

The artistic imperative in community dance

Ken Bartlett leaves us with a personal manifesto for the centrality of art and dance and making of meaning through engaging in dance as artists

As a start I want to offer you a rather long quote from Nigerian author Ben Okri's selection of essays *A Way of Being Free*. This is a whirlwind of reflections on the power of art, the role of the artist, in his case poet and writer, and what art does for us as audiences, cultures and societies. I quote this because I want to re-assert what I think dance is at its most essential and why I think the artistic imperative is central to our work.

This is an extract from his essay 'Beyond Words – we began before words and will end beyond them':

"A flamenco dancer, lurking under a shadow, prepares for the terror of her dance. Somebody has wounded her in words, alluding to the fact that she has no fire, or duende. She knows she has to dance her way past her limitations, and that this may destroy her forever. She has to fail, or she has to die. I want to dwell for a little while on this dancer because, though a very secular example, she speaks very well for the power of human transcendence. I want you to imagine this frail woman. I want you to see her in deep shadow and fear. When the music starts she begins her dance, with ritual slowness. Then she stamps out the dampness from her soul. Then she stamps the fire into her loins. She takes on a strange enchanted glow. With a dark tragic rage, shouting, she hurls her hungers, her doubts, her terrors and her secular prayer for more light into the spaces around her. All fire and fate, she spins her enigma around us, and pulls us into the awesome risk of her dance.

She is taking herself apart before our sceptical gaze.

She is disintegrating, shouting and stamping and dissolving the boundaries of her body. Soon she becomes a wild unknown force. Glowing in her death, dancing from her wound, dying from her dance.

And when she stops – strangely gigantic in her new fiery stature – she is like one who has survived the most dangerous journey of all. I can see her now as she stands shining in celebration of her own death. In the silence that follows, no one moves. The fact is that she has destroyed us all.

Why do I dwell on this dancer?

I dwell on her because she represents for me the courage to go beyond ourselves; while she danced she became the dream of the freest and most creative people we had always wanted to be, in whatever it is we do. She was the sea we never ran away to, the spirit of wordless self-overcoming we never quite embrace. She destroyed us because we knew in our hearts that rarely do we rise to the higher challenges in our lives, or our work or our humanity. She destroyed us because rarely do we love our tasks and our lives enough to die and be reborn into the divine gift of our hidden genius. We seldom try for that beautiful greatness brooding in the mystery of our blood." (1)

What is important about this for me is the attention it pays to the valuing of the human spirit and the transcendence from the everyday that the arts, and in our case, dance offers us.

Helen Thomas in her essay 'An-Other Voice – Young Women Talking and Dancing' in the book, *Dance, Gender and Culture*, which she researched over

a nine month period of work with a community dance project, states:

"In all these young women's talk, dance emerges as a source of pleasure...it enables them to express themselves in a way they cannot with words, in all the talk there is a notion of transcending reality, the sense of dance as a feeling of otherness." (2)

Time and again, people talk about their involvement in dance as being not just life enhancing – a hobby – they talk about it as being life affirming – at the centre of their lives and their hopes for the future – the way in which young people talk about their experience of dancing at 'raves' or the youth club disco can be as articulate and intense as those who have made dance their life's work. The power with which people with different physical and intellectual abilities articulate the richness of their experience through dance can be truly inspirational. For me it is the experience of dance itself that empowers and then offers the potential for empowerment in other areas of life.

It seems to me, whether the context of the participation is at a disco or a tea dance, an active member of a community dance group, a workshop for people with Parkinson's or the audience at the ballet, that dance offers us, unlike any other artform, a direct connection with the physical, the sensual and the erotic; powerful forces in a culture that denies their importance and value and has a substantial history of attempting to suppress and control them.

