conversations that impact cultural, creative and social policies.

Could my next collaboration be with you?

### **References**

1. *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice* (2017) ed Diane Amans
2. Linda Jasper (1996) cited in ‘*An Introduction to Community Dance Practice* (2017)’

### **Info**

**To watch the Clean Break Project with The Place visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlOf6XM8kpE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlOf6XM8kpE)**

**[www.saradossantos.com](http://www.saradossantos.com)**

**@sara.artista\_movimento**