

Dancing Voices

Natasha Gilmore, Artistic Director, Barrowland Ballet and freelance choreographer

I am currently devising **Dancing Voices**, a participatory project that brings together older dancers and singers in a large-scale dance and voice project culminating in two high profile events in July 2012 at Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre in London, and in Glasgow for the Merchant City Festival. The project is an East London Dance (ELD) initiative and commissioned as the pan-London older people's project for Big Dance 2012 and Capital Age Festival. My company, Barrowland Ballet, were recently successful in a Creative Scotland bid to remount the project in Glasgow in partnership with Glasgow Life. This provides a fantastic opportunity to translate a tried and tested model in London to a new community in Glasgow.

The Dancing Voices model offers a range of access points for participants enabling experienced older performers to be pushed and challenged choreographically, as well as opportunities for people to experience a dance performance project for the first time. We are working with three different group types:

- established older people's dance companies
- older people's groups or clubs who haven't taken part in dance activities
- frail older people in sheltered housing and day centres who will have a one-off workshop and will watch the performance as special guests.

A model of 'peer motivating' will be embedded throughout, offering training opportunities for experienced older performers to support workshop delivery and inspire less active older people to take part. I believe it is this diversity of entry points that will enable a project of this scale to be translated effectively to Glasgow.

In 2010 I was commissioned to create a similar project



called Dancing stAGE. The final event brought together dancers in an incredibly moving performance by 140 older performers, 60 of whom had not previously participated in a dance activity other than social dancing. The success of this project is the foundation of this year's even more ambitious project, using the same delivery structure of the three different group types but with an even bigger cast, plus the added element of a large choir from VoiceLab accompanying the dances. I am prevented from being overwhelmed by such an ambitious project by the



Above and left: Dancing stAGE 2010. Photo: Carmen Klammer



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skills base. My previous experiences with these groups have been so fantastic, participants have been creatively generous and so committed. We have created a playfulness on stage whereby there is a shared humour. Perhaps for some imagining a huge cast of older dancers – many of whom have no previous experience of dance, some using walking sticks – it may be hard to picture a product of artistic quality but dance is a powerful medium that can capture such beauty and honesty. My first task is to choose appropriate themes and styles, by this I don't mean 'I'd better whip out the old Vera Lynn records'. In fact, I have been told by one of the groups that they are bored of being asked about their memories by choreographers, so I aim to devise in an artistically strong way that challenges the stereotypes of older people dancing. The music we're using includes Ghost Town by The Specials, a mash-up of The Eurythmics', Sweet Dreams with U Can't Touch This by MC Hammer, and Florence and The Machine. We are exploring social changes with each track reflecting a different era and a different social movement.

What is really exciting is that this year I am able to recreate the London production in Glasgow working with groups from across Scotland thanks to a Creative Scotland award. Barrowland Ballet are producing the event in partnership with Glasgow Life and Scottish Ballet, with ELD acting as mentors. Last year I toured a production called A >

meticulous planning and support that comes from ELD, they really know how to deliver these types of projects and support the artistic team and participants throughout. In both London and Glasgow I will work closely with a team of skilled dance artists who deliver the weekly rehearsals.

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Above and right:
Dancing stAGE
2010.
Photo: Carmen
Klammer



Conversation With Carmel, in every venue we formed a community cast to perform as a central part of the production, with a focus on older dancers. Through this I made links with a number of the older dancers in the Scottish venues and I'm delighted to be able to strengthen these links this summer. Developing dance provision for older people has been a priority for Creative Scotland over the last few years. There is currently a positive environment for participation projects for older people in Scotland with The World Congress for Active Ageing taking place in Glasgow in August 2012, and the development of a new National Dance Festival of creative ageing, launching in October 2012.

Despite this there are currently far fewer established older dance groups in Scotland than there are in London and the rest of England, so hopefully this project will strengthen the established groups by raising their profile. Since the London performance in 2010 for example, 25

new people have applied to join ELD's Leap of Faith having either met the group at this project or after seeing the performance. This led to ELD successfully fundraising from the Baring Foundation to expand their provision of dance for older people and build on the legacy offered to participants from the project. I am hoping the Scottish project will have a similar impact.

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ELD is a leading promoter, provider and producer of dance in East London and beyond **visit** www.eastlondondance.org

Dancing Voices can be seen this Summer; 11 July, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London -
visit www.southbankcentre.co.uk and 29 July, Old Fruitmarket, Candlerigg, Glasgow **visit** www.merchantcityfestival.com