



Above: Polly Risbridger.

Taking the lead for dance

Polly Risbridger, Creative Producer at East London Dance, on their active engagement with all things Olympic



Above: DansAthletic, an East London Dance project. Photo: Nick Gurney.

East London Dance is based right at the heart of the Olympic boroughs – just a stone's throw away from the Olympic Park. The Thames Gateway is also one of the largest regeneration projects in Europe, with the proposal that a city the size of Leeds will arrive over the next 20 years. My daily commute to work brings to life how fast change is happening in East London. The view from my train is ever shifting and evolving as work continues. As I walk out of Stratford Station I am confronted with the countdown clock to the Olympics, which at the time of writing this said 1,260 days to go.

At East London Dance we cannot ignore this significant sporting and cultural event – it is all around us. We don't want to be left playing catch up but be ready to strike as soon as the opportunities present themselves – as well as making the opportunities ourselves. I have been to lots of events where everyone is asking 'but what can we actually do? What are the opportunities? How can we get a slice of the action?' When, in reality, the opportunities are unclear and the questions just can't be answered at the moment. Our response at East London Dance is that we will go out and make our own opportunities. We want to be proactive and take the lead for dance. We don't want to just get called upon to provide dancers for

other people's ideas, we don't want to recommend artists for other people's projects, we don't want to provide volunteers to show people the way to the stadium. We want to be leading dynamic, creative, innovative high profile dance events that capture people's imaginations and demonstrate the talent of our East London dancing community. We also want to benefit from the legacy that the Games will offer us as part of the regeneration of East London.

We were in fact ahead of the game in relation to the Thames Gateway regeneration and initiated the London Thames Gateway Dance Partnership in 2004, bringing together the four dance organisations in the region – Chisenhale Dance Space, Laban, Greenwich Dance Agency and East London Dance, as well as Arts Officers from the ten East and South East London boroughs. Through working together and developing a united voice we are able to place dance on the regeneration map.

East London Dance's Olympic journey began in 2004 when London was gearing up to submit its bid. We were invited to be a part of a schools initiative with London Borough of Newham, called Olympic Links. We were tasked with helping raise the profile of London's Olympic bid amongst school children in the borough... with a budget of £5,000!

This was the first chance we had to be ambitious for dance within the context of the Olympics and the £5,000 certainly wasn't going to meet our ambitions. So from an invite to do a few schools workshops we fundraised and grew a large-scale film project with over 200 children and young people. We invited Luca Silvestrini and Bettina Strickler from Protein Dance to artistically direct a film, working with a team of East London based artists. We drummed up support from London 2012 who identified that it was an ideal example of the marriage of all its key bid themes and lent their logo and support for the distribution of the film, Start to Finish (this was back in the day when there were very few copyright issues around the logo and they were keen to support initiatives to help them win the bid).

So following the success of this, London won the bid (and of course we like to think that our film was the clincher!!!). The atmosphere outside Stratford Station when London was announced as the host city for 2012 was electric. Whatever the cynics say it still felt like a united community celebrating their achievement.

It was also a moment when you stopped to think – everything is going to change now. The world is looking to East London and here we have been toiling away for the last 21 years. So looking back at that moment almost >

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Above and left: Olympic Torch Relay.
Photos: Martina Trotman.

four years ago – what has changed? We’re still the same organisation with the same vision and ambitions but the cultural landscape around us is changing dramatically.

An example of this changing cultural landscape is this focus of large institutions and national arts organisations on East London. On first sight this appears quite threatening to a small regionally based organisation – a fear that the big players will come in and swoop up all the money, steal our participants, offer our artists better pay and higher profile. However we have tried to turn around this negative response into an aim of making all our potential competitors into partners. Why not make the most of their profile and status? Why not invite them to come and spend their money with us? Why not join up the sector? So here we find ourselves planning international dance events with significant new partners, working with our associate artists to inform the programming. Something I never would have imagined 4 years ago.

