

We Dance

Gus Garside, National Arts Development Manager, Mencap and **Claire Marshall**, Changing Cultures and We Dance Evaluator report on the achievements of We Dance, a Cultural Olympiad project in the West Midlands

Day one and a young woman bursts into the room at the first We Dance session. She knows her own mind. She went to a school for children with physical and learning disabilities where they provided wide experiences and she's 'done dance' before. She comes across as cantankerous and when unhappy everyone knows about it. Her mum has brought her and has learnt about this opportunity through the research she regularly undertakes of any activity open to disabled people. She doesn't live locally and, like most of the participants, spends lots of time travelling to access the limited opportunities on offer. The session is hard work for her as she has restricted movement and many aspects of the session are physically and mentally demanding. She often finds working with others hard. But she sticks it out, and when you look past her initial persona there is a big smile hiding in her eyes and she's loving being creative, moving to music, expressing herself.

Week five and the dance has developed at a pace, a massive change is noticeable within the group, there are greater concentration and fitness levels and some members of the group are able to remember large sections of choreography. The session is going well and the dance leaders introduce a new idea developed out of a warm-up activity. In pairs one person is to lead across the space with a travelling movement while the other follows. There are two individuals

who clearly have to work outside their comfort zones as our young woman who likes to be dominant has to follow and another young adult with very low self-esteem has been asked to take the lead. This creates tension, and there is an outburst. However they overcome the challenge themselves and working together they produce a dance sequence. When they successfully finish the movement, they give each other a warm embrace and smiles beam across their faces. Together they have successfully confronted personal, social and physical challenges.

The project has had a huge impact on this young woman, she is fitter, has improved her movement range and is socialising with others more. These are achievements that those working in dance and the arts expect. What most people don't know is that this project has brought her a step closer to her career ambition, of living a life where she can be creative; her mother tells me that "she wants to learn and be doing, she's not passive. She doesn't want to be stuffing envelopes like others with learning disabilities. She wants to do something she is interested in." She appears cantankerous, as she's not prepared to settle for anything less than what she wants and behind those eyes she has a passion and We Dance has helped to fuel that fire.

We Dance was a Cultural Olympiad dance project for people with a learning disability in Birmingham and



the surrounding region. It intended to extend opportunities to dance, be creative, challenge perceptions, and improve health and wellbeing.

Getting the partnership right was critical both for the successful delivery and for ensuring a strong legacy. In this case all the partners had their own reasons to embrace the venture with enthusiasm. Led by the UK learning disability charity Mencap, partners were Birmingham Royal Ballet, whose learning disabled dancers from Freefall (itself a partnership with Fox Hollies school for pupils with special needs) were central as creators, performers, trainers and mentors; mac Birmingham, who provided a festival venue, meeting space and valuable advice in shaping the plans and Midland Mencap, an autonomous



Barry Kirby and others, Freefall Dance Company. Photo: Alex Griffiths

Birmingham based learning disability charity affiliated to national Mencap, which provided local knowledge, contacts and volunteers.

A healthy and creative partnership means involving everyone from the very start in project development – this brings risks and challenges and doesn't always sit comfortably with funders because it means the plans evolve and change. This is especially the case if listening to what people with learning disabilities are saying throughout. Fortunately our funders – the Legacy Trust and Arts Council England – were comfortable with this and happy to be involved.

From a dance perspective it was an ambitious project involving training, commissioning a new work, a festival, outdoor performances and making two

Dance for Camera films.

Needless to say, not all of it went as planned and I'd like to look specifically at the diversity issue.

We had been asked by members of our learning disabled advisory team for Asian and Irish dance. We successfully recruited eight dance leaders as trainees in November 2011. However, despite putting out a call to a wide and culturally diverse range of dance companies in the region directly and also via Arts Council England, DanceXchange, Foundation for Community Dance and other agencies, we failed to attract dance leaders whose central practice lay outside of European contemporary dance. We discussed this with Piali Ray, the director of Sampad, and others and came to the conclusion that

many Asian communities in the UK remain reticent about allowing disabled family members to perform publicly and consequently there are few dance leaders from these backgrounds with an interest in this area. On reflection, further evidenced by our research, we are not aware of long term Asian disability dance projects in the UK. It also seems that the dance agencies, while being in touch with many traditional dancers, have yet to make major connections with the Irish dance world.

In retrospect it is clear that we needed to amend our recruitment process – how we sought out these dancers and perhaps what we expected of them. In asking for dancers to facilitate people with a learning disability to create new work, >

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Right: Rehearsals for We Dance festival.
Photos: Brendan Maclean

we did not take into account the fact that this is not traditionally how dance is created. We have learnt enormous lessons in this respect. In the end we recruited the best applicants and this resulted in a strong and enthusiastic team who over a very short space of time facilitated a set of four stunning dance performances. As for the diverse dance styles we took a different approach. Piali, the Legacy Trust and others helped us to introduce Chitrleka Dance Company into the programme, offering a beautiful processional traditional Indian dance from a fifth participatory group. Plus we included Bhangra, line and ballroom dancing into the workshop programme.

So what was achieved?

- We delivered training to eight independent dance leaders
- We worked with four Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, one youth group and two adult groups
- A two day festival was held at mac with performances by the community groups, Freefall and StopGAP dance companies; workshops; an exhibition featuring the winners of Derwen College's learning disability art competition Going for Gold; an exhibition of dance costumes and an opportunity to be photographed as a ballet dancer and a participatory installation created over the weekend
- Two Dance for camera films were made: one with Freefall Dance Company and one with pupils from Fox Hollies and Uffculme schools. Both supported by film makers Sima Gonsai and Babis Alexiadis. After being shown at the festival they were broadcast on the BBC Big Screens throughout the UK and future screenings at film festivals here and abroad are planned
- Outdoor performances of the Freefall commission The Clean Sweep were

held at the Live Sites in Birmingham and Coventry as part of the Paralympic celebrations

- 541 learning disabled people participated, we had a total audience (live and via the screens) of an estimated 1,552,462 and 23 people with a learning disability volunteered to work alongside mac Birmingham staff at the festival.

A vital aspect of We Dance was a commitment to growing a sustainable legacy. Some examples are:

- mac Birmingham have been inspired to research growing a programme of disability arts
- They are working to train some of the learning disabled volunteers as Customer Service Assistants
- People with a learning disability are signing up for their regular workshop programme
- At least two of the community groups will continue employing our We Dance trainees, all of whom have been asked to become peer mentors for DanceXchange
- Freefall dancers have developed new skills as dancers and mentors.

In the words of one of our participants, Scott, "it's all incredible, dancing, people, going on the stage. I love dancing. It has touched me – it's something I'll never forget."

contact Gus Garside gus.garside@mencap.org.uk / Claire Marshall claire@changingcultures.org

We Dance was part of Dancing for the Games, which was inspired by London 2012 and part of the Cultural Olympiad in the West Midlands. It was funded by Legacy Trust UK, an independent charity set up to help build a lasting cultural and sporting legacy from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Arts Council England and Advantage West Midlands. We Dance was part of Big Dance.

