

Ludus Dance

Ludus Dance, which this year celebrates 35 years of its existence, has played a unique role in the development of dance in England – leading the way in dance education and being central in promoting community dance. Here some of its early members reflect on its development, influence on dance as a whole and on themselves

Christopher Thomson



Christopher Thomson, Director of Creative Teaching and Learning at The Place

I was a founder member of Ludus, though over summer 1975 I seem to remember I left, only to return after a few weeks when Anthony Peppiatt and Penny Greenland agreed to join us. I think this was indicative both of my shaky commitment and the uncertain nature of the company's existence at that point. I was 24 and had trained in drama before working as a dancer. I was nowhere near as grown up as many of the 24 year olds I meet today.

But by the time I left in 1986 I had worked as performer, stage manager, general manager and artistic director. I produced four shows, working principally with choreographer Beyhan Fowkes and on one piece with David Glass. I am still proud of Cut to Ribbons, the show we made about

gender stereotyping, with Philippa Donnellan as the sexist Dad and Nigel Charnock as the gum-chewing, spot-squeezing teenage daughter. That I helped make shows with any political edge at all I ascribe primarily to Anthony's influence. My level of socialist consciousness was pretty lamentable, so he had his work cut out trying to get me not just to be the woolliest of liberals. I don't think I ever quite lived up to his hopes in this respect, but he was very nice about it.

Unlike TIE, our form didn't easily lend itself to political narrative, but the 1970s were a more personal-political time, certainly in relation to sexism and racism, and we made pieces that addressed these and other subjects with a considerable degree of success. But perhaps our politics was even better expressed through the development of our community dance programme, led initially by Anthony and Joan Ewart. We had a collective sense of dance as intrinsically radical in terms of what it can do to individual consciousness, understanding and feeling, and this is reflected today in the comments on the Ludus website about what the arts mean to their audience.

Spending cuts and demonstrations about education funding remind me of our early years, though we are in a very different political context now. But in addition to some encouraging developments in terms of community action, internet-based mass movements are changing our ideas about democratic participation, and appeal directly to those who have never known a world without the web.

In this context, the company's commitment to ideas and the question of moral choice is in a direct line from our early work. Ludus has survived and thrived not only because it has consistently upped its game in terms of production and artistic quality, but crucially because it has made dance a part of people's lives in an enduring way. Their recent work has highlighted issues of choice and morality in a complex materialistic and individualistic world, seeking to engage audiences who are more sophisticatedly self-aware than in those early days. It's a more 'dialogic' approach I suspect, seeking as we did to highlight contradictions and invite debate, but perhaps more open to the possibility that there are no simple answers, only a continuing process of rigorous enquiry that starts with the individual, and the question.

In a recent issue of Animated, Simon Dove discusses the danger of isolation in dance practice, asking if the structures and training we have created promote marginalisation of the art form. He writes eloquently of dance artists who have a sense of social engagement and purpose. I think Ludus is still in this territory, looking for ways in which the art form can promote self-discovery and empathy in order to transform lives. In their latest work the company has worked with three of our most consistently invigorating choreographers to explore an essentially moral question and, 35 years on, that doesn't betray any loss of nerve.

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George Adams, Neb Abbott, Rebecca Thomas, Ellen Turner in Consequences. Photo: Merlin Hendy.



Brendan Keaney, Director, Greenwich Dance

I find it very hard to believe that I joined Ludus Dance Company thirty years ago. I distinctly remember the audition day, having to change at Preston station on the return journey and phoning my brother from a phone box, (no mobile phones in those days) to tell him that I would be moving to Lancaster. "Where is Lancaster?" was his response. "I don't know" was my reply, but it was clear to me that I would be moving further north than 'Preston'.

Preston was a distant dreamland. I remember watching West Ham, on the television, in the FA cup final in 1964. Growing up in Walthamstow, there was only one team to follow and I had never heard of the second division underdogs 'Preston North End'. It was an epic game, I think there were five goals. As the match progressed, I watched my allegiance slip from the pride of East London to the heroes of the North.

I recount this tale because that Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1964, when I was just seven years old, remains fresh in my memory, as do so many moments in my three plus years with Ludus. I think there are points in everyone's career that are particularly important and I count my time with Ludus as a seminal episode in my life.

Although the thinking that underpinned the Ludus model does not seem so extraordinary today, there

can be no doubt that the founders of Ludus were in a completely different place from the rest of the Dance world when they started the company in 1975. Firstly it was a 'collective' governed by the members. In theory, there was no hierarchy, everybody that joined the company was paid the same and supposedly had an equal voice.

Some of this early ideology was to be dismantled shortly after I joined the company. Pay differentials were introduced, as it was clear that the founder members had different experiences and skills from those of us that were arriving straight from college or with limited working experience. It might have been a collective but it was important to recognise that there were clear leaders.

