

Right: *Natural*.
Choreographer:
Clara Andermatt.
Photo: Pau Ros.



The fame game

Fiona Ross, Director of Creative Learning, Sadler's Wells, describes what happens when the Company of Elders, a modest (and lovely) dance company receives national media exposure

When the Company of Elders was approached by BBC1's arts documentary strand *Imagine*, the proposition was to tell the story of a contemporary dance company whose members discovered dance late in life. No one imagined the programme would be a hot topic on Twitter, pick of the week in The Sunday Times TV section or lead to invitations to appear on a prime time quiz show.

Established in 1992, the Company of Elders has been quietly developing its presence amongst the dance community over the last ten years. The group began as an off-shoot of Sadler's Wells' weekly arts appreciation club aimed at anyone who wanted a more active involvement in dance. Now a firm fixture in Sadler's Wells community and learning programme, it commissions new works from professional dance artists and choreographers. The dancers have a variety of backgrounds and interests and there is a core group who have been dancing together for over ten years.

Recent commissions have included working with Luca Silvestrini, Richard Alston Dance Company and Portuguese choreographer Clara Andermatt who secured the Elders

performances at the prestigious Venice Biennale dance festival in 2006 with *Natural*, a work that mixed text and dance to stirring effect. In addition to regular home performances in the Lilian Baylis Studio at Sadler's Wells, UK performances have occurred in locations as diverse as the Houses of Parliament, the National Theatre, Duckie Cabaret Club and Bethnal Green Working Men's Club. Along with Portugal, foreign engagements have seen the dancers take to the stage in Russia and led to international acclaim. All this for a group of modest Londoners who consider themselves amateurs.

Although some of us found the title of the documentary *Save the Last Dance for Me* somewhat pessimistic, filmmaker Fran Landsman captured an intimate, thoughtful and uplifting portrait of these 25 people. Snatches of them laughing in the rehearsal studio and making preparations for a new performance project led by Alston's company were interspersed with powerful personal stories about overcoming the pain of bereavement and serious illness to perform with the group. Eve suffers from peripheral neuropathy and can't feel her feet; Donald, 73, has osteoporosis; and a number of the dancers have had hip

replacements, including Jill who was left with one leg longer than the other. 61 year-old Alison's story is the most incredible of all: she overcame a brain tumour in her twenties that left her unable to walk or talk for two decades. Their shared passion for performing is best summed up by Geoff, 85, who attends dance classes almost every day: 'Quite simply, I shall dance until the end of my life,' he says, leaping across the stage.

What the programme so warmly conveyed is that this is not an elitist group for ex-dancers, but that anyone could join the Company of Elders and have a go. This was the overwhelming impression left on a veritable legion of viewers. Within minutes of the broadcast on 23 June, 2009 comments were flying round Twitter about how 'uplifting and moving' the programme was. Sadler's Wells was subsequently flooded with calls, emails and letters from individuals wanting to join the group, festivals wishing to book or commission performances, holiday companies hoping to buy in Company of Elders-themed short courses and investment banks offering to support the group as part of their corporate community packages. TV critics declared that 'There's no better antidote to the



Above: *Natural*. Choreographer: Clara Andermatt. Photo: Pau Ros. **Above right:** *White Hot*. Choreographer Luca Silvestrini. Photo: Belinda Lawley.

shrinking effect of ageing than the power of dance' and 'Every city, town, village in the land should have a Company of Elders.'

Manufacturers' obsession with anti-ageing products suggests that growing older is one of society's worst taboos. TV critics, and the public who contacted Sadler's Wells in droves in the days and weeks following the broadcast, clearly found the Company of Elders a life-affirming reminder that vitality isn't the preserve of the young alone. All this interest left us feeling immensely positive about the coverage for both the group and Sadler's Wells, and keen to maximise these new contacts and connections. It also left us with difficult choices regarding ways forward for our over-60s programme that, in addition to the Elders, features outreach classes and a weekly arts club.

