



Simon Dove. Photo: Jacqueline Chambord

# Start making sense

**Simon Dove**, Director of Arizona State University's Herberger Institute School of Dance considers evolving the art form through socially-based practice in the United States higher education system

**Dance is inherently a socially-based practice.** It is rooted in community celebration and family rituals around the world. Yet professional contemporary practice seems to have become so culturally marginal. How has this happened, and why does the field still seek to define professional practice as separate from community activity? Why do people seem to value individual physical virtuosity more than the power of dance to convey ideas and meaning?

As Director of Yorkshire Dance Centre, the National Dance Agency in Leeds, UK for five years and subsequently eight years as Artistic Director of the Netherlands' international dance festival Springdance, I have evolved a clear understanding of the power of dance to transform people's lives, and the role of the dance artist as a potent catalyst for this social evolution. From the school-excluded young person in Leeds culminating a year's project with us by leading a dance workshop in his former school, to Paris-based Rachid Ouramdane, stimulating critical social debate through his performance piece examining suicide among young people, I have witnessed how dance can really move us all (pun intended). Yet it seems that the very structures that have been built to foster and nurture dance in the West, are also the very ones that lead to an isolation of practice, the marginalisation of the art form, and such limited public engagement. If only 6% of the population claim to attend dance performances, then that leaves a massive 94% who find no purpose in attending. Clearly current dance practice does not make sense to most people.

Dance training is intensive. The immense investment of time, effort and resources that it takes for each individual to hone their body into an instrument of technical virtuosity is certainly laudable. However if this physical dexterity is the sole focus of the dancer's effort, then we are already sowing the seeds of isolation. If institutions are training

dance artists so that their work can only be seen in expensive buildings with high specification floors, controlled temperatures, advanced technical facilities, and broad sightlines, then Western society is simply consolidating that separation. In the pursuit of the highest standards in dancing, it is important not to forget the critical importance of us knowing why we are dancing, for whom, and to what end?

Many of the dance makers from around the world I have worked with over the years are developing a profound sense of purpose for their work, and questioning many of the established assumptions about what dance is and where it happens only after they have completed their training and begun their professional practice. Exceptions are all too often those who have not undertaken a formal dance education, but are autodidacts, having constructed their own path to dance proficiency from internships, workshops and programmes of their own choosing. If dance is to play a more significant role in people's lives, clearly we need to ensure that developing dance does not also encourage social disengagement. So how does one change the notions of what appropriate dance training is for the 21st century? How can professional dance activity be more relevant to more people?

In the United States the majority of advanced dance training programmes take place in colleges and universities. Higher education then, offers the opportunity to provide an appropriate training ground to ensure that future generations of artists develop a more socially-engaged practice. The new curriculum for Dance we have developed here at Arizona State University (ASU) seeks to offer students a much wider range of possibilities for their practice. Central to the principles of the programme is the focus on the students' own creative practice, crucially shifting the emphasis away from learning an imposed set of movements, towards an understanding of what it is they >



ASU visiting artist faculty, Nora Chipaumire with Burundian refugees at the Phoenix-based International Rescue Committee, a community partner with the ASU School of Dance. Photos: Thomas Story

wish to communicate and how. Rather than have a specific technique imposed on all, students can now choose a 'personal movement practice' – a dance form they wish to focus on each year – from five options, Dances of Africa and the Diaspora, Contemporary Ballet, Movement Language Sources (Somatics), Post-Modern Contemporary, or Urban. This is supported by a contextualising course in Movement Practices, which offers an introduction to somatic principles, embodied knowledge from around the world such as Ta'i Chi, Yoga, and Aikido, and a kinesiological understanding of how the physical body functions. Theory and history is integrated in the personal movement practice courses and a range of history, philosophy, and ethnology courses help to frame all this information. The sum of this practice is applied and explored in an ongoing programme of creative practice courses that runs through each year culminating in a final graduation project. This creative inquiry is the core of the curriculum, constantly asking the student to synthesise their acquired knowledge in relation to their own ideas, their own creative imagination, and their own sense of the world they inhabit. The students continually demonstrate how they make sense of it all, and in their work how it makes sense to the participant or viewer. This is a powerful way to catalyse a form of self-discovery in the student, and develop in them a real sense of responsibility for what they do, why they do it, and for whom and with whom do they do it. These are central questions for any artist in the 21st century, and students who begin this process of self-inquiry whilst still at college are years ahead of those who only begin to engage with these questions when confronted by the realities of professional life.

Critical to the development of this inquiring student is a real understanding and empathy for the people and communities around them. What is their role and responsibility as an artist in the world today? How can they

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use their artistry, for example, to work meaningfully with a group of homeless young people? How can they use their movement knowledge to explore the stories of people who speak a different language? Confronting these questions opens the dance artist to imagining solutions that are not taught in the classroom, but where the cumulative skills, knowledges, and personal understanding of the world are applied to achieve very tangible, practical, and creative solutions. To ensure all students undergo this experience, we have integrated into the third year of creative practice the examination of international models of socially-based practice followed by a practical internship applying that understanding locally.

Clearly it is our responsibility as dance educators and administrators to foster a curiosity to really explore this phenomenon called 'dance' – from the personal to the wider practices around the world. The students need context from the widest possible knowledge of the field and they need to find their own connection to this work. As a response to this we have developed a visiting artist faculty programme, so there will always be artists here on campus from diverse parts of the world, working, teaching, researching, and just chatting; each bringing a different way of thinking and making, in a very tangible form for the students.

There is substantial long-term value for artists working in varied settings to offer us fresh perspectives on the world around us. This will help nurture a healthy and engaged society, as well as evolve new and dynamic manifestations of the art form itself. The challenge here is to both alter society's limited access to dance practice, and expand the dance artists' understanding of their role in society. We need to foster a shift towards respecting and supporting the artist, not just the finished work; to invest in the artist's presence in our world, and not only the product. Our mission here at ASU is clear; we are becoming a training ground for socially-engaged and innovative artists, who use dance as their primary means of engagement. A cultural practice based on products is not dynamic. A cultural landscape based on seeding artists to thrive in diverse contexts will evolve and give rise to work we cannot yet imagine, and transform people and society in ways we have only dreamed of.

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