

The Barrowlands Project

Linda Robertson, Scottish freelance journalist, writes about the collaboration between choreographer Michael Clark, Dance House Glasgow and community dancers at the Barrowland Ballroom

Michael Clark believes there is a dancer inside everyone.

“Everyone can dance, everyone does dance, whether they’re aware of it or not,” asserts the world-renowned choreographer. It was a message that was reinforced through The Barrowlands Project, a large-scale, landmark initiative that turned the spotlight on community dance in Scotland.

It went something like this: the Aberdeen-born, critically-acclaimed dancer and choreographer returned to Scotland to create a new work for the Cultural Olympiad which would include a group of amateur dancers. The 43-strong group of community participants would perform alongside Michael Clark Company professionals, taking over one of the city’s most iconic venues – the famous Barrowland Ballroom.

“The genesis of the project was that Creative Scotland, LOCOG and Glasgow Life were keen for there to be a landmark dance project for the city, which marked the end of the London 2012 Festival and a shift in focus to Glasgow for the Commonwealth Games in 2014,” explains Ailsa-Mary Gold, Artistic Director of Dance House Glasgow, which worked in partnership with Michael Clark Company, Creative Scotland and Glasgow Life to deliver the project. “How did we mark that and do something that was really exciting, a high-quality dance piece with community engagement?” She continues “Michael had recently made other works which included community participation at the Tate in London and the Whitney in New York, so we had a chat with him, asked him to consider it and we were delighted when he said

yes.” The call for would-be dancers went out in April 2012. “Michael was looking for people who hadn’t had professional dance training,” says Ailsa-Mary. “There had to be a diversity of ages and a balance of gender. The dancers also needed to be able to do the work, to get on and off the floor easily and run.”

Dance House invited people to write and tell them, in 250 words, why they wanted to get involved: “They had fascinating and moving and funny reasons for doing it – they had dreamed of dancing all their lives or had a special story about the Barrowland.”

The group, who ranged in age from 18 to 64, came from all walks of life, some who had never even stepped foot inside a dance studio before. Some were fans of Michael Clark and wanted this once-in-a-lifetime chance to be part of his creative process. Others wished to take a leap into the unknown and push themselves out of their comfort zones and there were those who had fond memories of spending their youth whirling around the dance-floor of the Barrowland Ballroom, now a music venue.

“When I heard about the project one half of me thought ‘I must do it’ but the other was ‘hmm, I’m old and past it and maybe I can’t do this anymore’,” laughs Marion Cobban, a sixty-something book editor who lives in Glasgow and who has enjoyed a life-long love of dance.

She started classes at the age of seven, after her mother took her to see a show in His Majesty’s Theatre, Aberdeen, where she’s originally from. “I was in various amateur dance and drama shows and I would have loved

to have made a career out of dance but there wasn’t an awful lot happening in Aberdeen in the sixties,” she says.

Instead, she pursued dance as a hobby, taking classes in Glasgow and performing in large-scale community projects including Carmina Burana in 2000 at the city’s Tramway.

“It had been a long time since I’d actually performed but I submitted my application to Dance House and started by saying that I remembered seeing Michael, probably when he was aged between 12 and 14, on stage at His Majesty’s in Aberdeen, before he went to the Royal Ballet. I said I had danced on the same stage as him and maybe this was a chance for a not-so-final fling! When I got the email to tell me that I had been picked I thought ‘ooh wow, I’m meant to do this. Don’t write yourself off yet!’”

Eight dance artists were also chosen for The Barrowlands Project to act as a conduit between the Michael Clark Company and the community dancers. It was a unique opportunity to further their own professional development and for Jade Adamson, a Glasgow-based dancer, performer and teacher, it was also the chance to work alongside a choreographer that she’d long admired.

“I’ve always been fascinated and impressed by Michael’s alternative, ‘punk rock’ style; by the technically flawless and charismatic dancers, and by his music choices and collaborations with live bands such as The Fall and Scritti Politti. I auditioned because I wanted to experience all these things first hand, see Michael at work and get a glimpse of the company behind the scenes. I was also excited to see him work with the



Left: Michael Clark outside Barrowland Ballroom, Glasgow. Photo: Jake Walters

community cast and pleased that he'd chosen to invite so many local people into his world and his art." Passionate about community dance, Jade has previously worked on professional/non-professional dancer collaboration pieces and mass participation dances. "I value the power and integrity of the non-dance trained body in professional dance work," she says.

"It pleased me to know that Michael shared my value, especially as his performers are renowned for being highly-trained technicians. When I applied for The Barrowlands Project I wasn't completely aware of what it would entail," admits Becky Cameron, a freelance dance artist who was also a dance leader. "I knew I was going to be working with the community, which I had not much experience with, and I knew I was going to get the opportunity to work with Michael Clark. I was quite glad that I went into the project with no expectations as it allowed me to develop my skills in an honest environment. I have worked with younger dancers in the community but not those over 16."

