



Above: Ken Bartlett.

## A workforce for the future?

**Ken Bartlett**, Creative Director, Foundation for Community Dance, asks if we need to develop new methodological approaches for community dance to suit the needs of both people and dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**The best part of my job at the Foundation for Community Dance** is the opportunity it has afforded me to see and celebrate how brilliant community dance is, what it achieves and how it transforms the lives of people and their communities. Here I mean work led by members of the Foundation and other artists, companies and organisations who share the values of community dance, and the ambition to widen access and increase participation in high quality dance experiences that offer a life long relationship for people with the art form.

Writing earlier this year about the work of dance artist Royston Maldoom in the Guardian's What's On Guide (1 November 2008), dance critic Judith Mackrell described and almost wrote off community dance, or at least the performance aspect of community dance, as mediocre and politically correct. Clearly she's seeing a different range of work than I am, but it is a criticism that I think we should consider. Judith is a smart cookie and knows her dance.

What if, I wondered, she has a point? And if she does, what do we need to do as a sector to be able to challenge these assumptions in the long term. Because I don't believe that anyone working in community dance wants to deliver work that is mediocre, or even regarded as mediocre. I believe that people strive to deliver work that is of the highest quality and that is transformational.

One of my concerns is that I don't hear enough discussion about our methodologies and approaches to pedagogy in community dance. This is perhaps not surprising, given the nature of the work: individually led in the privacy of the studio, with everyone finding their individual solutions; a sense of threat when asked to reveal what we have been doing or even reflect critically about it. I suspect that, as the profession has grown to include a wider range of dance professionals and more dance styles and genres, these kinds of discussions are difficult and

would be seen as highly critical of the individual practitioner's right to define their own working practices.

Community Dance as a manifestation within the dance ecology of the UK has now been established for some 30 years. As circumstances and funding opportunities as well as the aesthetics of dance have changed over this time so have the outward manifestations of community dance. However, the overriding aims of the community dance sector have largely remained the same - to increase access to and widen participation in dance - and are based on a fairly consistent set of values about the practice:

- Placing the participant at the centre of the activity
- Respect for difference
- Dance as an empowering tool for participants in the dance and the rest of their lives
- Being inclusive rather than exclusive.

It seems to me that in accepting a wider range of practices, purposes and contexts within community dance that the definitions of what community dance is have themselves become blurred. It has become increasingly difficult to establish a cohesive idea of what the professionalised community dance sector is, how it works and what it can achieve for those who take part. Though we know this 'thing' called community dance exists, because we're all a part of it.

Over the past ten years because of the particular take of a Labour Government we have become adept at arguing the instrumental impact of dance at the expense of deepening the debate about its intrinsic values. It appears from the current media profile that dance is receiving from such programmes as *Strictly Come Dancing* and the T Mobile adverts, that dance is the arts activity of the moment. Figures for participation and for dance audiences

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are rising significantly. The contexts for engaging people in dance continue to expand and artists are embracing new contexts and people.

So where is community dance in this developing picture of access to and participation in dance? Indeed, what is its territory?

In my childhood when I lived in a small village in the Pennines the local cricket club would hire the defunct village school hall and run whist drives to raise money for the coming season. Everyone would attend, from the youngest children to the oldest person; no one was excluded. After the whist drive, food, prepared by largely the local women would appear, the card tables pushed to the sides of the hall and a three or four piece band set up in the corner and everybody danced - traditional English dances as well as popular dances such as the waltz and the tango. Couples danced together and the young people were gathered in by the elderly to learn the same dances that had been passed down generation to generation. This is an example of a dancing community that is social, inclusive and learns from each other without the need for any kind of dance professional or community dance artist.

There are many styles and traditions of dance being arranged for people to participate in across the UK largely as a result of the incredible mix of culturally diverse who now live here. Whilst people might originally attend these sessions for social reasons, meeting old friends, maintaining a cultural heritage etc. what happens is that they become expert in those particular dances, getting more confident, learning new moves and enjoying the full pleasure of participation in the activity of dancing. What they become after a while of dancing together is a community of dancers. This can be a mixture of the professional and non-professional - the key is the pleasure taken by all participating in the particular dance.