Responding to the overwhelming flurry of communications from people wanting to join the group was our first priority, and definitely the most enjoyable task. Although we'd widely

publicised that the Company of Elders is fully subscribed and the already long waiting list has been closed, we received countless requests from undeterred individuals with their own special reasons for being fast-tracked into the group. The stories people told were of a passion for dance at an early age put on hold for decades due to work and family commitments. 'I am 75 and have never had a dance lesson in my life,' one person wrote, 'but I jived from the age of 14 and still like to jive at home to music.' Or, 'My one ambition has been to dance on stage, but as a youngster I was steered away from it by my parents who wanted me to be more academic and my male friends/husband who thought dancing was not for them.' CVs and photos filled the postbag, including a letter from a belly dancing 87 year-old who'd got through to the third round of the Britain's Got Talent contest. Impressive credentials but, alas, not compelling enough evidence to win a place in the company!

At a taster day for over-60s which

followed the week after broadcast, I was virtually held to ransom by a group of thirty demanding to know when Sadler's Wells was going to set up more classes to accommodate their interest. This was the biggest challenge: responding appropriately and strategically to waves of enthusiasts who wanted to sign up on the spot for instruction. Although our work with seniors is an important part of Sadler's Wells' community and education office, our annual budget for this is modest and we have to make choices about which projects we can afford to resource. A vital feature of delivering work to this age group is that dance can be an affordable activity in retirement. Thus our community outreach classes are £2 per week and annual membership to the Company of Elders is just £15. By subsidising these activities we can ensure that they are accessible to retirees from all backgrounds across London. But we can only hold a small number of classes.

Also, is it appropriate for Sadler's



Above left to right: *In Fine Shape* Choreographer: Cheryl McChesney. Photo: Belinda Lawley; *La Foule*. Choreographer: Ippy Donnellan. Photo: Belinda Lawley. *In Fine Shape*, Choreographer: Cheryl McChesney. Photo: Belinda Lawley.

Wells to suddenly start running (and funding) a plethora of dance classes for over-60s? It's certainly not a core part of our business. How do we follow-up the numerous queries from dance teachers wanting to franchise the Company of Elders across the UK?

What the surge of interest did highlight was the disappointing level of visibility of community dance within the UK. Even though much has been achieved by the sector, in terms of advocacy and linkages there are still many people who don't realise they can access quality opportunities to dance on their doorstep. We fielded over a hundred calls from people as far afield as Leeds, Cornwall, Northampton and Bridlington desperate to track down local classes. In one case we managed to hook up a lady in rural Somerset with a weekly over-60s movement class run by her local dance agency only three miles from her house. She was thrilled.

Keeping sight of our priorities means we won't be starting new classes. Working with colleagues at

Londondance.com, we will set up a new database for over-50s in London to signpost classes and events in their borough. We're also producing information sheets about how to find classes nationally. We won't be looking to franchise The Elders. What the documentary so accurately conveyed was what makes the group so special, and that is the individual personalities and interests of its dancers. This can't be replicated in a formula, and we feel we'd be compromising our integrity if we tried to do so. However we are following up a few of the other leads which may help us realise our ambitions to stretch ourselves and do more annual performances, collaborate with more artists and possibly venture into other art forms. We also hope to take up an invitation to submit a Company of Elders team for the BBC2 prime time quiz show Eggheads. We also trust that the Imagine programme's positive reception will add to the critical mass of advocacy about this area of work, as championed at the recent Time to

Move conference delivered by Take Art Dance, Somerset.

On an individual level the dancers have been delighted with the unexpected buzz surrounding them and their activities. Geoff received a letter out of the blue from an old friend he'd lost touch with twenty years ago; Doris, 84, was recognised by a passerby as she did her shopping in Hackney. Generally the members became celebrities in their own communities for a short while. Already good advocates for the joy of dance, they're happy to tell anyone who'll listen how much they relish dancing with the Company of Elders and how it enriches their lives. They're looking forward to their next performances at Sadler's Wells on 1 and 2 March 2010 that will include a work created with Wayne McGregor and Random Dance Company.

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