

Re:fReSh



Jayne Devlin and **Caroline Schanche**,
Co-Directors of Inner Ground Dance Company,
based in Cornwall, invite us into a project
where many mature movers met very
contemporary practice.

- Feel yourself moving
- Renew your technique
- Expand your knowledge with new ideas
- Show up & enjoy the discipline
- Happy heart, happy body, happy mind

Can we start again...?

Let's begin by travelling back to Saturday 5 February 2022. Inner Ground Dance Company (IGDC) community of dancers are gathering together for their first in-person, contemporary dance workshop. It has been two years since we were last together in either a hall or studio...

This first Re:fReSh workshop is fully booked with a waiting list and several disappointed dancers unable to join us on this occasion. There is a palpable atmosphere of elevated anticipation as we return: apprehension, excitement, optimism, hope. The hall doors & windows are open too wide allowing the still wintry breeze in. Enthusiastic and nervous hands pull-on warm layers...perhaps like donning imagined physical shields? Small arbitrary movements are made to keep muscles getting stiff. There is alcohol rub on our hands, but faces are mercifully free of

>>





Right: Re:fReSh 2022: Workshop 5 with Jayne Devlin & Caroline Schanche. Photo: Jayne Devlin.
Far right and below: Re:fReSh 2022: Workshop 4 with Pete Shenton. Photo: Mark Kerr.



previously obligatory coverings. A sense of risk can be felt as formal 'restrictions' are now lifted and we have to make a start... someway, somehow...

We exchange glances...can we start again?

We gather together – with tolerance, in a circle. It's the only way we know how to begin, to start again. We are revealed. We are together. We have come home. With faith and bold ambition, we step forward, into the empty space...

Why Re:fReSh?: Ageing and visibility in dance

"I want my dance to be visible and valued – even if I'm not physically agile or young. And I value working with other mature dancers who also bring their creativity and life's experiences to their work."

Re:fReSh Workshop Participant

Our overarching vision since inception in 2012, has been one of a fresh and inclusive approach to dance for the mature dancer in Cornwall. Within Re:fReSh, we intentionally focus not only on stretching the aspirations of the participants, but also advocating

"Let us out of the box!"

Workshop Participant

for a richer provision of dance for the mature dancer across the region.

Whilst we acknowledge the strong and evolving individual outcomes for the participants, it appears vital to continue to shine a spotlight on the visibility of the mature dancer – mature dancers taking space – within the dance ecology of Cornwall.

As Francois Matarasso (1) tells us, "Broadening the range of people involved in the arts challenges existing aesthetic values and enriches the arts and culture generally." It is necessary to support these individual aspirations through 'system' developments within the region, beyond IDGC to broaden dance provision, providing an equitable offer for engagement in dance from pre-school age to youth, through middle and older years.

"...society's tendency is to believe that dance is for younger people, which spills over into older people's



beliefs about themselves, their abilities and their place in the world. IGDC helps me to value myself and to see that there is a place for me if I choose it. I realised that dance can still be for me."

Re:fReSh Workshop Participant

The territory of dance masterclasses, moreover, and those who teach them, traditionally, could be seen as the province of the young(er) dancer – more often than not, professional or aspiring to be.

We noticed that many opportunities to train or create with experienced, high-standard practitioners appeared unobtainable to non-professional dancers, even more so for mature, non-professionals – dancers whose major priority for participating in contemporary dance workshops is for pleasure, for feeling well. This creates a liminal space within which we question and explore notions of who can participate and when.

Through the Re:fReSh programme, we sought to challenge these concepts by inviting practitioners to Cornwall to share their practice, extend their connections and by making high quality dance

Re:fReSh is an inspirational body of work for mature dancers living in Cornwall. It provides inspiring opportunities to re-connect a community of dancers, re-build creative confidence and re-fresh dance skills and is produced under the umbrella Inner Ground Dance of Company (IGDC), a Not-for-Profit community dance company which welcomes dancers over the age of 50. The programme is a carefully curated series of high-standard contemporary dance classes and workshops delivered by nationally known and regionally-based dance practitioners and choreographers. The activities develop new and existing relationships between IGDC and visiting artists, whilst exploring the aesthetics of producing work for and with mature, non-professional dancers.

teaching experiences available and accessible to a broader range of participants.

Inside Re:fReSh.

Let's journey forward 14 months to April 2023.

IGDC's Re:fReSh programme has delivered 17 workshops including one weekend residency, culminating in 308 individual dance experiences, an ever growing IGDC email list of 101 contacts and an average of 23 participants at each workshop, all within an age range of 50 – 70s.

Dancers, from a diverse range of dance experiences and backgrounds and whose exact ages are deliberately always unknown to us, travelled the length and breadth of Cornwall (and this is no mean feat in Cornwall) to participate in Re:fReSh workshops with acclaimed practitioners including: Yael Flexer, Pete Shenton, Theo Clinkard, Seke Chimutengwende, Simona Scotto, Katie Lusby, Kyra Norman, Emily Alden, Grace Selwood, Rob Mennear, Simon Birch, and Kuldip Singh-Barmi, all of which were complemented by workshops with IGDC Co-Artistic Directors, Jayne & Caroline.

A visiting practitioner expressed their experience: "It was fantastic. I really cherished the warmth and welcome I was shown. But mostly, I loved seeing how much the dancers were open to learning and to challenging themselves. There was a shared power in being part of the group and a sense of personal and communal achievement by the end of the day."

This warmth was felt equally by participants: "Friendships strengthened, friendships renewed...a joy to walk into new territory and feel so welcomed and accepted – that is a real confidence boost!"

