

Dancers' Career Development: Here for the journey

Credit: Vanessa Lefrançois.



Where do you turn when the time comes for a career change within or beyond dance? For an ever-broadening demographic of British-based dance professionals across half a century, it has been to Dancers Career Development, the charity founded to ensure that, from training (and re-training) to retirement age, no-one need navigate that sometimes complex path alone. **Vanessa Lefrançois**, its incoming Executive Director, interweaves the voices of those it supports, shedding light on past, present and future.

"DCD embodies guidance, open-mindedness and possibility... they have persistently shaped, through their workshops, events and coaching sessions, both my mindset and that of the whole industry."
Dancer Feedback

"At a time when so much feels uncertain in the dance world and wider world generally, it's so reassuring to know DCD are available to support you." **Dancer Feedback**

September 2023 marked the beginning of Dancers' Career Development's 50th Anniversary Year.

Looking back 50 years, Fonteyn was partnering Nureyev at the Royal Opera House, Pan's People were a regular feature on Top of The Pops and Bob Fosse's film Cabaret had just opened in New York. The UK dance sector and dancers within it have evolved immeasurably since 1973. Who could have predicted in the 1970's that motion-capture combined with CGI would enable dancers to perform as their avatars in front of a live studio audience; a Hip Hop Academy would rise from the ground in Queen Elizabeth's Olympic Park; 11 million viewers would tune in to watch Rose Ayling-Ellis (the first deaf contestant) win Strictly Come Dancing; or that soloists from some of the world's most prestigious dance companies would perform adaptations of Swan Lake in their bath tubs, during Culture in Quarantine?

For those past 50 years, Dancers Career Development (DCD) has helped guide thousands of dancers through the highs, lows, injuries and curtain calls of their performance careers, with a primary focus on career progression. We offer dancers a through-line of support from vocational training to post-performance careers: to enable and empower dance artists to seamlessly pursue alternative careers in or beyond the dance sector, at the end of their performing lives. Joining DCD as it celebrates this historic milestone, it is important to reflect on the company's purpose and impact, to ensure it remains dynamic, ambitious and relevant for dancers and offers wider dance sector support.

DCD has not, itself, been immune to change; it has journeyed far from its inception as the Dancers' Resettlement Fund in 1973 - reinvented itself, kept pace of the evolving world in which we live and the needs of dancers within it. Originally established to award retraining grants to Arts Council England's revenue funded dance company artists, we have (since 1983) been engaging with an increasingly diverse breadth of dancers working in the independent sector from Hip Hop, ballet, commercial, African diaspora, contemporary, musical theatre and South Asian dance backgrounds.

The seismic shift during this period from long-term employment contracts to freelance and short-term project assignments, has perpetuated career insecurity, prevents socio-economic mobility, >>



Clockwise from top left: Adhya Shastry, winner BBC Young Dancer; Chanelle Anthony, McOnie Company; Fumi Kaneko & William Bracewell and Eliana Hayward. All photos: Andrej Uspenski.



Seeta Patel, Artistic Director, Seeta Patel Dance. Photo: Andrej Uspenski.

weakens employment rights and fails to deliver basic holistic health care. DCD has witnessed an increasing number of dancers seeking to develop complementary skills and knowledge to bolster their blended-portfolio careers. While our career exploration and retraining grants remain an important component of our services, so too do our coaching and mentoring programmes, 1:1 advice surgeries, psychological resilience, personal and professional development workshops.

"I took part in the Beyond Dance Mentorship Scheme and I found it very helpful to jumpstart my journey of post-career exploration. It was also very helpful to have someone to hold me accountable on deadlines and carving out that time in my schedule to benefit my future self." **Dancer Feedback**

"DCD supported me to train at The Motley Theatre Design Course once I stopped performing as a dancer. The bursary made it possible for me to keep working in the industry I love and to bring the creativity and storytelling skills I'd honed as a dancer to design. Nowadays, I am lucky enough to work all over the world with leading directors and choreographers, and in museums, opera houses and theatre, but DCD helped to open that first door and they've been by my side ever since. It's an honour to be able to give back by serving as a DCD trustee." **Dancer Feedback**

When I cast my mind back to my formative dancing days as a performer and choreographer, I was always more interested in how a dancer moved

sequentially between two points in space or time, rather than straining to perfect a static pose. Fluidity strikes me as critical in today's world, as flowing water reshapes the banks that confine it and finds new outlets, so too can dancers careers remould, explore new trajectories change direction.

