

Brendan Keaney



How to turn a house into a home

Brendan Keaney, Chief Executive and Artistic Director of DanceEast, reflects on his journey at Greenwich Dance over the past 16 years



Nigel Charnock. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

2012 was a year of mixed emotions. It was a particularly busy year at Greenwich Dance. We kicked off with British Dance Edition and as the year progressed so did the partnership between Greenwich Dance and Trinity Laban. In the summer we hosted Big Dance in South East London and took a breath as the Olympics arrived. An extraordinary sense of achievement swept across the country and I was particularly proud that one of Greenwich Dance's resident artists, Temujin Gill, was part of Danny Boyle's creative team.

In theory the year was going extremely well, however the tragic death of Nigel Charnock completely dominated events for me, consequently 2012 will always be the year that Nigel died.

Inspiring is a much overused adjective, however this was not the case with Nigel. It is no coincidence then, that when I first learned of Nigel's illness it triggered a process of self-reflection and re-evaluation of my direction in life. Through his work Nigel had taught me lots about the world and how people relate to each other. However, he kept his most important lesson until the end. He reminded me that life is short and there is not enough time to do everything. I realised that my meter was running and I would probably need to leave a job that I absolutely loved – I had lost track

of time over the last 16 years, and this was a luxury I could ill afford. If I wanted to embark on a genuinely new chapter in my life and wanted a new challenge, I needed to start the process of change sooner rather than later.

When I initially considered applying for the post at DanceEast I was still very much in the same reflective mode. Was this the right move? What could I bring with me to this new role? There were lots of questions and at this time I had not really taken stock of what I had achieved at Greenwich Dance. Whilst I was particularly proud of the fact that somehow we had managed to balance the separate roles of being a service organisation and maintaining an individual artistic voice what I was less sure of was exactly what we had done, en route, to make this happen. How had Greenwich Dance ended up where it was?

I decided to start by considering my initial aspirations for Greenwich Dance Agency (as it was then known) when I first applied for the job just over 16 years ago in 1996. This is not to suggest that I consider the two situations to be similar. On the contrary, the landscape was very different in the 1990s, as were the resources that were available. By way of providing a bit of context, as I was about to take up post in Greenwich, I was presented with my very first mobile phone. Yes, mobiles were still the exception rather >



Left: Rosemary Lee's
Common Dance.
Photo: Rachel Cherry

Right: Student from
University Campus Suffolk,
The Red Shoe Studio,
Jerwood DanceHouse.
Photo: David Parry

than the rule and I was particularly proud of my new phone, which was a leaving present from colleagues at the Arts Council! More critically Greenwich Dance was just three years old when I took up post whereas DanceEast had been around for 30 years.

In retrospect, I was particularly naive about the role of a Director and what was required to create a successful enterprise. I initially imagined that that there were just two parts of the equation, on one side there were the Artistic Director's priorities and on the other side there was the operating environment. What I don't think I really understood was the size and scale of all the other factors that would bear down on me and most critically, how to manage the huge cast of players that I would need to work with.

I am loathed to prioritise any one group as being the most important or most influential to me, however given that I spent the majority of my time with my immediate colleagues it would seem the most appropriate to talk about them. I suspect that all the individuals who end up leading an organisation/enterprise have at least one megalomaniac gene and I am no exception. If I did manage to keep my megalomaniac trait in check whilst I was working at Greenwich (I understand that this proposition may be up for debate) then it was my colleagues who should take the credit. They learned how to steer me if I was heading into a corner too fast and alert me if I was driving without due care and attention. It takes an enormous amount of skill to be a co-pilot and my colleagues appeared to do this effortlessly.

In reality those things that appear

effortless usually require the most skill and energy. It is not easy to get anyone to genuinely evaluate their performance and reflect on their strengths and weakness. Everyone has the capacity to get defensive. It requires a particularly high level of tact and diplomacy to get your boss to understand that s/he may have made a bad call. I was extremely fortunate at Greenwich as I worked with very patient people who were happy to manage me as and when required.

It goes without saying that there would be no work without artists. It seems less than inclusive to single out individuals or projects but I am not sure how you explain what happened over such a long period of time if you don't provide examples. Consequently, if I had to identify one project that summed up what I was trying to achieve at Greenwich Dance, it would be Common Dance, choreographed by Rosemary Lee in 2009.

I am not going to talk about the project in detail here as it is already documented in previous editions of *Animated*. However, in many ways, Common Dance perfectly illustrated and set out our priorities. It was about presenting high quality dance and it was also about celebrating a sense of community through dance. Rosie is part choreographer and part magician – she casts spells on her dancers and apparently ordinary people realise they have an extraordinary capacity. Most importantly she also understands the special qualities of the environment she is working in. Common Dance was certainly a celebration of dance, community and people, but it was also concerned with the particular qualities of a shared space.





Rosie invested an enormous amount of her energy in the making of the piece and we understood that as producers we needed to reciprocate. We also understood that the non-trained dancers were making a big commitment in terms of their time. They needed to be able to relax during both the creation period and the very intense performance periods too. Consequently, we created a new green room for the cast (in a part of the building that was previously used as a chair store!) as we wanted the artists to feel at home. The Common Room remains as a legacy at Greenwich Dance – not just to the project itself but also to the fact that you need to invest in all projects – investment is not just about money it is also about generosity.

Moving forward to today, it is just over one month into my new job as Chief Executive and Artistic Director of DanceEast, the sun is shining and the season is at last changing, a metaphor I hope, for the way forward. Assis Carreiro, my predecessor at DanceEast, has left me an extraordinary legacy. It seems a great privilege to be custodian of DanceEast's Jerwood Dancehouse. I could not have imagined that people would have had access to this quality of dance studio when I first started to work in dance. The facilities are stunning, the light and sense of space in the large studio on the second floor is almost overwhelming.

Consequently I must thank Nigel for getting me here. I must also thank him for helping me think through my priorities – which reminds me that I have many people to thank as well as Nigel, Rosie and my former colleagues. However, the time for reflecting is now over as it is not just mobile phones that have changed in the last 20 years. I am about to start a massive new learning curve and this time, thanks to other people's generosity, I am armed with a lot more information. In particular Common Dance taught me how to understand the identity of a building and it might sound trite but it is important to remember that it takes more than a house to make a home.

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