

6 In conversation



Above: MDI African and Caribbean Youth Group. Photo: Leila Romaya.



Above and right: Karen Gallagher.

I haven't stopped dancing yet...

Karen Gallagher, in conversation with Rachel Rogers, recalls how she first got started in dance, the journey she has taken to her current position as Artistic Director of Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) and her long-standing campaign to raise the profile of dance in Liverpool

RR - Can you remember your first dance experience?

KG - Yes, I remember being aged three and performing to 'A Spoonful of Sugar' at my nursery. I loved it!

I had no formal training as a young child and was introduced to dance through secondary school. Our dance teacher had trained at The Place and this influenced her teaching a lot. She also brought in visiting artists from London Contemporary Dance and Rambert. Artists like Micha Bergese and Tom Jobe who came to the school and made work with students were really inspirational for me. Bringing artists to work with school groups is really important for inspiring young people today and a model I still use.

After school I kept up with several dance classes and got a job. I took class with Irene Dilks and Elroy Joseph to improve my technique. As teachers they were so supportive of anyone wanting to dance and particularly me as an individual. In 1980 while I was taking part in a Summer School, Elroy suggested that I applied to Laban. I don't even think I had heard of it but I did apply, I got in and moved to London. I really enjoyed my time there though it was very challenging. My level of technique was not the same as many others in my year and I really had to work at it.

RR - When did you first start working with dance in the community?

KG - I did a lot doing outreach work whilst at Laban. I set up a youth dance project in St John's Wood and I worked in the Albany Theatre in Deptford as well as setting up projects in Hackney.

After I graduated, Liz Bruen contacted me and offered me work with Merseyside Arts and though I hadn't planned to move back to Liverpool, I took it up and I've never looked back. I also did outreach work through the Unity Theatre and choreographed their Christmas show amongst other things. I worked with the Disability Arts Resource Unit

too, as an animateur at Southport Arts Centre - I was doing loads, all these posts were part time - I was very busy!

RR - Where was the first place you 'settled' into a full time job?

KG - That was at Seconds Out Theatre Workshop, a youth training scheme. I became the tutor on the dance and mime course. This was the first time I managed a budget for a programme of work and I was able to bring in artists to work with the young people. This scheme was fantastic, I loved seeing the development in the young people, experiencing first hand the difference dance made. I ended up managing the whole scheme.

RR - Did you ever use your performance skills after Laban?

KG - Yes I did, I had a brief sojourn to Germany as part of a performance collective set up by Debbie Marley. We toured two pieces, one portraying the life of Billie Holiday in which I played Billie. I did really enjoy it, the experience was fantastic but really performing is not my bag and though I have wonderful memories, I was happy to leave and get back to teaching and choreographing.

RR - A major focus of MDI's work is curating and promoting dance events - when did you realise this was one of your strong points?

KG - In 1992 I joined Cheshire Dance as Assistant Director, there I began to put together regional dance programmes. This included developing strong partnerships with regional venues and building a medium scale touring circuit for Cheshire. One of the first companies we presented was Random Dance; I'd seen Wayne McGregor's work at a Spring Collection event (later to become British Dance Edition). The work of Tom Roden (then Air Dance, and now New Art Club) was also promoted through this circuit and as a developing artist was supported by Cheshire Dance. >

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RR - What are some of the changes and developments you have seen since starting at MDI?

KG - There's been too many to mention really. I moved to MDI in 1994 when it was a fairly new agency. This position was a huge challenge. Initially MDI was set up as a pilot scheme and I worked alone with some freelance support. Though the agency was new, dance development in the area was not; there was a lot of support, and now we employ eight people with lots of freelance workers, so it's been a steady and sustained growth.

It has been inspiring to watch artists' careers develop over time. I remember presenting Henri Oguike, when his company started out over ten years ago. He performed at The Liverpool Community College to about 40 people, but we persevered and each year the audience grew. Then, a few years ago and to my delight he sold out at the Liverpool Playhouse, 1,300 people over two nights! Now that's audience development. It's not only national artists that MDI have supported though, we are committed to working with local artists and companies and supporting their significant achievements. It's been exciting to see the development of artists such as Andrea Buckley, Paula Hampson and more recently the newly formed Taciturn Dance Company and House of Suarez.