A colleague recently recommended Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis's bestselling book, *The Squiggly Career* – a concept which resonates with me and many of my contemporaries in the arts sector. The concept embraces change, uncertainty and possibility: firmly placing the notion of linear career progression in a bygone era. New technology continues to disrupt and redefine how and where we work; whilst the intervention of Covid-19 left many of us reassessing our work-life balance, career trajectory, values and lifestyle choices. Freelance dancers, particularly hard hit by the pandemic, left the industry in droves and sought alternative jobs in unprecedented numbers. Whilst demand for DCD's services increased, dancers' career development is, as our name suggests, our everyday.

Straightforward, rarely. Squiggly, frequently.

Dancers are incredibly resilient, talented and skilled human beings, who are constantly reimagining this dynamic art form, drawing inspiration from their heritage, technical advancements and world events. At a DCD event in partnership with SAMPAD recently, we heard from Shreya Vadnerkar, who explores her British Indian identity through a choreographic blend of Breakin' and Bharatanatyam, whilst award winning producer Sima Gonsai, used dance on screen to raise awareness of the increasing number of children

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developing asthma as a result of air pollution in her film *And Breath*.

It is difficult to predict what next and how dancers’ careers will evolve in response to the world we live in, technology, audience demands and their own innate creativity. It is even more difficult to predict which direction each dancer will go in at the end of their performance career. How will they utilise their unique talents, experience and knowledge?

Exploring new career directions, particularly for those who have trained intensively for years to become a professional dancer, can be daunting and fraught with complexity. However, through the very nature of this artistic profession, dancers are uniquely equipped to navigate ‘squiggly’ careers, be curious, experiment and take risks. Confidence, determination, resilience and an appetite for learning honed through years of practice and performing is a strong foundation to build from. The 2023 Essential Skills Tracker produced by KPMG, CIPD and Edge Foundation found the critical skills and qualities all employers seek include communication skills, problem solving, creativity, positivity, aspiration, leadership and teamwork, which can be found in every dancer’s toolbox.

“I will forever be grateful to DCD for not only the financial support, but also their encouragement and guidance during one of the most daunting periods of my adult life” **Dancer Feedback**

Listening to panel members reflect on the creative process, at an inspiration event at Birmingham’s MAC (Midlands Arts Centre), reinforced my belief that dancers are adept at reinventing themselves, evolving and stepping into the unknown, because it is a fundamental part of our creative practice.

Kathak dancer and choreographer, Aditi Mangaldas, reflected that every creative processes comes from a place of doubt, forcing her to ask questions about herself, the dance form and life “...it is not about waiting for that moment of inspiration but about being brave and walking into the forest”. Some dancers are clear about their career aspirations beyond performing, for others it is opaque and can be overwhelming. But like most choreographic projects, careers are riddled with uncertainty, result frequently unexpected, external momentum and influences prevalent. Dancers can take solace in the knowledge that they are

innovators and excel in unfamiliar territory – which bodes well when stepping into a new profession.

“Dancers’ Career Development has given me invaluable support to retrain as a Medical Doctor after an 18 year-long career as a professional dancer with Birmingham Royal Ballet. Their support commenced long before I began retraining. DCD were there to listen to my concerns about the studies I so wished to embark into. They offer me a safe space to confront my fears and as a result I was able to gather enough encouragement to follow a path I knew it would be academically challenging. Later, when I was ready to make the step, their financial support helped with university fees towards a Bachelor of Medicine degree. My gratitude is enormous.” **Dancer Feedback**

History has taught us that successful businesses constantly innovate, those that are blinkered by success and are reluctant to evolve, fail; look no further than Kodak, Blockbuster or Tower Records. However, consider the entrepreneurs that failed before succeeding: Walt Disney, Oprah Winfrey, Stephen Spielberg, to name but a few, are arguably defined as much by their failures as their success; how else do we learn? Starting a new venture, as many former dancers have done is nerve racking, but taking charge or your destiny and future prospects is incredibly empowering. With organisations like DCD to help up-skill dancers setting up new companies, with the support from our mentors and other dancers who have successfully established new businesses before them, we make sure dancers are equipped, emboldened and never alone.