The Re:fReSh programme reflects IGDC's ethos that everyone should have access to excellent creative activities, across the course of life, long into maturity & older years.

We know creative participation can be life

>>



“As two mature dancers ourselves, we feel we are leading by example, keeping stagnation at bay. We are, simultaneously, both curators and producers of the work initiating change whilst also remaining connected to our (own) dancing bodies.”

enhancing bringing people together through bonds of shared experience and supporting us to live well longer as we age (2). At IGDC we believe dance, in particular, creates healthier, happier people and curated the Re:fReSh programme by carefully considering the workshop content, specifically inviting practitioners we felt would be eager to align with, reflect and complement our objective of delivering life-long learning in contemporary dance.

Evaluation revealed that not only did this content, and warm atmosphere described above achieve this, it also positively impacted and enhanced participants

- sense of belonging/connection and community,
 - perceived sense of self-identity,
 - self-esteem and self-worth,
 - expression of creativity and playfulness,
 - affective responses (e.g. feelings of joy, hopefulness, liberation or to ameliorate stress), along with a stronger sense of embodiment.
- As a result, synergistically, participants



appreciation of aesthetics in dance performance, composition, choreography and improvisation techniques was enhanced (3). Or as a participant frames it:

“(Re:fReSh) helps provide a sense of community... a focus of commitment and a sense of shared endeavour and achievement. It is one of very few provisions to offer such fulfilling opportunities. (I have) seen more dance productions in theatres and appreciated the talents of professional dancers and fellow amateur dancers. (I have) confidence in dance and movement, and in social situation.”

The project wasn't free of its challenges, but we remained open to suggestions and thrived on the conversations that ensued. As two mature dancers ourselves, we feel we are leading by example, keeping stagnation at bay. We are, simultaneously, both curators and producers of the work initiating



Left: Re:fReSh 2022: Workshop 9 with Rob Mennear. Photo: Rob Mennear.
Below left: Mark Kerr. Photo: Jayne Devlin.

change whilst also remaining connected to our (own) dancing bodies.

Beyond Re:fReSh: Lifelong dancing

Ageing dislodges how we feel on the inside (internal), from how we appear on the outside (external). And, as a consequence, our relationship with our identity changes, as it does with (our) bodies, (our)selves, and (our)dance. It can be confronting and alarming, and in order to cultivate a positive outlook for our 'older years', a period of integration with our past selves – the unrealised dreams, the paths not taken – is often faced (3). Approaching this transitional period of time with positivity, takes courage and is enhanced by interconnectedness, relating, and strengthening inner psychological resources (4).

Dance, as we know, is a "collective process" (5): Through dance, we know the world and understand it, understand ourselves and understand ourselves in relationship to other people: "Dance is about people spending time together, thinking by behaving and modify(ing) their thoughts by modify(ing) their behaviour; it is potentially very powerful work." (6).

IGDC feel this – moving as a way of thinking – is of profound importance particularly when we consider the transitions required throughout our ageing process. We feel that dance, for a mature, older body, offers hope and joy; that we are still moving and still finding different ways to move.

We return to participant voice to share how these concepts played out for them as a result of Re:FreSh:

(I have) joined (Workshop Leader's) class and gone on my own even though it was scary and found out how generous really amazing dancers are in a shared space and found out I felt I belonged."

"(Re:fReSh) opened up new dance opportunities and ways of moving I wasn't sure I could achieve

in my 60s. It has increased my confidence and expanded my experience of direction and choreography, whilst being tailored to a varied level of abilities. My limitations have been replaced by inspiration."

So, what of the future for IGDC, notably of Re:fReSh 2024?

Having received funding from the National Lottery, we are delighted to have programmed four more Re:fReSh workshops this Autumn. We have yet to discover if the appetite for the workshops within the IGDC community of dancers remains and also realised we have new aims and aspirations for it along with a desire to return to IGDC's roots as a performance company. Therefore, the work continues.

To answer our opening question: Can we start again...? It seems we can, at least for the time being.

"Inner Ground Dance Company creates space and visibility for mature dancers. They celebrate and fantastic bodies with lived experience, bodies with drive and desire, bodies with sensuality and sensitivity. They do all this through exciting and engaging dance projects for the older dancer. It's brilliant and it's vital work."

Helen Tiplady, Creative Director, Hall for Cornwall.

References

1. Matarasso, F. (1994) Regular Marvels: Handbook for amateurs, practitioners and development workers in dance, mime, music and literature. Leicester: Community Dance & Mime Foundation, pp 6-7.
2. Chappell, K., Redding, E., Crickmay, U., Stancliffe, R., Jobbins, V., & Smith, S. (2021). The aesthetic, artistic and creative contributions of dance for health and wellbeing across the lifecourse: a systematic review. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2021.1950891>
3. Markula, P., Metzger, K., Bliss, T., Gervais, W., Rintoul, M. A., & Vandkerkhove, J. (2022). "It Can Be Magic:" Creating Age Awareness Through Contemporary Dance. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.795541>
4. Mead, J., Fisher, Z., & Kemp, A. H. (2021). Moving Beyond Disciplinary Silos Towards a Transdisciplinary Model of Wellbeing: An Invited Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.642093>
5. Hölling, H. B., Feldman, J. P., & Magnin, E. (2023). *Performance*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309987>
6. Lacey, Jennifer. (2013). "Jennifer Lacey in Conversation with Mathieu Copeland Gare de l'Est, Paris, 16 October 2010." In *Choreographing Exhibitions*, edited by Mathieu Copeland and Julie Pellegrin, 123-128. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2013.

Info

www.innergrounddancecompany.com