

U.Dance: Four countries, one ensemble

Linda Jasper MBE, Director, Youth Dance England

19 young dancers from across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales form the U.Dance Ensemble and will be amongst thousands of dancers performing during the final weekend of Big Dance 2012. On 13 July, the night before Big Dance in Trafalgar Square, they will première a piece created with Hofesh Shechter in the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the Southbank Centre.

This performance is part of U.Dance 2012 where we will have over 35 groups from Britain and Northern Ireland dancing and performing together. Some of the London groups performing in U.Dance 2012 are also part of the Trafalgar Square event. We have been planning with Wayne McGregor | Random Dance and the Big Dance Team how we connect the two and expect that the Trafalgar Square and U.Dance 2012 dancers will be able to watch the amazing performances taking place in both venues – it's only ten minutes' walk between the two.

The Ensemble has been created by Youth Dance England (YDE) working in partnership with DU (Dance United) in Northern Ireland, National Youth Dance Wales, YDance (Scottish Youth Dance) and Southbank Centre (SBC). It was created initially to extend YDE's

national event, U.Dance 2012, to young dancers from each of the four countries – to celebrate London 2012 and SBC's role as an Olympic venue and supporter of youth dance. The partnership was formed in May 2009 with the purpose of looking at the various ways that dance opportunities for young people could be increased and strengthened through cross-border cooperation and activity, identifying where joint initiatives could be best used, and taking into account the very different focus for development and infrastructures in the four countries.

A major attraction was the proposal to bring together some of the most talented young dancers from the different countries to form one ensemble, to extend opportunities for young dancers and foster exchange of practices. Members for the Ensemble from Scotland and Wales were recruited through established national youth dance companies; England and Northern Ireland, both without national companies, recruited dancers through an open application process. Flexibility has been required at every step of the way to accommodate the different needs of partners. To take into account the more extensive professional dance training system in England the age range was agreed for

young dancers as 16-19 years, whereas in the other countries it was extended to 21 years, to reflect the different opportunities available to their young people. Auditions were held in each of the four countries and the rehearsals will be held in three. From the outset the importance of exposure was seen as an imperative to support the work of all the partners to raise the profile of youth dance. It was also seen as very important that young people experienced at first hand working in the different countries.

Since September 2008 U.Dance has involved over 140,000 young people in England participating in performances. An interesting development has been that YDance in Scotland and National Youth Dance Wales have adopted the U.Dance performance framework to stimulate progressive performance opportunities to encourage young people to perform, create and view dance. In 2011 it was taken up by our partners in Scotland and Wales, each running their own events to identify groups for U.Dance 2012. These events have encouraged new connections with the youth dance sector and partners want to build on the interest generated to forge new networks for youth dance.

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The Ensemble provides the final stage of the U.Dance performance framework. It is led by Artistic Director Hofesh Shechter who was selected by all partners. We were keen to work with a choreographer with experience of working with young people and enthusiasm and passion for creating high quality dance with them. We were also looking for an artist with an extensive portfolio of choreographic work, who is well known in the dance world and to audiences. We wanted an artist who would be able to engage with young people in a shared creative process through which they would learn and develop as dance artists and individuals. Hofesh met all these criteria and we are particularly impressed by his commitment to working with young people.

When we asked Hofesh what he enjoyed about working with the young dancers he said: 'That energy, that positive energy, that's the most amazing thing up to now. And to be inspired by their hunger, I really enjoy that. That really gives me more energy and it's great'.

More information on the U.Dance Ensemble and programme is available at www.u-dance.org. Tickets for U.Dance 2012 performances are now on sale: www.southbankcentre.co.uk



Above top: First U.Dance Ensemble residential rehearsal in Glasgow, forefront – Anna Britton (left) and Eilidh Brown (right). Above: Final audition for the U.Dance Ensemble, Hofesh Shechter and auditionees. Photos: Brian Slater