However, it was not governance and structure that differentiated Ludus and the other small dance companies operating at the time. There were fundamental issues about the work we produced. Ludus was about educating young people through Dance, not about simply introducing them to Dance. Dance was a tool; it was not the end itself.

I remember sitting around the table in the Ludus office for what seemed like endless discussions about 'form' and 'content'. Dance without a message was almost an aberration to us. We were not simply dance obsessive; we wanted to change the world through dance. The time spent around the table was as important as the devising/choreography that took place in the studio. It was impossible to separate the philosophy from the art.

Since leaving the company I have spent many hours analysing the situation, asking myself just exactly

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how naive was I. I have particularly ruminated on the question as to whether it was right to spend so much time on theorising and talking. Given that I still struggle to understand terms like dialectical materialism it might appear that much of that 'talking' time was lost on me.

However I have concluded, that much of my current practice, the fundamental principles on which we work at Greenwich Dance, were formed during those years in the early eighties. It was at Ludus that I discovered, what appears to be a paradox, i.e. that elite art is not simply for the elite. Greenwich Dance's commitment to developing a local dance culture, building a strong relationship with its community, based on mutual respect, has been directly influenced by the Ludus model. Most critically it was at those meetings in Lancaster that I first developed my belief that Dance needed to abandon the image of a pyramid with community practice at the bottom supporting a hierarchy of professional activity. We now describe Greenwich Dance's programme as a crystal; multifaceted but one, each part being integral to the structure as a whole.

Thirty years on and the dance landscape is dramatically different, and most critically, the role of dance, as a powerful tool in many education and social contexts is now largely accepted. However, it occurs to me that one thing has not changed as much as perhaps it should have. Ludus was not part of the mainstream Dance culture then and has never been given the acclaim that its pioneering work justly deserves. Sadly the world of Dance did not understand the work of the company in the 1980's and has failed to adequately celebrate one of its most inspiring success stories ever since. So if I can return to my ruminating on just how naive were we? Clearly, we did not change the world, the silicone chip beat us to it, however, there is a more realistic question to address, to what extent did we manage to change the world of dance?

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Matt Fenton, Director, Live at LICA (Lancaster University)

From my perspective as a venue director, academic and theatre practitioner, Ludus Dance's current piece – the triple-bill, Consequences – poses some interesting questions to the dance, and in particular the dance in education sector. Certainly it marks a distinct shift in emphasis for the company, away from more clearly thematically-led or didactic works to something much more ambiguous, multiple and slippery. Where recent shows rather signposted the links to school key stages, to scientific ideas, or even to such government-led classroom initiatives as citizenship, and where the learning outcomes were signalled in a way that enabled teachers fairly easily to see how the shows might relate to classroom discussion and learning outcomes, Consequences suggests a much more discursive, allusive and to my mind richer set of possible readings and approaches. As an audience we must work hard at watching it, and I bet teachers will work hard teaching from it. I mean this in a good way. The experience of watching the pieces – though on reflection how surprisingly like a single work in three acts the show feels – is that of exploring a crazy patchwork quilt of takes on the possible meanings of the word Consequences. The show could spark classroom discussion on anything from personal relationships, ecology, war,

love, sex, jealousy, generosity, America, x-factor, imagination and the pure unadulterated joy of dancing to very loud music, be it Vivaldi, Aphex Twin or The Pussycat Dolls.

Although I am yet to see a dance work for young people for which it matters less what age you are, Consequences works perfectly well in a professional venue context. I have a suspicion that the ten-year-olds and up, for whom the piece is intended are extremely well equipped to read the interplay of emotions, one-up-manship, shifts in status, tiny alterations in the balance of power and attraction, of partisanship, of subtle cruelty and quiet generosity on display. The making and remaking of imaginative worlds, only to be screwed up into a paper ball to become something else, is childlike in its inventiveness, but far from unsophisticated. In fact the piece reminds us that in human relationships, as in much else, not a lot changes from the classroom.

Attraction, charisma, taking sides, schadenfreude and even sexuality are as much part of a ten-year-old's world as an adult's. The singular expressive ability of dance, with its minute shifts of balance, attractions and repulsions, the giving and taking of weight, becomes in the show a metaphor for all human interaction. In Nigel Charnock's concluding piece, the ultimate revelation is that for an adult as much as a child, to release oneself into un-abandoned movement is to become someone untouchable, a star, if only for a moment. Despite the fact that the body, and what it represents for others, is often problematic, it is not such a given that the body slows down and rigidifies: even in adulthood it remains a pleasure to move; there is a caught-in-the-moment exhilaration in dancing, and it can be a way of knowing oneself and the world. More dance as education than dance in education.

