



Left: Benjamin Dunks. Photo: Nicola Rosewarne

Building traditions afresh

Benjamin Dunks, newly appointed Artistic Director of Attik Dance, describes his project linking diverse traditions and making new ones on World Dance Day in Devon

Traditional Dance. What do we mean by this in the context of community dance and communities? In this multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country what are we describing as traditional? Are we talking about the traditional dances of England – Morris and Maypole and similar? Or are we talking about the dances performed by many of our communities to celebrate their own traditions?

When offered the artistic direction of the World Dance Day project for Dance in Devon these were the questions I was asking myself. The brief was relatively simple. Lead a two day residential at the Beaford Arts Centre in Devon and develop dance, or movement, or a process where the

dancers present would then take movement they had developed or learnt and create a dance piece for their own groups to perform on World Dance Day. The brief topic was also clear. You must work with the idea and exploration of 'traditional dance'. This was an opportunity to work with 10 dance artists, exploring an area of dance that was new to me but one that I was very excited about.

The dance practitioners coming to the residency had a very broad mix of dance backgrounds. There were practitioners of African dance, Appalachian precision clogging, flamenco, break dance, 5 Rhythms, contemporary dance, belly dance and contemporary improvisation.

Below from left: Jo Ashbeth Coffey, Katherine Ford, Rebecca Jeffery, Sue-Claire Morris. Photo: Benjamin Dunks



Another significant question I was asking myself was that with all of these differing traditions, training and experience, how was this going to be possible? At what point does the teaching and learning of a sequence of movement break down due not to the quality of dancers' teaching and learning, but due to the varying histories of those dancers and the varying nature of the movement parameters they work within?

Through all of this questioning, my answer became apparent. The traditional we would work with would not be traditional dance as an historical dance form, but would be a hybrid movement experience we would create through the unique mix of all of us together. Thus, by being together as a group, we would create our own 'tradition', which would be unique to us. This would involve creating a process of exploration of movement and each other's language, and would require everyone to be open about their own histories and be prepared to take on each other's ideas of movement and history.

The residency started as most residencies do, with introductions, histories and interests, particularly relating to why we were together. With such diverse backgrounds of movement, performance, creativity and facilitation, this was a fascinating insight into the breadth and depth of our dance world. Everyone, even with similar traditions in their own dance experience, had had such varying lives and interests in dance that it was guaranteed to be an interesting couple of days.

Introductions were followed by the untangling of everyone's definition of 'traditional dance', with a particular focus on 'tradition'. The responses were as varied as the histories, with a theme that seemed to predominate, that tradition is a structure, not necessarily a dance, formed of ritual, celebration and belonging around and through which the dance happens. Tradition is the emotion, is the reason for dancing, and is that which belongs to you. A number of dancers talked of the deeply ingrained sense of rhythm their traditions gave them, and again this did not necessarily occur in a dance form.

After further conversations around what everyone's individual tradition was and how that related to all of our differing definitions, we found our way to Beaford Village Hall, our studio for the two days.

How do you share practice across multiple dance traditions? We started with a classic game of show and tell. The first task for each of the dancers was to identify a number of key movements in their traditions, which for them summed up their physical language and were identifiable as key indicators of style. These movements were then put into a short sequence by the individual and shared and learnt by everyone else. The breadth of styles, ideas, movements and philosophies was wonderful, and we finished the session buzzing having danced across the world and back.

The next task was in pairs, and each individual in each pair shared with the other their sequence of their 'tradition'. The pair then put these sequences together, manipulating

the material in whatever way they felt would give them a better physical understanding of the movement and would make for an interesting sequence. This is where the exploration of the group as a tradition really began, with the sharing of movement material and working with a generosity and openness to the altering and development of their own movement. The results from this exploration were stunning, with a fusion of traditions that created vibrant and alive sequences of material we hadn't seen before. The participants were stretched into moving in new and challenging ways and were also surprised by working creatively with a whole new palate of movement choices.

This process continued in a number of different tasks, all developing out of the desire to fuse traditions to find new languages, to explore new ways of working, creating and learning. The richness of the material and the excitement at the learning through the process didn't abate, until we found ourselves with two hours to go before we finished. The last task. This was for each individual, bearing in mind the group or groups with whom they would create the World Dance Day performance piece, was tasked with collating the movement they had discovered, explored and created. This was so that each individual walked away from the two days with a clear understanding of their experience, both philosophically and physically, and had material that was going to be useful to them for working with their group.

The following weeks involved the individuals working with their groups and exploring how the movement they had experienced and creatively explored at Beaford informed their final product. The approaches of each of the individuals in pursuing this task differed in many ways, from creating the sequence themselves and teaching it to their groups, to facilitating a choreographic process, to loosely defining a set of improvisational parameters.

World Dance Day this year coincided with the Royal Wedding, so it was decided that, in Devon at least, we would have World Dance Week. And it was throughout the week before and the weekend after World Dance Week that all the performances happened. There were a number of ceilidhs across the county, each of which had performances of different sequences born from the residency. We had a youth Appalachian precision stepping group fusing break dance and flamenco into their own steps, break dancers fusing African, contemporary and belly dancing into their movement. I'll not forget seeing the belly dance group on Exmoor dancing an extraordinary sequence fusing their incredible movement with flamenco, break dance, African and 5 Rhythms.

Ultimately my concerns for the incompatibility of styles, training, experience and knowledge proved unfounded. Get a group of dancers who are thirsty for experience, exploration and self-development together and give them a focus they are responsible for and you can make anything happen.

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