Working in partnerships across Merseyside with many different organisations has been a crucial part of our work - through them we have been able to achieve so much and reach so many people. Partnerships with venues have been particularly important, although MDI has always had a strategy for dance development in the region, much of the work produced has been done so with the good will and trust of these venues, as dance is not always a key part of their programming.

RR - Looking back, what do you think have been the three most influential projects that MDI have worked on?

KG - Definitely the Out of Reach Project in 1999. We worked for three years with groups of 'hard to reach' young people. The project gave us an opportunity to document the impact of dance, moving away from the anecdotal. We were able to look at how we worked as an organisation and as artists. It became a turning point for MDI as we were able to establish a core team including a Project Manager and dance workers.

Also, Our Town Story, which we took part in at the Millennium Dome in 2000. It was a fantastic opportunity to work with like-minded artists across other art forms including music, visual arts and theatre, which really enhanced the project. It felt good to collaborate with artists and develop new relationships. Jen Heyes, a theatre director, has been a major part of some of the work we

have produced over the years, creating and directing Primarily Dance (our first dance in education company) and the Friendship project. Both toured to Liverpool schools and formed a major part of MDI's programme between 2003-2006.

MDI are really proud of our African People's Dance (APD) Programme. Liverpool has a long history of connections with African and Caribbean dance, through the company Delado, then through the Blackie who continued to programme work. However, there were few opportunities to fully engage with these forms and from its outset MDI was determined to promote this area of dance. The work MDI does through Maxine Brown, our African People's Dance Worker has a core traditional aspect that is appreciated by artists and participants alike.

Initially we worked with Anne Clayton, Dance Officer for the then Northwest Arts Board. Anne worked closely with me to lobby the Arts Council and various Local Authorities to increase funds. Together we brought down some ring-fenced money left over from Delado and raised more from Liverpool City Council. This enabled us to audit what had occurred historically and begin to put a strategy in place. DanceNorthwest, the national dance agency for the region then instigated a three-year project to explore and examine the development of African People's Dance. The project was led by MDI and Dance Initiative Greater Manchester (DiGM). MDI has remained committed to the programme and six years on it's been a joy to watch the growth of the young people and adults involved through our ability to sustain the APD post. We have also been able to support artists such as Francis Angol and develop our Cultiv8 festival and seminar programme.

I think I have too many ideas... and not enough resources to bring them to fruition. I am very determined which means I rarely take "no" as an answer and become quite tenacious once committed to producing a project, event or performance. This is not a one-woman show however and without the right people around you to deliver, things would never happen. I've been very lucky with the people I've worked with over the years, staff, board and other colleagues.

RR - The Leap festival is also a huge event for MDI, tell me about how the event has developed since you came to post?

KG - Leap began before MDI and I inherited the project. It's our main annual programming opportunity and acts as a flagship for the organisation. It has shifted a lot since I started working here. It was a 3-month project across all boroughs and the venues involved would programme events with no one taking the lead. I felt it was too diluted and in 2003, MDI's 10th anniversary, I looked at how to



Above: MDI African and Caribbean Youth Group. Photo: Leila Romaya.

make it more dance focused. I realised that to give the event some homogeneity, the programme had to be curated by MDI and I took that on. The main venues we worked with agreed and we have developed a level of trust allowing me to have a lot of artistic freedom and know that they support me.

Leap became the only significant time when dance was programmed in Liverpool and I was still trying to provide 'something for everyone'. However, since 2006 we have themed the festival allowing us to become more focused about the artists, companies and events we programme. With 2008 approaching I thought that there was still not enough dance going on during the year and we were able to develop the Cultiv8, and more recently, Capital Nights festivals as opportunities to programme dance beyond Leap and keep it more visible throughout the year.

RR - The Capital Nights festival brought together a lot of European connections, how have these links influenced the way you work.

KG - Visiting Bassano del Grappa in Italy a number of years ago and seeing how the local authority there supported an experimental festival programme profiling work from out of their region was amazing to me. They were really taking a chance on art and the artists knew the support was there.