It also has as Carol Becker states in her book, *The Subversive Imagination*, a 'psychic value'. Along with all the arts, she continues, "It allows for



Ken Bartlett (left), 1972

Ken Bartlett, FCD Summer School 2010.
Photo: Rachel Cherry



By dancing ourselves, we connect directly
with the physical, we are placed in touch
with that part of ourselves that in this culture
is undervalued and often denied.

a recombination of experiences, a suspension of the rules of daily life, a denial of gravity (in the metaphoric, not the balletic sense).” It challenges “the monopoly of the established reality. It presents the possibility of fulfilment... It is a reminder of what a truly integrated experience of what oneself in society might be, a remembrance of gratification, a sense of purpose beyond alienation... It has the power to remind people of what has been buried – desires their deepest selves dream but cannot manifest within the existing system. It can embody the tension that keeps hope alive.” (3)

In other words it allows us to see, however momentarily, that the world could be different – even a better place.

Dance as a collaborative practice challenges the English/USA-centric culture of individualism and narcissism and reaffirms the collective. It has the power, to quote Dick Hebdige, from his book *Subculture – the Meaning of Style*, “to help the individual transcend self-centeredness and discover rootedness by establishing the connection between, and the difference from the group.” (4)

To paraphrase the words of the Black American cultural theorist B Ruby Rich, even though the spark of the dance may originate in the isolation of the individual ego, the work is produced in the call-and-response connection that links each of us to some kind of community, however literal, geographic, symbolic or delineated. That community may be where the force of the dance might arise or be inspired and where it may return, to be taken in, replenished, celebrated or criticised.

So, transcendence, otherness, self-expression, learning of skills, appreciation of quality, engagement in critical discourse, valuing the individual, yet feeding off and giving back to some kind of community are all elements of why I am optimistic for the future of community dance.

This artform focused work, such as that being developed in the best of community and participatory dance at least confronts the value and importance of the art itself, and that is its strength. We may from time to time promote the instrumental benefits – personal and social education, health and wellbeing, etc. – that in my view will only happen if the arts experience is of the highest quality. At the end of the day however, what is important to me is people engaging directly with the form, struggling with it to make meaning, and purposefully skilling themselves to say something about themselves, the human condition and the world they live in. For me what is central is giving full access to people to engage in and struggle seriously with the sensuous aesthetic fulfilment of the art making process – the love of material, the principles of structure, the pleasure of translating abstract concepts into concrete form. In short, making art and being artists.

Dance in all its manifestations, places the dancers as subjects, it is we who make and are the form, it is we who are the artists. This is its power. It is demanding of us. It demands submission to its discipline. It demands the ability to work metaphorically thus providing us with the tools for successful art making. We shouldn't be afraid of that, nor deny the opportunity or pleasure that comes from the successful control of technique – this gives us all greater choice as artists. Nor should we be afraid of content which is problematic, or aesthetic codes that are different.

In making and participating in dance, we form and reform our individual and collective identities. At its best we celebrate and we question, we are constantly engaged in the evaluative and reflective processes through which value is generated and sustained.

By having the opportunity to see dance that feeds into our dreams and aspirations about who we are and how we want to be, it inspires us to have a go and want to dance ourselves. It invites us to be witness to and appreciate the power and beauty of dance which opens a valve in our hearts and souls, and allows us to hope for and frame a different and better way of being.

By dancing ourselves, we connect directly with the physical, we are placed in touch with that part of ourselves that in this culture is undervalued and often denied. We are placed at the centre of ourselves, as our bodies become the vehicle of our expression. We are, in this most embodied of the arts, operating as artists and creative people who are not only learning the skills to dance, but also creating and appreciating dance, in the fullest and most human way possible and finding our own dance voice.

In engaging with dance as learners, makers, audiences or critics we are investing in new ways of thinking and being, in our desire to be more fully human. We are subscribing to a life that is more than value for money, or our identity as a commodity to be bought or sold, or buying into an arts funding system that as well as ensuring that the arts exist may also limit our vision of what the arts might become and the range of aesthetics as yet undiscovered. Most importantly we are committing to a life of the spirit, of connectedness and of difference, and of considering the possibilities of our future.

(1) Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, Phoenix House (1997)

(2) Helen Thomas, *Dance, Gender and Culture*: Palgrave Macmillan (1995)

(3) Carol Becker, *The Subversive Imagination*: Routledge (1994)

(4) Dick Hebdige, *Subculture - the Meaning of Style*: Routledge (1979)