

34 Continuing professional development



Gil Graystone.
Photo: Jamie
Wooldridge

Keep on keeping on

My personal journey in community dance by **Gil Graystone**

I walked into Ludus Dance Company, September 1978. This was my first 'proper' job and it was my dream job.

Dancing in all its wonderful forms and styles was more than just dancing – it was, and still is, my passion! I can't actually recall a time when I wasn't utterly smitten. I had improvised, created and performed since the age of three. It wasn't that I was precocious, I just loved dance. Even at primary school, I staged, directed and rehearsed many dance shows. And that was topped off by accompanying my mother to folk dancing conventions. At secondary school I had a brilliant dance teacher, Enid Hobba. Pre-Ludus, my teacher training cemented a desire to share this passion and knowledge. I suppose you could say I found Ludus and it found me. It wasn't predestined... but it might as well have been.

Inspired by an unknown dance company performing their Great Fifties Revival Show at Kendal Brewery in 1977, I decided to participate in their weekend course. I declared, as you do when you are young, bold and unabashed, that THIS was the company I was going to work for. This exciting new company was Ludus North West Dance in Education. A fortuitous meeting. They wanted to work with me too!

Although being informed at my interview I would be joining a cooperative, I didn't fully understand what that meant or required of me. On day one, though, I quickly began to learn. My opinion was actually valued and, even more amazingly, listened to. I soon realised I had a responsibility which stretched further than being a dancer and a teacher. I was politically naive but I was a 'sponge', a good listener and absorbed everything. This was the beginning of a fascinating personal journey.

A 'political awakening' began to change my views. Ludus was at the forefront of Dance in Education.

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Influenced by the work of the Theatre in Education movement, this dance collective was inspired by the uniqueness of dance to raise awareness about social issues; ask pertinent questions, develop curiosity and become a creative force in young people's lives. The company took dance to where young people worked hence adapting the traditional performance model to fit into the school environment and working day. The performance was the central stimulus for dance workshops and subsequent learning activities.

I stepped into a role created by Penny Greenland. 11 weeks touring in Wigan and Lancashire schools helped to make the role my own before heading off to The Riverside Studios in London to take part in Dance Umbrella. I toured around the UK and further afield to Canada and Berlin. Touring in Northern Ireland during the early 1980s was an eye-opener in terms of sectarian communities. More political awakening, more learning, more absorption about life, people, places and the power and possibilities of dance.

We were an interesting team. I worked with Wendy Houstoun, Sian Williams and Brendan Keaney. And all the while I was changing too. I loved the thrill of performing but it felt quite a selfish act. It was the participatory work which I found challenging and interesting. I decided to leave the company, and develop my interest in choreography and create solo work. Quasi Mode was my first, swiftly followed by L'après-midi d'une housewife directed by Wendy Houstoun. But the desire to develop participatory work continued to be a powerful magnet to me.

1982 and Ludus was launching a community dance pilot programme. Headed up by Anthony Peppiatt and Joan Ewert, I was asked to be the Community Dance Worker and deliver the programme. There was no blueprint, no existing methodology and I had little idea how to develop dance within communities. However, instinct and passion were strong. As I explained earlier, I had roots, courtesy of my mother, in folk and Scottish dancing circles. I had trained at The Laban Art of Movement Studio. Laban's theories were in my body and 'soul'. Disco dancing, Northern Soul, other popular dance forms were also part of my dancing 'DNA'!



Wendy Houstoun, Gil Graystone and Sian Williams, *People in The Park*, a Ludus touring show, circa.1982. Photo: Unknown



With a strong desire to engage more people, develop access in dance participation, widen the offer, and a need to articulate the many benefits of dance, my journey continued with constant questioning and problem solving. I identified excluded groups, looked at venue type, travel, cost and physical access. It was time to apply the skills and knowledge to challenge the existing offer in participatory dance.