The choice of choreographers is of course no coincidence. In Nigel Charnock we find one of the most distinctive and iconoclastic presences in British performance of the last three decades, within and alongside an >

Ludus Dance Timeline

- 1975** Ludus Dance is founded. Tours the first show, Mr Punch
- 1980** Tours Power and People in The Park, including Vancouver, Calgary and Berlin
- 1982** Ludus Community Dance Project is founded, now known as Dance Development
- 1984** Tours Cut to Ribbons (on domestic violence)
- 1994** Marks and Spencer's manager, Paul Mellor, and Ludus Dancer, Ruth Spencer, take to the floor for the North West Dance Festival
- 1996** Ludus Dance takes part in the ITV television series 'Flying Start', gaining recognition for its contribution to the success and impact of small businesses in the North West
- 1999** Members of Ludus Dance meet Her Majesty, The Queen at the unveiling of the Eric Morecambe statue
- 2000** Tours Clash (on conflict and resolution), including Singapore, Malaysia, China and Kosovo
- 2002** Ludus Youth Dance Company is founded
- 2004** Gains Investors in People accreditation
- 2004/6** Members of Ludus Dance visit Athens to work with the Greek Council for Refugees and the British Council
- 2006** Ludus Dance lead BIG DANCE at Blackpool Tower as part of a world record-breaking attempt
- 2008** Tours ID:me (on identity and diversity)
- 2009** Ludus Dance holds the first Lancashire Youth Dance Festival in partnership with The Dukes Theatre
- 2010** Celebrates its 35-year anniversary. Ludus Youth Dance Company represent the North West at the National U.Dance Festival. Nigel Charnock, Yael Flexer and Ben Wright devise the new triple bill, Consequences.

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experimental theatre and performance art tradition. Yael Flexer's work in Bedlam Dance Company, and more recently with digital artist and collaborator Nic Sandiland, has seemed consistently uncomfortable with just dancing, always picking away at the edges of a performance, compelling her dancers to speak their uncertainties and motivations or to assert their interpretations, only to have them overturned mid-assertion. Ben Wright's work is fast emerging as an intelligent and visceral new choreographic voice in work that retains a sense of childlike discovery in what movement and the moving body can represent. None of them has diluted the core concerns or difficulty of their practice in making Consequences for young people. The choice of Ludus' co-producing partner on the project is also telling: Lancaster University's Nuffield Theatre is itself closely bound up with the discourse, history and practices of British experimental theatre, live art and dance over the last 40 years, with a long-standing commitment to performance and education.

Where then does all this point? What might the consequences of Consequences be, for Ludus and for the sector more broadly?

I see in the work a shift towards a more confident take on the unique perspective of dance to learning, thought and pedagogy. Dance is expressly not theatre. It is not even physical theatre. Yet in dance in education, the temptation has been to theatricalise, to tell linear stories, to present closely defined characters, or at least to try to frame the meaning, intention or moral of the work for an educational setting. I have a feeling this has done dance a disservice. Dance does not make particularly good theatre; its meanings (and

learning outcomes) are open to limitless interpretation. In any case, many great expressive dancers are not great conventional actors. Dance has a different relation to time, space and the body than theatre, and at last here is a dance in education show that knows it. As an aside, I find it no surprise that venues and festivals with a slight mistrust of traditional theatre (they know who they are) find closer and more meaningful associations in presenting contemporary dance alongside live art, durational performance and installation. For me Consequences also points outwards, to a European dance scene that makes our British over-reliance on story or character-based dance, especially for young people, or on pure form, seem a little quaint. Dutch, Belgian and French choreographers have long been using dance as a mode of thought, a way to develop ideas and modes of being in the world, and as a political and intellectual domain. At the same time these countries have developed some of the most interesting dance and theatre that enables young people to represent themselves, and this is perhaps the next challenge to a company such as Ludus. Recent projects by Tim Etchells (commissioned by Belgium's Victoria/Campo), *Fevered Sleep*, *Fabuleus* and *Ontroerend Goed* have established exciting new ways for adult artists to make work with children, for children or about children, facilitating young people's own unique perspective on the world, and most scary of all – on us.

Consequences premiered at Nuffield Theatre Lancaster in September 2010, before touring nationally.

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Nigel Charnock. Photo and © Mattias Eks.

Nigel Charnock,
Artist



Rebecca Thomas, George Adams, Neb Abbott, Ellen Turner in Consequences. Photo: Merlin Hendy

It's cold, it's dark, it's too early in the morning, I've just drunk two mugs of coffee and I'm waiting for the big white van to take me away.

This van will take me from my flat in Lancaster to a big comprehensive school in Wigan where I will put on some cold lycra tights, a load of make up and become 'Tracy', a punk teenager. That was in 1982 and I was performing in my second show for Ludus, *Cut To Ribbons*, a show about violence against women.