Our approach is dancer-centric, we recognise performers as unique human being and tailor our advice accordingly, from a ballet dancer who studied formally to become a barrister, to the self-directed learning of a Hip Hop dancer to improve her DJ skills. We balance our commitment to helping retain talent in the dance industry and diversifying arts sector leadership, with recognition of dancers’ transferable skills and unique qualities that position them well to explore alternative prospects outside the creative industries.

Just over half the dancers we work with remain within the arts sector as community dance practitioners, artistic directors, CEO’s, teachers, marketers, rehearsal directors, producers, >>



Tommy Franzen, ZooNation The Kate Prince Company.
Photo: Andrej Uspenski.

programmers, designers and technicians or connected through careers in film, photography, composition, coaching, nutrition, physiotherapy, Pilates or yoga; some venture into PR, fashion, horticulture, IT, carpentry, hospitality, veterinary or medical practice. The list is endless. It is evident that there are no limits to dancers' tenacity, what they can achieve or how they will reinvent themselves post their performing careers. I respect them immensely.

What's critical is that we continue to listen to dancers and work closely and strategically with our partners, be they our partner dance companies, grant awarding bodies or the many excellent sector support organisations that exist such as One Dance UK, Parents in Performing Arts, People Dancing, Sampad, Soul City Arts, National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science, Clore Leadership – alongside the incredible work by the UK's National Dance Agencies, vocational dance schools, ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing). Working collaboratively, we will be best placed to help dancers realise their potential and aspirations during and beyond their performance career, retain extraordinary talent in the sector and help dancers navigate new career pathways beyond dance.

Throughout our 50th Anniversary Year, we will be delivering professional career development workshops and inspiration events in-person nationally, reconnecting with our alumni community,

working with partners to share knowledge and continue to be ambitious for dancers' futures. When a dancer's mind, body or heart determines that performing is no longer a career option, DCD will be there to ensure that they are not forgotten, abandoned, or going it alone – we will do all that we can to prepare and equip them, so they are confident and ready for the next stage of their career.

Demand for DCD's services has never been higher. Last year we engaged with 1,387 dancers, some who were actively seeking to change career and others who were developing new skill-sets to open up different career opportunities and additional income streams alongside their performance work. One is multi-disciplined artist Isaac Ouro-Gnao (Punchdrunk's *The Burnt City*), a former DCD SHIFT participant, who juggles his performing career with freelance journalism: "The SHIFT programme was a great support at a key time in my career. I was able to upskill in my marketing through the Digital Marketing course at Oxford University's Saïd Business School thanks to the grant made available. I'm now able to apply these skills in a new job I managed to pick up as a result."

There is no mistaking the value of dancers to society, artistically, socially and economically. It is DCD's role to help make this more visible, to advocate for dancers, raise their voices and be on standby 'in the wings' for when they need us most. As former DCD alumni, Federico Bonelli, Artistic Director of Northern Ballet stresses, it is important to consider the 'what next' throughout dancers performing lives, so career progression is a natural step in each dancer's journey – however squiggly – one that is rewarding, sustainable and full of surprises.

So please don't keep DCD and our work a secret; spread the word amongst your networks and signpost dancers towards us when they need a friend. With your support we will continue to have a positive impact on dancers' lives and the wider sector for the next 50-years and beyond.

"The care that DCD has for dancers, and the potential that they see in every one of us is remarkable. We are incredibly lucky to have them."

Dancer Feedback

Info

To find out more about DCD's programmes and get involved visit our website and follow us
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