Community dance as I want to define it for the moment, has learnt much from these manifestations: its inclusiveness, the social interactions it can promote and the sheer pleasure of dancing communally with other people. The historical distinction between community dance from other manifestations of dance, is its historic link with theatre/concert dance tradition, the development of ‘New Dance’ in the UK in the 1970s; building on such things as pedestrian movement and contact improvisation. This work allowed and encouraged a small number of professional dance artists to see that there were alternative ways of engaging non-professionals not only in dance but more importantly in the art of dance. In the UK there were a number of important initiatives supported financially by the then Arts Council of Great Britain – the first Animateurs and Dance Artists in Education initiatives - that allowed these approaches to take hold and inspired other artists to develop new skills and approaches that placed participants not only in the role of learner but in the role of creator/artist, gave purpose to the process by placing art making and performance as part of an ongoing process rather than an end in itself. These artists were equally concerned with the artistic quality of the whole process as well as the wellbeing and empowerment of the participants they worked with.

As we progress into the 21st Century, from the industrial revolution through the technological revolution and into what some are beginning to call the cultural revolution, there have been significant changes in the way people choose to engage with each other socially and as members of society, as well as political and economic changes to the nature of long established communities. We have seen massive shifts in the nature of work that large parts of the population are engaged in, changes to the skills base demanded by the economy, a huge shift in the nature of the >

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population itself with different loyalties being expressed as part of individual and collective identities. We are, it seems, part of a culture that is not yet at ease with itself, where the individual demands a voice as a right as well as more disparate collective voices demanding to be heard as we come to terms with the fast and eccentric rate of change that we are dealing with in an age of uncertainty.

This new way of being has had impact on artists as it has on the people they choose to work with in community dance settings, and it is in this context that I believe that we need to review our practices and pedagogic models to see if they are appropriate for our current and developing context.

When I look at the established professional dance world in England of producers, promoters, companies, conservatoires and funders I am reminded of a closed religious order: the absolute truth was established back in the mists of time and the only way to survive, is to submit to the rites, rituals and responses that have been established without question for generations. Pursuing my ecclesiastical metaphor, hopefully not stretching it too far, someone once told me that she thought there were two kinds of nun and for me there are two kinds of dance professional. ‘Those that have experienced God, and those that have been on their knees so long that they have no alternative.’

I hope that you can see that I am attempting a fundamental challenge of how we in community dance operate and how we widen access and increase participation and indeed actively seek to include difference and diversity in our pantheon of what we can call dance. I am challenging whether community dance should continue to align itself to the narrow aesthetic values currently being delivered, often beautifully, by the professional theatre/concert sector, and I want to ask whether in this present fast changing context whether that we should continue to privilege that sector as something to aspire to and measure ourselves against, when we are often seen as in deficit by that sector when we don’t match up to their ‘standard’ or view about what quality dance is or might be.

I am seeking for us to consider a 21<sup>st</sup> Century pedagogy in community dance that has art making as its focus and the participants at the centre of that, operating themselves as creative artists with control over content, form and context. A pedagogy concerned with facilitating people to

make meaning through the art of dance not drilling people in how to dance in a particular style or tradition or fit into the learnt aesthetics of the established dominant modes of dance or learning a set of steps. A pedagogy that is concerned as much with how the dance feels as much as how it looks. People are vessels that are full of dance, not empty and waiting to be filled with our view of what they need to become. What I want is a much more complex journey that will demand a different pedagogy than that learnt from the established order.

So what kind of pedagogue and pedagogy am I looking for in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

I have already laboured the point about accepting people as potential artists where they are when they enter the dance space, and placing them and their aspirations, ambitions and ideas at the centre of the process and also about the importance of bringing a range of aesthetics to the fore rather than privileging a narrow historical perspective. I don’t want to see community dance practitioners with an obsession about identifying the talented and the gifted against narrow criteria, but operating as people who are prepared to take the time and make the effort to unearth potential and develop it rather than spot it and train it. People who can work with the half full rather than the half empty.

