

What's the point of community dance projects?



Esther Felicitas Modu, Movement Artist, reflects on her experience of organising a Big Dance event in her local community, Haringey, North London

I am a resident of Tottenham in the borough of Haringey, North London. For the past ten years, I have worked as a freelance dancer, teacher and choreographer. Nine out of those years I lived in Haringey.

Over the years I came across a wide range of reactions when being asked where I lived. Predominantly a worried look or curious exclamation of: "Oh really. How is that going...?" As a happy and long-term resident of Haringey, I generally pointed out that I enjoyed living here, enjoyed its diversity, "an area researchers at University College London recently proclaimed the most ethnically diverse in Britain – and possibly all of Western Europe..." (1). This diversity, to me, has always been the beauty of this area.

In September 2011, the Tottenham riots kicked-off. This event seemed to confirm the cynics' opinion of Tottenham being a violent and rebellious place.

I am an active member of the laymen's Buddhist organisation SGI (Society for Value Creation). The SGI is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) aiming to promote culture, education and peace based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin is a humanistic philosophy that teaches that all life, all people without exception inherently possess a Buddha nature, a life state of absolute happiness. The SGI and its members seek "to raise high the banner of world citizenship, the spirit of tolerance, and respect for all human rights based on the humanistic spirit of Buddhism, and to challenge the global issues that face humankind through dialogue and practical efforts based on a steadfast commitment to non-violence..." (2). Everything begins with one's immediate environment, one's friends, families and communities. This notion propelled me to create value in my local borough.

Shortly after the riots, I read about Micro Grants (funded by Legacy Trust UK), supporting individuals to organise their own Big Dance 2012 event in their local community in London. Up to that point I had always been critical towards community dance projects, doubting their long-lasting effects. However, the Micro Grant seemed the perfect opportunity to actively contribute to my local community and to promote Haringey as a harmonious, lively borough. My application was successful and I received a Micro Grant of £1000. I determined that my Big Dance event, Haringey Moves, would represent Haringey in the best possible way,

reflecting the wealth of it's diversity and community spirit.

My aim was to organise an inclusive project, enabling local residents to participate in free dance workshops leading towards a performance in July 2012. To achieve this, I decided to run five workshops, open to all ages and abilities. Additionally, five workshops in the local The Brook and The Willow School, working with 26 children aged 7 – 11 years, out of which 13 had severe learning disabilities. In this way I was able to create two contemporary dance based dances.

While distributing flyers advertising these workshops I truly got to know the local community. I held many conversations on the street, encouraging people to come, children, adults, anyone. I was struck by a general apprehension towards dance, and an anticipated sense of embarrassment, which many people seemed to associate with it. I was surprised how difficult it was to actually get people to come to the workshops. In my mind I had envisaged crowds wanting to join. I learnt how much more had to be done to make dance more attractive and accessible to the general public. For dance to be seen as a natural expression of life, as part of daily life, not something exclusive for the trained dancer.

"All life is dancing. The trees with the wind, the waves on the sea, the birds, the fish, all performing their own dance of life. Every living thing is dancing, and you must keep dancing too, for the rest of your life." (3). This sense of dance being in and all around us sums up just what a universal language dance is.

Currently, there is one Youth Centre in Tottenham, open one evening a week for three hours. When approaching the young people attending the centre, I felt a tangible sense of distrust. Despite several teenagers expressing their desire to come along to the workshops, none of them made it in the end. Personally, I feel this is due to learned low expectations and disappointment. Exciting cultural projects simply aren't the norm. Thereby, it is alien to come across them, and even less likely people participate. I also feel that a lot of young people particularly in Haringey are trapped by the overall complex image of this borough, an idea that has managed to survive. Yes, Haringey, precisely Tottenham, has run-down buildings, few charming cafés, limited facilities, but none of this is to do with the inherent potential of the people who live here. Having said that, the lack of a shiny environment does have a perceivable negative effect on people's belief in >

Right: Haringey Moves participants, Rosa and Zyon Belle-Fortune.
Photo: Kate Belle-Fortune

Left: Esther Modu.
Photo: Chukuma Modu



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'happening' projects and initiatives.

In the end, a total of 18 local residents (aged 4 – 68 years old) participated in the workshops. Seven out of these were local residents that I had never met before. It was my aim that each session would deepen the connection and relationship with their bodies and dance in general.

The workshops involved a guided warm-up, leading into improvisation tasks, both alone and as a group. In the last 45 minutes I would teach choreography, performed to Curtis Mayfield's Move On Up. Each rehearsal was filmed and then uploaded online for everyone to practise at home. This proved to be extremely popular with the group. The links to the rehearsal video were eagerly awaited each week.

The dance consisted of one main section performed in unison scattered across the space and group formations. We had a large sun painted on a canvas that split in the middle half way through the dance. It was a joy to see different generations of people come together in this way, each inspiring the other was truly remarkable! Both young and older contributed their unique qualities and made this group a joyful, proud and courageous group.

For the second dance, I worked with children from The Brook and The Willow School. The Brook is a Special Needs school, which regularly combines some of its lessons with the neighbouring mainstream Willow School. Two classes from each school joined the Haringey Moves project, totalling 26 children. The main challenge was to work around the schools' timetables, and getting all four classes to attend each rehearsal. Because of the nature of the two schools, the children are used to working inclusively, which was a great experience. Each older mainstream child (aged 9 – 11 years) partnered up with a child with severe learning disabilities. Working in this way, allowed us to discuss the importance of listening to each other's bodies. To transcend difference and unite on the basis that we are all equal.

The children's dance consisted of wheelchair formations weaving in and out of the space, long pieces of bright textile – building a temporary cover for each child to grab hold of, skipping, stretching, clapping, improvisation and all the children decorated their own t-shirts. We performed to Macy Gray's song There is Beauty in the World, a statement which was our running theme for this dance and the overall message of the whole performance.

On 6th July 2012, the community group and school children performed in front of 250 children and local residents. It was a great success. My final memory of that day is the whole room (audience included) engaging in a series of moves together. All the more powerful because it was spontaneous. The whole room was dancing and proving how infectious dance is.

Since that performance I am part of a local group that takes responsibility for cultural performances at the open-air Shell Theatre in Haringey. In the long-term I have built a new relationship with this community, and trust that this project has touched the lives of those who participated in the workshops, and those who witnessed the final performance. During this process I have seen a small transformation in those who had the courage and desire to participate, I believe that we all have taken something away from this experience, and that hopefully in the future similar projects will encounter less resistance. Personally, I feel this is the beginning of my efforts in making dance more accessible, and to live this spirit each day.

So... what's the point of community dance projects?

- To have and create fun right at your doorstep
- To choose to identify with your community
- To actively contribute to your community
- To get to know your neighbours
- To find out about local people's ambitions and values
- To be empowered as a citizen of your local area
- To improve communication in your borough
- To get passionate about where you live

And.....and.....and.....

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(1) Jumana Farouky, 'Unity Begins at Home' – TIME magazine, 15 February 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1590193,00.html?iid=chix-sphere> (accessed on 30.11.12)

(2) SGI-UK, 'SGI Charter', n.d., <http://www.sgi-uk.org/about-us/sgi-charter> (accessed on 30.11.12)

(3) Daisaku Ikeda, 'Buddhism Day by Day: Wisdom for Modern Life', Santa Monica, The Middleway Press, 2006, p.394.