Attending this and other European festivals has given me opportunities to develop curatorial relationships across Europe. This culminated in the Migrant Body project in

2007. This was important to the development of local artists and my own programming which in turn brings new opportunities to local companies and audiences. These European connections have allowed me to really push the boundaries of local artists and audiences and to develop a broad 'team' of colleagues who have a shared ethos. Between us we share ideas and connections, including our own passion for supporting the art form.

RR - There is a real sense of determination and purpose that comes across when you talk about dance and what you imagine for the projects you work on...

KG - Yes, I'd say I'm very driven. I've also been lucky in the relationships I've made professionally, these have been key to ensuring that we are engaged at a regional and national level. Working with people who have a shared ethos and being in the right place at the right time has meant that certain partners - Liverpool and Knowsley Council, the Unity and Everyman Playhouse Theatres have really bought into dance and we have worked well with them.

RR - How do you think Liverpool being European Capital of Culture in 2008 has benefited the organisation?

KG - Around the time Liverpool won the bid it was wonderful having champions such as Sir Bob Scott and Sir David Henshaw to push dance forward including it as a major part of the programme. Capital of Culture 2008 and

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Above: Pilgrimage Project, Liverpool Anglican Cathedral 2004. Photo: Robert Cook.

the lead up to it has provided opportunities for the organisation to prove that it can deliver.

British Dance Edition (BDE) in 2008 was the icing on the cake really. I first attended in 1992 and thought then that holding the event in Liverpool would be a dream. Knowing we are the first non-National Dance Agency to host the event and that it was a success is just fantastic.

Both 2007 and 2008 have been special years as we have proven what can be achieved given appropriate levels of investment. Bringing over the Urban Bush Women last year was a great achievement for us artistically and in terms of audience response. The Akram Khan Company / National Ballet of China co-commission with Liverpool Culture Company enabled us to develop our profile within the international touring circuit and has provided opportunities for local artists to work and tour internationally. This project especially gave us the chance to be a key commissioner on an international level - raising the game for dance and for Liverpool.

MDI, with the support of venues, the Liverpool Culture Company, Arts Council England and many others, have brought dance centre stage both literally with the Empire Theatre programmes during BDE and perceptually with the other festivals and community projects running continuously. By positioning dance within a context where it can be recognised for what it can really offer, we hope, we inspire confidence both in terms of taking part and in developing the art form in its own right.

RR - What more do you hope for in terms of support for dance in the region?

KG - 2008 has seen a genuine commitment to the value of dance across the board. However, the lack of a champion or a key person or organisation to influence regional dance development means there is still a lot more work to be done. It was with a heavy heart that I witnessed the disinvestment from our National Dance Agency, DanceNorthwest. It is so important to have a central resource for the region, we need to work together to bring about change and development.

I sound like a broken record but investment, at an

appropriate level is so important to enable any substantial development. It does feel like we are always working on a shoestring, to sustain the growth we have worked so hard to achieve. Not only spending inordinate amounts of time funding core costs, then having to fundraise constantly for all our production ambitions can be quite disheartening as we start each year as if it is day one all over again despite proven successes. Having to prove ourselves over and over to the same people and organisations is difficult, providing this evidence with limited staff time is also a major problem.

Although there has been a commitment and a developing infrastructure of artists and organisations in the region, this has not always been followed through with an appropriate level of resources to take things forward. It's great that ACE is now looking at a dance strategy for the North West, and nationally our profile is being raised through BDE, European Capital of Culture etc. It's up to us to make sure we make the most of these opportunities.

RR - What do you see in the future for you and the organisation?

KG - With the current economic climate and 'hangover' from 2008 we need a mixed approach. We're excited to see where the dance legacy will go after putting it out there for the past few years. It's also exciting that the direction of the organisation feels clearer. I believe by maintaining partnerships and increasing the profile of events whilst making the most of what is happening (i.e. YDE, the Cultural Olympiad, and Find Your Talent etc.) AND if we are given appropriate investment and support at the heart of what we do we can continue to make a difference.

RR - And your dream...?

KG - No question - my dream for dance would be a philanthropic multi-millionaire donating to MDI to kick start our major ambition for a Dancehouse for Merseyside. Personally I also think there is still a dance in me waiting to come out... so never say never

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