

Skills n Drills

Hip Hop artist **Robert Hylton** lets us in on Skills n Drills, an intensive workshop programme for professional Hip Hop artists

Skills n Drills is an annual one-week intensive workshop programme in professional Hip Hop dance training with video lectures and creative workshops. August 2010 saw its fourth and most successful year to date, growing from strength to strength in numbers of attendees, course content and quality of workshop leaders. The course is the brainchild of Robert Hylton and supported by Greenwich Dance. The recipe is very simple: get the best Hip Hop dance teachers available in the UK, a space and open the doors to those that want to learn about what Hip Hop dance really is.

Professional development is

paramount to personal growth and good practice in any career, in this instance we are talking about Hip hop dance - urban dance forms such as Locking, Popping, Breaking, Hip Hop, House and Street. With classes of assorted styles being regularly taught up and down the country and Hip Hop dance companies having appeared on stage in the West End and Sadler's Wells, there is no doubt that Hip Hop dance is a serious business and serious profession.

The overall purpose of Skills n Drills is to feed Hip Hop artists by giving them a place where they can connect, learn, engage and be informed. As a full-time teacher it can be at times

"This has opened up my mind and reminded me of what I love about dance - I can't believe how good value it is"

Angela Crawley - Physical Health Development Manager/ Dance teacher

very difficult to sustain your own training and equally as a performer it can be difficult to operate out of your own bubble. Which unfortunately means that lots of bad habits can be carried in the dance and wider practice. The question is, where to go to train, refresh and connect with your >



Robert Hylton. Photo: Irven Lewis

chosen form. It can be a bit hit and miss dependent on the quality of the teacher and the level of their knowledge. The fact that the Hip Hop field has as yet no agreed standards means that finding the right quality and level of training can be quite difficult.

All of the workshop leaders at Skills n Drills are heavily connected to the sources of their particular form and all still consider themselves students of the form. Whether that is Popping with Popping Pete (Electric Boogaloo) or Locking with Greg Campobello Jr – Rip (The Lockers) both of who are leaders in their particular field. and are innovators and masters of the dances they practice. In order to pursue the highest level of delivery it is important that the teaching in Skills and Drills

"I learnt even more than I hoped - and have gained a lot more confidence in this area of dance. The feeling of learning so much in five days is amazing"

Andy Strachan - Community Dance Artist. Ludus Dance

was as close to the source as possible.

Which is where YouTube comes into the picture.

In the eighties many people had a worn out VHS tape to inspire them and began to learn their favoured Hip Hop dance. These days access to information is very easy and young people have an amazing amount of access to dance on the net. The internet can be a powerful tool of knowledge, it can also be an unwelcome distraction as various clips of badly practised and uninformed hip hop dances are widely viewed and mimicked – some people even then take inaccurate information into the classroom to teach which is then further watered down, leading to uninspiring dances being created.

At Skills n Drills the participants are a diverse group - young dancers at the start of their journey, students studying at MA level, community dance practitioners working for organisations and independent dance professionals. All with the aim for self-development and an awareness that they have a responsibility not to approach their

"I think the tutoring has been amazing. Everything was broken down and explained properly. Every artist was amazing and made this experience brilliant"

Hayley Wenlock - Community dance artist

work as a hit n miss You Tuber, But from an educated perspective that will ensure quality in their performance or in the classroom.

I am always surprised about how little the back-story of Hip Hop dances are known and I believe that the knowledge behind the dance such as timelines, history, innovators, what, why and when is paramount for a successful practitioner. So Skills n Drills, as well as providing substantial practical workshops each day, offers lectures that provide the valuable back-story for the attendees and allows them to connect the dots.

Each class/workshop is two hours long to allow time to break down to the detail of individual techniques. All the teachers want the participants to get it, so movement is broken down into various technical exercises that people can take away with them correctly taught, understood and authenticated. Hence the term Drills – exercises are drilled and analysed to give participants the opportunity to gain depth with a particular technique.

Musicality is a major priority when teaching dance and is one of the major nuances of Hip Hop, (which is being lost by the YouTube generation), essentially music is the soul of Hip Hop dance. Before Hip Hop you had party dances, and social dances, in this instance spreading from the soulful sounds of the sixties, think Motown and James Brown and those carefully placed sways or two steps. Social Dance is a practice that does not exist for many Hip Hop dancers who only see the dance as an acrobatic sport, for me however, the bottom line is Hip Hop dance is first and foremost dance.

What's important at Skills n Drills is that we link techniques and creative dance as one. Hip Hop has to the



Ben Ajose-Cutting, Jahrel Thomas, Alex Hughes Walker, Emerline Storey and Kimberly Rumary. Skills n Drills 2009, Greenwich Dance. Photo: Robert Hylton



Kit Glennie, Frankie Johnson, Richard Smith, Ben Ajose-Cutting, Robert Hylton, Michael Sogbetun. Skills n Drills 2009, Greenwich Dance. Photo: Rose Chu

“Definitely, knowledge is the key to success (in dance). How things connect the history – past and present”

Paris Crossley – CAT student Swindon YDA

majority been turned into a routine based studio dance just like Jazz in the eighties and the simple fact is, if you can't freestyle you ain't Hip Hop. Two stepping to a song that you truly love is the most natural thing in the world, a practice that is innate within all of us – so why can freestyle be a problem in class? Approaching freestyle can be misinterpreted as just going wild to the music; in reality it is well-crafted articulate and strategic practice that can be learnt. In all classes there are moments of improvisation where we build on and out from technical exercises. It is imperative that a Hip Hop dancer can create their own language for that is the heart and soul of the dance. There is therefore a strong choreographic element to the course that aims to develop greater artistic choices for the course participants.

The lectures programme included

insight into specific forms, such as Locking, referencing the pioneers, the social and historical backdrop, music, who, why and when. Within the lecture series artists such as Bboy Mouse former World Bboy Champion come in and talk about who they are their motivation, success, failures and approach. I believe these personal connections are important as at times famous dancers can seem inaccessible, but at Skills n Drills it's important to bring the history into connection. We also provide lectures on community dance practice from the Greenwich Dance team, to talk about their experiences when producing Hip Hop in education and pass on vital information about current education practices and policies. For those who work in dance organisations this kind of information is at hand but if you are an

“I thought the tutoring was 1st class. All of the tutors were gracious in their teaching, they shared not only their skills but their heart and souls”

Rachel Deadman – General Manager Woking Dance

independent artist or at the start of your teaching career such information is a must.

Skills n Drills 2011 is set to be in late August at Greenwich Dance agency, this being our fifth year the standards, which have been set to an already high level, will be even greater. The teachers more invigorated, ready and willing to share information and promote a high level of practice to all involved.

Hip Hop is now forty years old and has pushed itself into mainstream society and education, now it is making itself proper, grown up and official. In time there will be conservatoire's of full time Hip Hop training for dancers who want to be the best, for now Skills n Drills acts as a bench mark and a building block for those who are on their way to becoming the next generation's of exceptional performers, teachers and choreographers. The simple fact is, what we are experiencing is the evolution of a dance form, one that has a big and bright future with legacy being the key to continued growth and excellence.

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