

Witness the magic

Joce Giles, Head of Learning and Participation, Rambert Dance Company describes an initiative at Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton, working with amputees



As everyone will be well aware, **Big Dance 2012** featured thousands of events throughout the UK in all kinds of places and spaces. While many may associate it with ambitious performances in iconic settings, for Rambert, Big Dance 2012 was defined by a project we delivered with support from a Big Dance micro-grant, which involved ten participants and culminated with an informal sharing to family and friends.

Although the project; a series of five dance sessions with amputee patients at Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton (part of St George's Healthcare National Health Service [NHS] Trust), was on a much smaller scale compared to other dance events this summer, it had a profound impact on everyone involved. Sonia Illescas, one of the Rambert Animateurs leading the project said afterwards "the project at Queen Mary's Hospital has been a one in a million opportunity to witness the magic that dance has to offer people who may never have experienced it before".

Many of the projects that Rambert's learning and participation team deliver are developed in partnership, as was the case with our work with the amputee patients at Queen Mary's Hospital. It was in spring 2010 that Rambert first started talking to Sarah Weatherall, the Performing Arts Manager at St George's Healthcare NHS Trust about possible ways that our two organisations might work together. As this would be a new area of work for both organisations, it felt important that we gained a good understanding of each other's work before deciding the kind of activities we might develop together in the future. This involved staff from St George's attending rehearsals at Rambert's studios and the Head of Nursing for Patient Experience and the Deputy Director of Nursing visited a primary school to observe a Rambert workshop, which enabled them to see >

Rambert project with amputee group, St George's NHS Trust. Photos: © Ellie Kurtz

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how we work with people with little or no experience of contemporary dance. After observing this workshop, they were able to identify different patient groups that they felt would benefit from taking part in dance activity.

Following a successful pilot in 2011, which involved Rambert delivering taster sessions with three different patient groups (amputee, neurorehabilitation, and Parkinson's), we met with Sarah Weatherall and staff from the different patient groups to discuss options for developing future work. With the Paralympic Games on the horizon, the amputee rehabilitation centre at Queen Mary's Hospital wanted to create opportunities for patients to be inspired by the games and also have the chance to engage in a physical activity that was beyond their ongoing rehabilitation work. The idea of a series of dance sessions for amputee patients that would take place around the time of the London 2012 Games was discussed.

These conversations coincided with the launch of the Big Dance 2012 micro-grants, which seemed designed to fund exactly this kind of work and fortunately, St George's proposal for the amputee dance project was successful.

The project

Queen Mary's Hospital has a long-track record of providing amputee rehabilitation services, which goes back 90 years to when the hospital treated World War I servicemen who had lost limbs and has ever since continued as a service offered by the hospital.

The hospital has been involved in the rehabilitation of a number of former paralympians, in 2012 there were

three former patients competing in the Paralympic Games in London and Rambert's project was launched by John McFall, a medallist at the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

The launch involved John giving a talk that described how he had lost a leg in a serious motorcycle accident when he was eighteen but then went on to compete and win a bronze medal in the 100 metres final in Beijing. His speech was truly inspirational and set a positive tone for the start of the project. Following the speech by John, Marie Lawrence, a Rambert Animateur, took participants through a short, seated warm-up that introduced some of the movement they would be doing in future sessions.

The patients taking part in the project were all lower limb amputees and were a mix of in and out-patients. It was clear from the first session that participants were enjoying moving in a new way and liked the interaction with other people. What also became clear at an early stage was that applying some of the principles of contemporary dance technique into the sessions had real physical benefits for the participants.

Commenting on her experience of teaching the group for the first full dance session following the launch, Sonia Illescas reflects that she was "demonstrating about the ways dancers don't just shift the weight from one foot to the other but they also transfer the weight to different parts of their bodies in order to find the balance. This was a real eye opener for the group and I realised the great impact these principles could have as part of their gait training. I taught them exercises in Graham and Cunningham techniques and it worked perfectly."



Christopher, an out-patient who had just celebrated his 60th birthday and has attended Queen Mary's since he was four years old, describes his own experience of doing these exercises, "much upper body and spine control was gained through posture, relaxation and tension of muscles, breathing correctly, and finding flexibility through the exercises."

The physical benefits of contemporary dance technique are also described by Sue, another participant, "Rambert taught us technique and how the same dance technique can be applied to amputee patients. We also learnt to engage our core and it's something I now do without thinking – it has certainly improved my posture and alignment. I'm feeling so confident now (in my body) that I am thinking of changing chairs to one with only lower back support! Rambert has taught me practical skills and has affected me in so many ways!"

Sue also explains how the dance



Rambert project with amputee group, St George's NHS Trust. Photo: © Ellie Kurtz

sessions had a positive impact on her ability to take part in other activities outside of the hospital setting, “we were taught and shown how to engage our back muscles. I decided to apply this when I was swimming and it worked. I swam faster and for longer!”

The effect that the sessions had on their mental strength was also something that was noted by participants, with one person saying that “psychologically it’s been a great help”. This helped participants with endurance, which is such a vital aspect of their rehabilitation.

An aspect of the project that all participants commented on was how much they enjoyed taking part in a group activity, which enabled them to have a shared experience with other people who faced similar challenges to themselves. One participant describes the environment that they were working in, “it was a very safe zone, a safe space to do dance work. We were all

in the same situation so no one felt awkward”.

As well as having the opportunity to connect with other amputee patients, the project was also opened up to participants’ relatives and/or carers. This led to the young daughter of an out-patient joining in each session alongside her mother, who comments on the experience, “I loved it. So often activities are either for non-disabled people or disabled people but this time both of us could do something together. Our lives become entwined when we do something like this together”.

Although only a small project in terms of the number of sessions that were involved, it is a great example of the big impact that dance can quickly have on people’s physical, mental and social wellbeing. For a group of people who had never considered taking part in dance before, Christopher says, “what this five session mini project did was to roll back the carpet for physically disabled individuals to

engage in an exercise that is as old as human existence itself”. Another participant succinctly sums up the experience of the group, “we broke free and discovered there wasn’t limitations”.

Fortunately this is just the beginning of the work that Rambert will deliver with St George’s Healthcare NHS Trust. The St George’s Charity has recently received funding through Awards for All, which means we will be able to deliver a more substantial programme of work with the amputee patient group, as well as Parkinson’s and young neurorehabilitation patients over the coming year.

Rambert also hopes to develop further partnerships with other hospitals in the future and we are currently having conversations with Chelsea and Westminster and Guys and St Thomas’s Hospitals about a number of exciting projects.

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