I think we really need to become people who are experts in the body - what it can do/can’t do - what it wants to do and doesn’t want to do. A pedagogy based on much more than a short course in anatomy and physiology – one, as Miranda Tufnell suggests in the book *What Dancers Do that Health Workers Don’t* (JABADAO, 2000) ‘that develops a deeper connection to the experience of the body and a personal creative language, widening the field through which we perceive and experience ourselves and the world around us.’ One more concerned with whether it feels right rather than what it looks like, one that understands the body’s development through our ages but one which doesn’t stigmatise what people can do because of their age or other condition, that celebrates what they can do rather than what they can’t. Or what we think they can’t. One that demonstrates we are experts in the body. As Amanda Fogg reported in the Spring 2008 issue of *Animated* about the work of the Mark Morris Company with people with Parkinson’s disease “this (the dance class) is an opportunity to puts the disease on the back burner, it’s a dance class,

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we don't look at it like a therapy class".

I am interested in developing a pedagogy that puts content and meaning back into the dance mix, saying things in dance truly meaningful about the human condition. Now don't get me wrong, I'm happy to be witness to dance that simply creates ripples in the air around me, nor am I banning people just having fun with putting their bodies into interesting shapes, positions and gestures to see what will happen. However I am more interested in us passing on what I'm calling the 'deep rules' of dance not its many outward forms, supporting people of whatever body size, shape fitness or age to explore together, asking 'I wonder what will happen if...' and then becoming highly skilled in manipulating the massive potential of the tensions between those deep rules of stillness and movement, silence and sound, darkness and light. People who are interested in supporting the making of meaning through dance rather than imposing their dance on people.

I think community dance artists have to become more knowledgeable and multi lingual about the dances they know, so that when supporting and facilitating community dancers to make their work they have as wide a range of reference points to draw upon to support the precise meaning they want to convey in their dances. This might include historical, culturally diverse and social dances, and knowledge of a wide range of dance and movement techniques to add to the meaning, rather than forces people through a funnel, and allows artists to respond positively to the dances that people bring with them.

We still need to recognise the need to name distinctive dance practices, yet as American choreographer Liz Lerman as suggested over the years, recognise that they are only separated by a permeable membrane. In other words, stop configuring dance as a pyramid or even a continuum that indicate that some forms and approaches are more important or intrinsically valuable than others.

Supporting people in art making is more than providing an expressive outlet, it is supporting and facilitating the conscious, knowing, illuminating and constructed.

So how do we move from the expressive wriggle of the two year old into the more conscious, controlled, embodied and communicable piece of dance, apart from relying on

them to begin to make the move to consciousness as part of the natural progression of child development?

I'd suggest the first step is to unearth and identify the content that the community dancer(s) want to communicate and from there we can begin to identify the form that best serve the content and the dancers. We need to become more intuitive, curious and knowledgeable about what specific bodies might be able to do and the risks we can ask the owners of those bodies to take, and indeed whether we can include what they do within our frame of reference as dance. It seems to me that if artists choose to work in this way they have to possess a rich understanding of what the body can do, what it is safe to do and how to protect it for the long term.

In summary then I see a pedagogy that needs more educated dance artists who can: engage with current issues facing their dancers and the wider world; a pedagogy based more on negotiation than instruction and which fully embeds its values in the practice; one which gives more value to the making of meaning, art making and content within the process; one that has a multidimensional view of what constitutes art and dance and dance as art, and has a multilingual, multicultural knowledge of dance and dances. This needs to be concerned with passing on the deep rules of dance - the grammar not just the vocabulary; dance artists that have the skills knowledge and competence to call themselves experts in the body; a pedagogy that doesn't make careless assumptions about what is appropriate for individuals or particular groups of people and finally a practice that has a more sophisticated set of quality benchmarks than a simple judgemental like or dislike.

I would like to see attention to these qualities and perspectives included in all the undergraduate courses for community dance. Our aim at the Foundation for Community Dance is to embed them in the development of our National College for Community Dance. Perhaps through this, and as people progress through their careers and acquire these skills, knowledge and abilities, the suggestion that community dance practice is mediocre or just politically correct will seem like something very much from the last century.

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