It was the hardest work I have ever done: up at 5.30am, shower, toast and coffee, van arrives at 6.30am, we drive to a school in the North West, arrive about 8am, unload the set from the van into the school hall or gym, put

the set up, teach two workshops, perform the show, take down the set and load it back into the van, drive back to Lancaster, have a company meeting, run to the just-closing shops, get home around 7pm, get up at 5.30am to do it again the next day.

It was a bit rough but I loved it. I loved it because I felt, and still feel, that Ludus is unique in the dance world and that Ludus makes a difference to people's lives. Ludus makes a difference because it creates great dance theatre and then takes that brilliant work to audiences who wouldn't normally ever see dance. This work has an enormous impact on the young people who see it and it's had a huge impact on me as a

performer and choreographer.

To truly engage with an audience I think that theatre has to communicate and share something with other people; it's not enough that it's just a display of a physical skill or some arty abstract meandering. For me, theatre should connect with people, it should move them, inspire them, it should entertain, motivate, provoke, and celebrate life, and hopefully the work I create now (30 years after leaving Ludus) still does those things. Whenever I make work now I always remember a group of kids in Wigan whose response to Ludus was so amazingly brilliant that I had to go and hide in the toilets and cry! I didn't want anyone to see how moved I was by >

their honest spontaneous reaction, I didn't want them to think I was a big stupid softie! So when I'm creating performances now there's always part of me that makes it for those people 30 years ago, so I try to be honest with myself and with the audience and make something that's somehow a very human expression of love and life.

And this year I came back to where I started and made a piece for Ludus - Pandemonium. And it felt great to be able to return and give something back to a company that gave me so much. I didn't realise at the time but my experience with Ludus changed the way I work in a big way. Ludus changed the way I dance, the way I teach and the way I make theatre. Over the last 30 years I've been lucky enough to travel all over the world and choreograph and direct in many different countries, and that experience with Ludus has always travelled with me, it's lodged itself in my heart and will always be part of whatever I do.

Thank you Ludus! I'll be back. Nigel.

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Wendy Houstoun. Photo: Steven Berkeley-White



Wendy Houstoun, Performer and Maker of Work

I am proud and pleased to have been asked to write about Ludus Dance as it celebrates its 35th birthday.

Ludus was my first job in 1980. On my way to the audition, the Iranian

Embassy siege was in its last days; Thatcher was getting into her stride; unemployment was high, and Ludus was a politicised animal. Questions at the audition were as much about politics as dance, and the founders of the company were motivated by social issues: they believed dance to be central to the social and political fabric of the world, and expected dancers to think as well as dance. I suspect this is still the case.

The first show we made was called Power - the story of Karen Silkwood. It portrayed the case of her mysterious death, following contamination at the Kerr-McGee plant in Oklahoma. Through this story it also dealt with the uses and misuses of personal and political power.

But in dealing with content, we sometimes stumbled up against the thorny issues of narrative and plot, and the attempts could produce surreal images. I can still see the contorted face of Brendan Keaney behind a gas mask as his air supply got cut off in the 'Contamination Squad versus Karen Silkwood' scene.

In some ways, my working life since has constantly pursued the collision of movement and meaning, theatre and dance. The experience of performing close up to a visible and vocal audience has often given me courage when confronting new and strange venues, and one of the first things I learnt to do in performance was silence a baying crowd with a kamikaze fall. I have been falling ever since.

My time with the company has also formed a lot of my attitudes. I have an enduring respect for the performer who slogs it out on the road; I dislike pretension or self-inflated behaviour; find it hard to cope with anyone who doesn't read a newspaper, and feel deeply uncomfortable around anyone who doesn't have a sense of humour. I admire anyone who can combine content and form, and I still respond more to invention and passion than technical skill.

When I think of the performers who have spent time with Ludus, I notice some similarities. They have a strong sense of the way personal feelings brush up against social and political

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issues. They have a down-to-earth approach about working, and seem to share a humility that possibly comes from the training ground of performing in schools. I can't think of a better training for a dancer. A training that creates an artist who has curiosity for their craft and a deep feel for their audience.

I wish Ludus a very happy birthday. Long may they dance... and think.

Most memorable tour: Belfast.

Leisure centres in the Shankhill Road and Andersonstown. The Royal Ulster Constabulary coming to apologise to us (with guns) in Hollywood.

Most memorable bad behaviour: Us drinking cans of lager behind the set in People In the Park.

Hardest character to play: The media - in the cube.

Most touching experience: A small lad singing: "I've been bitten by a boa constrictor" at a special school in Wigan.

Most difficult job: Performing in a leisure centre with a leaking roof while the audience of 800 children are running down the hall to watch us getting changed behind the black curtain or throwing rubbish onto the dance floor.

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There is a complete family tree available on the Ludus Dance website

www.ludusdance.org/familytree where you can see who else used to work or currently works for Ludus Dance.

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