

Making it happen

Three practitioners in the field of dance and Parkinson's disease describe their work and link us into the developing network



Joanne Duff with dancer from the Kentish Town Musical Moving Dance Group. Photo: Sheryl Tait. www.sheryltait.com

Beginnings

Joanne Duff, Ballet and allied dance forms

We all know that in a moment one single thing can happen that sets us on a new course. In my case, it was a phone call. In autumn 2008, my old friend Assis rang, telling me of an open workshop the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) was leading in London for dance for people with Parkinson's Disease (PD). She knew I wished to develop my experience of

education practice that had mostly taken place in classical ballet schools and companies.

At this daylong event I learned the fundamental premise upon which the MMDG work is built: "...professionally-trained dancers are movement experts whose knowledge is useful to persons with PD." (1)

The dancers led an inspiring workshop demonstrating the MMDG approach. They ensure each class is an aesthetic experience, integrating mind, body and emotion, whilst addressing the specific symptoms of Parkinson's. These include rigidity,

impaired balance, loss of coordination, problems initiating movement as well as depression, anxiety and social isolation.

One message was clear. Although the class is specifically designed for people with Parkinson's, with a real understanding of their particular needs, Parkinson's disease is never mentioned during the session. Instead, imagery, flow, grace, concentration, and fun are the focus. Participants are encouraged to dance – to explore joy and expression in movement. This way, people are NOT working from limitations or labels arising from a

progressive neurological disorder. Instead they are being challenged like dancers in any studio – guided to find the path and process to reach their full potential. These underlying values are part of my own work and inherent in the other classes I have seen in the UK.

For me, this was the workshop where everything clicked. I could see how skills and strategies that dancers use to make conscious decisions about movement could be useful to people with Parkinson's. I made another phone call to Anna Gillespie that really got me on the road to teaching dance to people with Parkinson's in London.

In 2007 Anna had a chance meeting with Dr Marion North CBE when they realised their mutual interest in this work. Together with Marina Benini they started a class in Kentish Town, developing work based on the understanding that dance is valuable to people with Parkinson's because it touches each individual's natural rhythm and movement style. Parkinson's is an individual condition with individual needs and dance gives a greater awareness to each person's unique expressive movement capacities. (Anna discusses the role of music below).

I brought my own ballet background to this group which we call Musical Moving, Dance for people with Parkinson's. We work together now to bring an expressive and enjoyable dance experience to people in London. Dr North lends valuable support as a movement consultant.

Musical Moving in London

In three years our work has grown, with weekly groups in Kentish Town and Wimbledon. We have taught sessions in five other London locations. We work with the education departments of Richard Alston Dance Company at The Place and English National Ballet.

Assis' phone call introduced me to a field of work that brought together my professional and personal life. My mom had lived with Parkinson's for

over 20 years. Although familiar with the symptoms, it took me a long time to make the connection with dance. But at every Musical Moving class I see clearly how people enjoy moving together to music. Best of all we continue developing our work with the support of generous individuals and organisations, including the MMDG in New York and the growing network of professionals throughout the UK.

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Reflections of a dance accompanist

Anna Gillespie, musician

Young or old, professional or otherwise, music can profoundly affect the experience of moving and, as an accompanist, it is a joy to feel part of this. The sounds and silences that comprise music only become meaningful when an active mind is attending to them and this applies to both dancer and accompanist.

It is through this shared, reciprocal and yet personal experience that my musical meeting with dancers occurs. A class never sounds exactly the same because we are all constantly responding to each other. This is particularly useful in a Parkinson's dance class. I'm free to 'personalise' moments in the music, following and/or encouraging the movement of a particular dancer. I can change tempo and quality at will, shifting the 'sense of motion', or try to oblige requests. The presence of a musician always helps the dancer to be musically involved. Mo Morgan, from Dance for Parkinson's in Edinburgh, particularly values working with musician Barney Strachan who brings an immediacy and musical responsibility to the class, allowing her to focus on other movement issues.

Music in a dance class

Mel Brierley, from Cumbria Parkinson's Dance Collective, sums up the breadth of potential that both live and recorded music offers: "Music acts as a support to the imagination, bridging the internal and external, liberating expression for the outside world to share, as a reminder for the body to join in again with the action as a means of becoming present and conscious in the moment of moving."

Musical imagination works on many levels in a dance class. Music can contextualise movement, for example a Viennese waltz or Balkan Gypsy music. This is fun to play with, immediately conjuring up particular movement dynamics and allowing the dancers to embody new movement personas. Or, music can be less prescriptive, facilitating personal feeling within which the movement is experienced.

The structure of music is often described in terms of movement imagery: melodies 'rise and fall', rhythmic patterns 'push forward' and notes become 'suspended'. These musical sensations can become fused with movement to wonderful effect; an arm 'floats upward or drops down'; a dancer 'pushes forward' or a gesture becomes 'suspended' in time and space and all these dancing experiences are open to all.

