

Right: John Darvell



## The bigger picture

**John Darvell**, artistic director, nocturn dance, reflects on the challenges of providing access to contemporary adult dance for those who can pay for themselves

**When I arrived in Berkshire it was clear to me that there was a dance identity, and a strong youth dance culture, but that there was very little access to adult dance.**

Across the six boroughs, there are youth companies such as 4MDT, ACE and others as well as youth dance platforms, regular weekly classes and youth clubs both in school and in the community. In contrast, adult dance opportunities are more the stereotypical structured evening courses provided by the key local theatres like South Hill Park, Bracknell and Wycombe Swan. You may find other dance styles on offer at these arts venues but compared with youth dance there is far less access points to dance. I found that I had to travel 40 miles to my local provider in Newbury run by Debbie Camp (Newbury Contemporary Dance Company), a veteran who has been running the weekly class for over 15 years.

I would class myself as a relatively new practitioner, still getting to grips with the practicalities / logistics of both defining what I do and how I do it. I moved out from London in 2007, not really knowing what dance provision was established in the area, or how to access it. What I did know was that I was keen to offer adults a chance to explore and challenge themselves through contemporary dance. Twenty years of living in London had given me a rather rosy view of what I thought should be possible. After all how, hard could it be? With such an increase in media attention through programmes like So You Think You Can Dance, surely dance was more on society's consciousness?

To put my passion for adult engagement with dance into context, and by 'adults' I mean to include people aged between 21 and 50: I only came to dance when I was 30 years old. I came to the sudden realisation that, if I didn't do something different, it may be my biggest regret when I came to retirement age. After over 15 years of working behind a desk in the public sector, I plucked up the courage to step out of my comfort zone and started a weekly evening course in dance at Morley College, London. From that small step, my passion grew. At each pivotal moment, it

was an inspirational and supportive teacher who made me take another risk – I wanted to be able to inspire people in that way.

A regular comment from my newcomers when they first come through the door is that they've not heard or even thought that the venue might run these types of classes. Generally they've been looking for a very long time, which shows that there is a demand for contemporary dance, it's just how people get know about it and then access it that needs addressing.

### **So how do you generate demand for something that is not supplied?**

For anyone thinking about starting his or her own dance provision in an area that might not have an obvious demand for it, then you have to be committed to the long term-goal. There is no quick easy win. It is a constant ongoing challenge, albeit a rewarding one.

In 2007, when I first approached the then dance coordinator of South Hill Park, Auriele Wells, with the idea of running contemporary classes there, I knew for her it was a big risk to take on someone who they didn't know anything about. If you don't have visual evidence of past projects to rely on and support your practice, then you need to find other ways of communicating your personal drive and enthusiasm for your practice. As the saying goes, you have to learn to walk before you can run; we started out with a few taster sessions at the venue and this slowly grew over two years to offering two different ability levels and a performance group.

There are a couple of keys pointers, which I'm sure we all know and will have heard many times before but for me, when you really get down to it, they are so important:

### **Develop a consistent brand and stick with it**

You only have to look at our own buying habits to see how important a brand identity is in our purchase making decisions. Instinctively, we know which online shops seem >

I think the question for the dance sector right now is, are we heading for future problems when it comes to adult participation?

reputable and which don't. Our target audience use the same decision making process when looking at any form of communication, an efflyer or poster – it is so important to pitch your brand identity correctly.

### Use networks to your advantage

A hard fact is that practitioners have to self-fund and promote themselves to provide engagement opportunities. Flyers and such are a good thing but the costs can be prohibitive. With limited financial support social networks, both online and in person, can be your best friend and should be utilised to your benefit. By using online networks like Facebook and Twitter you not only reduce costs but also can potentially target a far wider audience; word of mouth goes a long way.

A good example are the new classes that I've recently set up at Dr Challoner's High School, Buckinghamshire, despite being a locally well renowned school offering many adult community clubs, it was, in some ways, a total shot in the dark as it wasn't somewhere people would naturally think to come to for dance. I did the usual hard copy advertising and drop-off of flyers to adult learning centres, libraries, sports halls, dance providers, etc. but with little impact. The majority of people who come through the door found out about the class through some form of online medium or personal referral.

I'm forever building on my comprehensive list of contact emails which range from all the local schools, to other dance providers in the area; private dance schools, local authority contacts, etc. A lot of this information is already in the public domain and can be easily researched by using Google, so use it to your advantage.

### It's ok to talk about yourself

I've struggled with this because it just feels such an alien thing to do; not what a polite person should do. However you have to bite the bullet and build some kind of public persona that allows you to be forward and, in those times when you need to speak up, be heard. I'm not saying you should always be talking about what you do so much that you forget to listen to other people. It's about having the confidence to express yourself and be genuine about what you talk about.

Once you're up and running you need to continually think of getting your message out there and don't wait for people

Right and below: nocturn's weekly adult contemporary class, South Hill Park (Community Group).  
Photo: Dean Soden





to do it for you. For example, if you have a newsworthy project then write that press release. And don't be afraid to ask participants to give you feedback that can also come in handy when you need a quote.

#### **Use other work streams to support what you do**

We all tend to have portfolio careers – as well as delivering dance, I've worked for the Arts and Leisure Development Team, West Berkshire developing and managing educational arts projects, been a freelance creative agent for Creative Junction, Slough helping deliver the Creative Partnerships programme and even done the odd bit of graphic design. Being part of many organisations really helps with the cross fertilization of ideas from different art strands.

#### **The bigger picture**

I think the question for the dance sector right now is, are we heading for future problems when it comes to adult participation? What I mean by this is, will the success story of youth dance reveal a vacuum of opportunities for them to continue that love and involvement in dance as they progress from such a nurtured and rightly subsidised environment?

After encouraging so many young people into dance there appears to be no natural progression for their future engagement as dancing adults outside of education. As individual adults we may have the financial ability to pay for dance ourselves but if arts organisations and/or venues don't focus on adult participation then adults struggle to find suitable dance provision. And until the funding criteria of funding bodies such as Arts Council England meets these objectives there will continue to be no incentive or impetus for deliverers to provide the rich variety and wide range of quality projects for adults that are recognised as vital and rewarding for other targeted groups.

So until then, we are reliant on the tenacity, passion and stubbornness of individual practitioners to carry on, no matter what. It may be a lonely quest, scraping by – trying to make projects financially sustainable. But the true reward for me is seeing adults come alive, enjoying dance and finding ways to express themselves through movement.

**contact** [info@nocturndance.co.uk](mailto:info@nocturndance.co.uk) / **visit**  
[www.nocturndance.co.uk](http://www.nocturndance.co.uk)

