

Right: Roger Farrell,
Nicole Thomson and
Mark Barber.
Photo: Michelle
Collard.



Mark of excellence

Anjali's general manager, **Roger Farrell**, considers the changes within the company as it carries its commitment to the creativity of people with learning disabilities to the next level

For many dancers with vocational training a career that mixes performing and teaching might be considered a necessary compromise. For Mark Barber, a dancer with Anjali Dance Company, it's a bit more of an adventure.

Anjali is a professional national touring company that only works with dancers with learning disabilities, and is a world leader in developing the creativity of people with learning disabilities. Acknowledged by audiences, critics, promoters and Arts Council England as a consistent producer of high-quality, thought-provoking dance, the company has performed internationally and at middle and small scale venues in the UK. These range from South Shields to North Devon, and include The Royal Opera House, South Bank and The Place, where Anjali's most recent touring production, *Something Wild*, was seen as part of *Spring Loaded 2007*.

After studying performing arts at Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, Mark Barber joined Anjali shortly after the company's inception as an independent organisation in 1997. Given that vocational dance training at HE level is completely inaccessible to people with learning disabilities, he was fortunate to find Anjali practically on the doorstep of his Oxford home. Mark has spent much of the intervening eleven years enjoying intensive weekly professional training with his colleagues in a company that currently numbers seven dancers with learning disabilities.

From early on in his performing career Mark has shown an interest and aptitude for teaching dance. Anjali has been happy to encourage and support him in this. In 2008 we secured funding from The Paul Hamlyn Foundation for a bold experiment. Since October last year Mark has been on the staff at Anjali as Associate Director (Education), a salaried post that not only formalises his teaching and workshop leading roles but pitches him into our small in-house team at Anjali. There he contributes to day-to-day and long-term planning, as well as seeing education projects through from inception to execution and

evaluation. Mark is, in fact, the leader of Anjali's education team, currently numbering seven workshop leaders with learning disabilities. This group delivers all of Anjali's outreach work.

Mark had just returned from leading a week's residency at Citymoves in Aberdeen when I asked him what he thought about his role at Anjali. 'My job is to help make Anjali more famous and better funded. I enjoy working with new staff members, who are all fantastic. Also, I teach and make people excited about dance. I like teaching. The education team is getting bigger, with some great teachers coming into it like Ruth [Williams] who came with me to Aberdeen. Getting people into dance is important. Because of dance my body is more flexible and fit, and I don't get as tired. I think I'm more confident in myself. I'd like other people to have the chance to do all that. People with disabilities don't get the chance as often to do things.'

Nicole Thomson, Anjali's Artistic Director, and I are jointly responsible for the development of the Associate Director (Education) role. We were concerned that Mark should be properly supported in it, so that as much of the company's business as possible would be accessible to him and that he would be able to fully engage with the tasks required of him. It was also important for Anjali that Mark should receive the training, time and back-up to ensure that he enjoyed the work and would feel confident and successful in his new role.

Nicole has worked closely with Mark since he joined Anjali. 'Mark is a natural leader, and yet I've attended many conferences, seminars and events in arts and disability over the years where his talents and perspective have been marginalised because the organisers simply failed to consider the needs of artists with learning disabilities. His role in the company will give him extra tools to take the debate to cultural institutions that accidentally or carelessly exclude people with learning disabilities.'

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Progress and Professionalism

Having a learning disability can present two types of challenges in an arts employment situation: one of learning styles and capacity, and one of management – that is, problem-solving or coping with new situations. These challenges are linked and can be overcome by having those who are working with a person with a learning disability modify their approach as required. In this situation it helps enormously to know how that person can most effectively learn something new, how information can best be presented and efficiently retained, and what is reasonable to expect of him or her. For these reasons the funding Anjali has received enables Mark to draw on a member of staff dedicated to providing facilitation support to him as often as he requires.

A key training aim for Mark was to acquire more first-hand knowledge of how professional dance and disability arts organisations are structured and operate, as well as a broader awareness of professional arts institutions in general. Anjali achieves this through a programme of visits and short placements with a range of other organisations. Mark has, for instance, begun a long-term placement with Oxford Playhouse where he is seconded to the learning department one or two days a month. This helps to build Mark’s networks within community dance and develop credible career options for him within dance in the future.

Mark’s progress over the first nine months has been remarkable. His ability to devise and deliver workshop programmes and educational activities in a wide variety of circumstances has become essential to the company’s capacity to respond to organisations that approach us. Throughout Anjali’s history, dancers with learning disabilities have taught the professional staff working with us that when you raise the expectations of achievement the dancers respond. In his new staff role at Anjali Mark Barber has confirmed that precept several times over.

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Right: Hannah Dempsey in *Unexploded Stories*. Photo: Judie Waldman; **Far right, top:** Mark Barber in *WYSIWYG*. Photo: Chris Nash. **Middle:** Frances Weir in *Something Wild: Butterfly*. Photo: Chris Nash. **Bottom:** Hannah Dempsey in *Something Wild: Butterfly*. Photo: Anjali Dance.