Parkinson's can affect a person's perception of timing. A clear musical pulse organises time in a usefully predictable way and a sense of continuity encourages dancers to experience an ongoing flow of movement. 'Time-keepers' such as pulse, musical beats and rhythms also help us to come together through shared experience, thus reinforcing kinetic empathy through rhythmic clarity.

Memory and expectation also affect how we attend to music. Familiar tunes can remind a dancer with Parkinson's of past movement experience sometimes to such affect that they become freed from some of their present physical constraints.

Scientific research suggests that the >

brain activity essential to musical experience can affect how movement is initiated (2,3).

I have noticed that dancers who are clearly involved with the music often find enhanced ease in accessing movement. This has led me to search for more ways to encourage dancers to develop as deep a connection with music as possible. One of these is the introduction of vocal work to our dance classes. Simple vocal exercises are great for warming up the body, finding breath as a support for movement, and are essentially expressive and fun. Embodying a rhythm or melodic phrase by singing has a very positive impact on movement, which is then performed to the same or similar rhythm played on the piano. To learn more, I have joined 'Sing for Joy' a wonderful choir for people with Parkinson's and other neurological conditions, their friends and carers.

Whilst Parkinson's results in numerous progressive vocal and movement impairments, the ability to comprehend and respond to music seems comparatively little affected. I have been astonished by some of our dancers struggling to class and then dancing with ease, grace, and expression. I would advise anyone with Parkinson's to 'musicalise' their life as much as possible.

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Our network

Amanda Fogg, community dance practitioner

Everyone in our developing network has their story to tell, of how we came to this work, and why it is special and compelling.

Some dance practitioners have been doing this work for several years, but the catalyst for our network was Toby Beazley, Executive Director of Dance Umbrella. Motivated by his belief in the value of the Dance for Parkinson's Programme developed by

dancers from the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) for the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, Toby set up a day of Dance for Parkinson's with MMDG dancers David Leventhal and John Heginbotham in the autumn of 2008, which Joanne discusses previously. From this beginning, further events were arranged to coincide with subsequent MMDG tours in the UK over the next few years.

We come from a range of dance and health backgrounds and our approaches are diverse and informed by different life experiences. We include dancers and teachers from traditional dance backgrounds, community dance practitioners, dance therapists, Argentine Tango and Latin specialists (including a doctor), a dance therapist whose practice and research dates back to the 1980s and our colleague Dr Sara Houston, whose recent research study is detailed in this edition of *Animated*. One of our community dance leaders is a neurophysiotherapist, whose colleague's approach is somatic. We have musician colleagues sharing invaluable insights, and dance practitioners whose use of pre-recorded music contributes to the conversation about how we can make the complete experience as rich as possible.

A key factor in deciding we were ready to form a UK wide network was our involvement in co-teaching workshops, alongside presentations by Olie Westheimer, Director of Brooklyn Parkinson Group at the 2nd World Parkinson's Congress in Glasgow, in September 2010. During this week we set the date for our inaugural UK network meeting.

This took place on 1 April, again supported and facilitated by Toby Beazley. Much of the day consisted of a practical 'show and tell' session, sharing thoughts and experiences across different disciplines. This was richly stimulating and fun, generously open and free-flowing. We found the day energising and inspiring, leaving with a toolbox of new ideas and a

strong sense of connected common purpose.

Our day was also attended by people new to our network, and now part of our UK wide database (see website details below).

We are also indebted to Ken Bartlett and the Foundation for Community Dance for their support of our work. We embrace the exciting momentum our network is experiencing, and focus firmly upon enhancing the experience of our class participants, supporting each other, and maximising the scope of the work.

David Leventhal, writes generously about our network and gives us much to live up to:

"It's been a great pleasure working with the talented, innovative teachers who are part of a growing network of dance professionals dedicated to sharing knowledge and skills with the Parkinson's population. I've visited Parkinson's classes in Greater London, Weymouth, Kendal and Edinburgh over the past few years. It's been inspiring to see the wonderful work our UK colleagues are doing and rewarding to see these teachers coalesce into a unified team. In many ways this process serves as a model for the development of a closer-knit network of Dance for Parkinson's teachers here in the USA."

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Should you wish to become part of this network or make links to Parkinson's groups across the UK **visit** www.communitydance.org.uk/health and click on useful contacts

References

- (1) Dance for PD® Program Leaflet, Mark Morris Dance Group, Brooklyn Parkinson Group
- (2) Brown S, Martinez M J, Parsons L M. The Neural Basis of Human Dance. *Cerebral Cortex* 2006;16:1157-1167
- (3) Chuma T, Faruque Reza M, Ikoma K, Mano Y. Motor learning of hands with auditory cue in patients with Parkinson's disease. *J Neural Transm* 2006;113:175-185.