We also cannot ignore the links between dance and sport that the Olympic and Paralympic is

highlighting. We have developed a significant relationship with Pro-Active East London – a sports development organisation for the sub-region. They have supported us to develop our pitch to the sports sector, while still retaining the integrity of dance. I feel absolutely positive that they will fight for opportunities for East London Dance to engage with the Olympics whenever possible and it is our responsibility to be clear about the similarities and differences between dance and sport and celebrate dance’s uniqueness, rather than getting hung up on the sports world taking over dance.

Pro-Active East London has been one of the key supporters for our first major Olympic response. Following the success of the Start to Finish film we were invited to do a live project building on the ideas from the original film. We created site specific work for Stratford Station and we launched Big Dance 06 at Canary Wharf. Working again with Luca Silvestrini we had found a creative response to the Games and wanted to share this nationally, so set about developing DansAthletic: A Teacher’s Resource

(feature in Animated, Winter 2009). This has sparked huge amounts of interest and led to a range of opportunities for East London Dance. Following our launch event which included a performance by the young people featured in the pack we were invited by LOCOG to perform at the Beijing debriefing for London – attended by Olympic Organising Committees from across the world. A fantastic opportunity that came out of us programming the right event and inviting the right people. It is now our responsibility to follow this up – pursue LOCOG for more opportunities, develop our pitch. We need to go to them – we can’t just sit and wait for the knock on our door.

We are also finding that themes of the Olympics and regeneration are having significant impact on our creative work. Of course we get umpteen invites to do ‘opening ceremonies’ for local festivals and events and I often think... oh no not another one. But why not do them? Why not set the creative challenge to our artists? Why not push the boundaries of what people may perceive an opening ceremony to be.



Above: DansAthletic, an East London Dance project. Photo: Andrew Baker.

We are constantly finding new creative responses – whether it be the changing landscapes, the diversity of the city, the emotions behind competition, the new journeys across London... We have produced some really exciting work – roof top aerial performances as part of the Olympic Torch Relay, amazing photographs of young people dancing on future Olympic sites, danceuploaded.tv - a website for people to share films of themselves dancing across the gateway, youth led dance films exploring the concept of home commissioned by Westfield – the development company responsible for Stratford's major new shopping centre. And I'm sure there are lots more to come.

We are also working significantly with our users to develop their creative voices to influence the Cultural Olympiad. We are part of the Create Festival – a cultural festival for the five Olympic Boroughs with ambitions to develop a festival to match the size of the Edinburgh Festival in East London. As part of this there is an aim to have a proportion of the work shown programmed and curated by young

people. We have been consulting with them and developing plans to make this happen. We are also keen to make sure that our older dancers don't miss out – and working up ideas with Leap of Faith – our older people's performance group. We are introducing our artists to the right people and championing them wherever we can. And we are soon to become the lead hub for East London as part of the Big Dance – London's Legacy Trust project. Through this role we will develop our dancing network in the region and support everyone to engage in the opportunities out there.

And of course there is the legacy the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Thames Gateway regeneration will offer. We are very clear that East London Dance is here to stay – we have been working with East Londoners for the past 21 years and we will continue to work with East Londoners long after the Olympics has gone. But lets make the most of the regeneration of the area and explore how we can influence the physical infrastructure post 2012 and exploit it for dance. We are at the very early

stages of exploring the potential in the development of a dedicated dance building. Our vision is for a space where dance can be created, where people can have a high quality dance experience, where young people can take the lead, a space where collaboration is at the heart, a safe place to take risks.

So it's clear – it's going to be a world party. And with this there should be space for everyone. We don't need to compete with each other but join forces and shout about dance – we need to think beyond ourselves and make change happen for the sector. Yes, dance can link into other bid projects and work to other agendas but it can also take the lead and deserves its own major project on its own terms. So the only insight I can share is develop your ideas and go out and make it happen. No doubt there will be lots of challenges along the way, but if we work together and stay focused and ambitious for dance then these can be overcome.

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