

Right and below:
Romeo & Juliet project.
Photos: Rachel Cherry



Laban adult performance projects

Programme Manager at Laban's Education and Community Department **Liz Atkin** describes the development of adult performance projects in South London



Deciding to enroll for a weekly dance class when you're an adult can be quite a daunting commitment. Work and life challenges often get in the way. But as I've witnessed in my role as Programme Manager in the Education and Community Department, the adult dancers at Laban have been pushing themselves further for several years.

In 2008 the Performance Project was launched within our already well-established evening dance programme, connecting the adult community activities of Laban and Blackheath Halls for the first time. The dance strand was designed to give adults the chance to broaden and develop their contemporary technique and choreographic skills by learning and creating movement material to Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake (in 2008) and Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet (in 2009). The Blackheath Halls Community Orchestra played the music live in public performances that were the culmination of each 12-week course.

These collaborations have been a huge hit with participants and audiences alike. Choreographers Stella Howard and Lee Smikle have team-taught the dancers for both events. Typically the projects offer two classes enrolling between 20 and 25 participants each, with Stella leading a level one beginners class and Lee teaching level two for more experienced dancers. The choreographers combine their efforts in a project's latter stages, setting choreography from both groups to perform with the orchestra. As Lee explains, "In London there are few opportunities for non-professional adult performers in terms of dance. Enrolling in the Performance Project allows them to do more than just attend open classes. It starts as a desire to dance, but the social aspect becomes very important. Some people have previous dance or performance experience, and some have none, but different backgrounds and ages work towards the same aim. I feel >

they should be treated like a professional company. We expect a lot from them. Not technically, but in terms of commitment.”

With 45 adults fitting dance and performance into their daily lives there was, understandably, an air of excitement at weekly evening classes and rehearsals. Aged anywhere between 17 and 68 years old, they came from a broad range of social, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Their life experience covered a spectrum of occupations from lawyer, television producer, nursery nurse, design consultant and banker to music student, surveyor, retired primary school teacher, doctor, and full-time mum.

“I love working with adults who have chosen to come to a project like this,” says Stella. “There’s a real sense of spirit about it. People want the fun, but they also want professionalism. They want to give it their all. They’re a diverse group empowered by their work together. Here their ideas and skills are valued, and together we progress towards a common goal.”

Creative classes had been offered on Laban’s community evening programmes in the past. Initially there was a lot of interest, but over the weeks of terms attendance often diminished. When they’re open-ended, and thus without a theme or outcome, people sometimes just stop coming. But as Stella noted, the adults in Performance Projects are working towards something. People come to rely on others to be there. Shirley Moffat was a dancer in *Romeo and Juliet*, “The commitment to an end-product means I know I’ll turn up to class. A regular class I wouldn’t prioritise over work or family, but for a Performance Project I would.”

The choice to work with established music also helped make the process immediately accessible. Because people were familiar with these scores there was more security; it wasn’t just about harnessing an inner creative voice.

Meeting the needs of such a diverse group required a rigorous and supportive learning framework. Building relationships with individuals and with the group took time. Lee and Stella underpinned the first four weeks of classes with contemporary technique to develop confidence, ability and a movement vocabulary. They established a shared kinetic language through phrases and sequences taught while working with CDs of the scores, and with trust exercises and creative tasks. As classes progressed the tasks were less teacher-led and more about the participants finding their own ways to explore and move. As Stella describes it, “Part of teaching these kinds of groups is providing people with solid phrases they can learn and feel confident about, as well as drawing out their own material. It creates a sense of ownership, which makes them feel more comfortable about eventually performing in front of friends, family, and the public. For me it’s rewarding to see bodies move so differently from the same idea, but without trying to work in unison and always allowing for the differences they hold.”

“Moving in front of other people can be very exposing,” Lee adds. “That’s why it’s so important for us to establish a safe, supportive environment. Partnering can be a

challenge, and adults can be vulnerable. To work in close physical contact with strangers requires a degree of trust. There are other physical demands in terms of stamina, but in my experience people of all ages just love to get on with it. Older participants are just as enthused as younger ones. As choreographers we need to be flexible and realistic. We create a high quality of performance by reacting organically to changes within our groups.”

Commitment and professionalism were established by teachers and participants alike. I spoke to some of the former about their experiences. Hazel Lindley Milton, a 32 year-old Human Resources adviser, danced in both *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet* “These projects have developed me as an individual,” she enthused. “It was a real buzz to work with other dancers of all abilities, ages, body shapes and backgrounds. I loved it and would do another project in an instant.”

The dancers rehearsed separately from the orchestra until the last three weeks of the project, when Sunday rehearsals at Blackheath Halls combined live music and dance in the performing space. The shift from working with CDs was initially a challenge, but participants quickly learnt to tailor their movements to the orchestra’s speed and dynamics. “Working to live music is brilliant,” says Nigel Campbell, 52, an occupational accountant who danced in *Romeo and Juliet*. “Each performance with the orchestra is different. You have to listen out a lot more to the music. It makes your dancing edgier and sharper. I heard the music again the other day and my stomach started to tighten. I was mentally getting ready to go onstage again!” I asked Nigel what he felt were the benefits of taking part in a project like this. “It’s an opportunity to do something completely different. It helps me relax from work because I’m concentrating on so many things outside my normal thought process. And being part of a team, and working to create a successful performance, I’ve seen another side of life and met people I wouldn’t normally meet.”

Most importantly, and simply, the value of these projects can be found in the intensity of experience for the participants. This is not just in terms of dance and music, but encompasses the friendships, camaraderie and commitment of the individuals taking part. “At 58 years-old I wondered if I could still be creative,” says Sheila Twitchett, “and respond to others in a group situation. It was 30 years since I’d danced. I wondered if I would be good enough, but my heart still longed to dance and perform. I built up my confidence through technique and rehearsals and began to really believe in myself. There were no barriers. It was a remarkable experience.”

Laban and Blackheath Halls are running another exciting Performance Project for autumn 2010, set not to a specific and complete score but rather to a series of short classical pieces bound by a dark theme. Bookings for dancers opened in August.

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