The first method was trial and error. Plenty of trial and lots of error. Most development artists today would squirm at my naive attempts. No surprise, then, that I sat in many an empty hall waiting for local residents to give 'Ludus dancing' a go. I was disgraced at a local fete for frightening small children whilst dressed up as a clown. The complete antithesis to inspiring participants! Many a walking stick was thrown when the TV was turned off in the old people's homes. An absence of health and safety procedures and enforcement, gave us free rein to explore certain crazy events.

The work developed organically. I explored improvisation classes; led carnival dancers and bands; developed an Adult Performance group and headed up the successful Youth Dance Company – BodyRap. This young company performed with a local rock band in under-18 clubs, youth clubs and at school discos. The tours took dance to young people rather than keeping it within the traditional theatre venue. The Parent and Toddler classes became the instigator of dance in a number of local communities.

Above: Picture taken from a very early Ludus Dance in Education brochure. Gil Graystone centre back.

Right: Picture taken from 1982 edition of HOTFOOT, Gil Graystone teaching. Photo: Dee Conway



Once we had been accepted we could grow the offer and develop more dance activities.

It's important to remember that all this was taking shape in the early 1980s during a dancing boom. Classes were full at the Ludus centre and, with an appropriate strategy in place, 'Ludus Dancing' was thriving in a number of local communities. The team grew swiftly to respond to demand. Louise Glynn joined us having studied community dance practice at Laban and here a great partnership began. More delivery, more demand and the team grew to five with additional centre classes staff. 'Special needs' (as it was called then) dance work continued to develop, and dancing with elders was researched before trials. Diversity within the local communities informed the offer. The entire community



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My own dancing journey took a Ludus break whilst pregnant and motherhood became the primary driver. However I never stopped dancing – no surprise there then! – choreographing in North West theatres, Children's Theatre and with The Liverpool Philharmonic.

The third calling to Ludus was strong and I returned in 2000 to head up the national touring company. This was essentially an administrative and management role but I utilised my skills to mentor younger dancers and develop their teaching and learning skills. It was during this time that we collectively designed the Step Ahead course for dance artists wanting to develop their work in education and the community. A sell-out whenever we ran the weekends. It was during this period working with Deb Barnard, an inspirational creative leader who strongly believed in the collective structure that I grew as a manager and teamleader. Yet more skills learned under the Ludus banner!

Turning 50, I wanted to design a dance class for mature dancers. An interesting challenge. Community Dance has been developing as a practice for 30 years, national courses are now available, Universities are training Community Dance Artists and new accredited courses are being developed in support of the profession. Delivery had changed. The context had changed. I was asking different questions, applying old theories. In addition, I constantly sought feedback and chatted with the participants, and then the form and content of the class began to emerge.

This class, Stretch and Boogie, has now been running for five years with loyal participants returning term after term and year after year. Something must be right then! Using music which ranges from house, funk, easy listening, folk, punk, pop and world music, the group are introduced to new sounds, new moves, new ways to keep fit and healthy; forge new friendships and visit theatres to watch a range of new dance.

The cooperative ethos; political awareness; the amazingly talented people I have worked with and learned from; the creative questioning; curious meanderings; creating dance for a target audience; working in unusual spaces and places; 34 years of these many experiences keep me dancing and keep me keeping on the 'Ludus ethos' wherever I may be.

Following the closure of the Ludus Dance Touring Company, Gil Graystone works part-time for the newly formed, North West Graduate Dance Company, based at Edge Hill University. Gil plans to develop her practice with mature dancers and age inclusive practice. **contact** gilgraystone3@gmail.com

dance staff met regularly to discuss community dance ethos and practice, and collectively designed the participatory programme.

Much of the 'community cohesion' happened outside the dance class and frequently moved to the pub next door. A social committee emerged organising social events including treasure hunts, ceilidhs and 'sharings' where we hired local bands. The aim was always to be inclusive and get as many people dancing together as possible! These events were run by the Lancaster dancing community itself, again very much mirroring the folk dancing conventions I had been party to as a child. We were known locally as Ludus Dancing and after seven years, we were firmly established.