Rehearsals began in July, with dancers meeting every week at venues throughout Glasgow to learn the choreography, which increased to three times a week as the September performance inched closer.

"Rehearsals were fairly intense as we'd be working really hard during those two hours," says Marion. "The choreography seemed apparently quite simple and straightforward but when you're in groups of nine and it's all very strictly timed, it was quite tricky." She says Michael was a quiet force in the studio:

"He is not at all the diva type, no way was he throwing his personality all over the place and that impressed me. He just got on with it and was almost in the background. He would practise the moves himself in a corner and then in amongst us. He worked everybody as a dancer. Everybody in that room was a dancer as far as he was concerned," adds Ailsa-Mary. "He was working >

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with them in the same way he would with his own company. It involved community participation – it was a piece of art where they were involved in the creative process. It wasn't about giving them artistic license. They were 'drilled' as dancers."

Becky says she initially felt quite intimidated at the start of rehearsals, having to face such a large group of people: "However throughout the weeks I found my own voice and way of communicating the movement," she says. "We eventually split up into smaller groups which allowed me to engage with the participants on a more personal level."

"It was great that the dance leaders and community participants got to learn from Michael. He was in most rehearsals and constantly bettering the material and inspiring us all. It was so interesting to see how he works; he has such a unique way of creating movement and constructing pieces. Being given an inside eye on rehearsals and class allowed me to really

appreciate and understand why they are such an iconic company."

Clark's own dancers also joined in rehearsals. Kate Coyne, who has been part of the Michael Clark Company since 1997 explained: "The material was prepared in advance and then manipulated in the space – it had to be really worked out as we didn't want anyone to be left out or unable to do things".

"We had to road test the movement without dumbing it down at all, so that it was possible for a variety of people to do. It was very inspiring to work with non-professional dancers, it makes you re-evaluate what you do and the things that you take for granted."

Fellow company dancer, Melissa Hetherington, adds: "The way Michael works is very specialist but for a trained dancer it's very easy to work in such a way so it was really interesting to see how people would respond to a technique without any training. The energy that the community participants and leaders gave to the project... it





Left and below: Michael Clark Company, The Barrowlands Project.
Photos: Hugo Glendinning

couldn't have been what it was without it."

Jade Adamson says each and every participant was unique and it wasn't about who was the best dancer: "Some had extensive dance experience, others had none. It was about us all coming together and doing something as one, together, all the same."

The experience has been an investment in the futures of the eight dance leaders, who were recruited through an audition process coordinated by Dance House Glasgow and who got the opportunity to work with the company and take class with them in the morning. "They've nourished themselves by learning new vocabulary, honed their teaching skills and have had the chance to be exposed to world-class art," says Ailsa-Mary.

The Barrowlands Project was performed on the final weekend of the London 2012 Festival. The event marked the change in focus from London 2012 to Scotland and Glasgow 2014 when the city and the rest of the country will work together to deliver the Commonwealth Games.

"It was fantastic to all come together to make this amazing production," says Marion. "We became a dance company in a relatively short space of time."

And the ripples are still being felt across the dance community in Glasgow. Friendships were formed, new connections were made. Creativity was sparked and classes were filled.

"What we've learned from this project, and our similar ones at the Tate and the Whitney, is how each one has brought a community together and it's still part of them," says Kate Coyne. "It was very much a group experience, it was united and it's heartwarming to see the repercussions."

Jade says it was such a "special and unique opportunity" for herself and everyone involved and hopes the project will inspire more people to take part in dance across Scotland. "I don't doubt it will go down in dance history. It's not something that could happen every day, obviously funding-wise.

However, there are lots of other exciting and inspiring things happening in the professional/community dance scene in Scotland, including an initiative called Get Scotland Dancing, which aims to get more people involved in dance. I hope that projects like The Barrowlands Project will help challenge people's perceptions of professional dance, raise the profile of community dance in Scotland and increase participation in it."

The legacy of The Barrowlands Project lives on. Participants built a special bond during the rehearsal process and Dance House invited them to share their experiences through blogging and updates on the project website (www.barrowlandsproject.com) which also invited audience response and feedback.

"I would encourage anyone interested in the journey we all went on together to visit this site, it's a remarkable experience of its own," says Ailsa-Mary.

Following The Barrowlands Project performances, Michael Clark Company returned to Glasgow with the premiere of *New Work* at Tramway and all of the dancers were invited to attend the performance and an after-show party, where a photographic exhibition, featuring their portraits, was launched. Dance House has invited community participants to keep dancing following the project by offering free access to its extensive programme of classes for adults, including its own Community Company – an opportunity which almost all of them have taken up.

"It's very exciting for us to see – especially as the majority of them were people who had not previously been part of our Dance House family!" adds Ailsa-Mary.

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