

Catherine Cassidy.
Photo: Eve McConnachie



Education is everywhere

Catherine Cassidy, Associate Director (Education), Scottish Ballet, sets out the importance of education and outreach in giving opportunities to engage in dance to everyone



At Scottish Ballet education is everywhere. The company prides itself on its vibrant and dynamic education programme that engages with community groups of all ages and abilities across Scotland and beyond. From community performances in rural woodland areas, to fresh new Parkour and ballet projects in parks and on the beach – this is a company that seeks to break down barriers and open its doors to everyone.

“We value our education and outreach work as much as our main artistic output,” says Scottish Ballet’s Artistic Director Christopher Hampson. “I’ve been thrilled at how we can utilise work undertaken in this area to feed directly into our main programme of performances. The Dancers’ Education Group is one way in which we’ve been able to integrate company dancers with dance artists from within our Education Department – enabling an exchange of ideas and a healthy respect between each artist’s areas of expertise.”

It is this clear commitment to access that has seen the education work of the company grow and excel. Established in January 2013 the results of the Dancers’ Education Group have been palpable. The group of eight dancers have benefited from this new programme, which offers bespoke training, mentoring and the opportunity to gain practical experience delivering classes, workshops and projects in a supportive environment. The initiative is planned and delivered by the Education Department who have found the dancers’ involvement has fortified Scottish Ballet’s education activity programme significantly.

Participants shoot the main scene, filming of Big Dance Pledge 2014. Photo: Richard Parr

Participants love meeting the

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dancers, and to be taught by them is an additional pleasure. We ensure that the dancers are well equipped and supported in their role and that they also have the chance to contribute significantly to the creative planning of projects, workshops and talks.

Feedback from the dancers and participants alike has been excellent, and we are now planning a new teaching module for the programme in partnership with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Modern Ballet department.

Scottish Ballet's recent Hansel & Gretel, and Me initiative has demonstrated just how successful such in-house collaborations can be. Led by Christopher Hampson and the company's Education Department, Scottish Ballet worked in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland, the National Galleries Scotland, The Scotsman and the National Library Scotland – as well as a host of arts organisations and agencies – to deliver a range of opportunities for the Scottish community to get creative and share their ideas for a brand new Hansel and Gretel ballet. Following two national writing competitions, an art competition, five woodland performances and a summer school, Christopher had a huge amount of wonderful, engaging research materials available to kick start his creative process – and participants were left with the knowledge that they had contributed in a meaningful way.

"Your ideas were your own," said one participant in Dundee. "You got to show off your own specific personal touch and style of movement and natural rhythm."

The project was a huge, fascinating journey for all involved and provided first-time experiences for participants and staff alike.

Working with a diversity of participants in both cities and rural areas meant that the team had to be flexible and adaptable and respond quickly to new creative ideas.

As far as we know, we are the first ballet company to research a new professional production through a yearlong, multi-artform outreach project



Regenerate class participant in rehearsal, over 50s performance course with Scottish Ballet Education department and guest choreographers. Photo: Andrew Ross

– and the results were magical.

And the company's programme for the Edinburgh International Festival 2013 also provided an excellent opportunity to engage in a genuine way with community participants of all ages and stages, when as part of Scottish Ballet's award-winning Dance Odysseys programme the company's Education Department delivered Twyla Tharp's The One Hundreds alongside the Dancers' Education Group.

This set piece of choreography requires five professional dancers to learn 100 individual eleven-count movement phrases, and a further cast of 100 community participants to each

learn one of the individual phrases taught directly from a dancer. During the event each dancer taught 20 people an individual phrase, one at a time. A wonderful experience was had by all and there was a real sense of fun and community – resulting in a striking performance on the professional stage.

"The fact that we were workshoped by the same dancers with whom we appeared later on stage gave a sense of belonging and a level of equality," said one of The One Hundreds participants. "I experienced all the tutors, dancers and organisers to be absolutely lovely – loving, friendly, tolerant, understanding, flexible and inspiring!"



Participants shoot the main scene, filming of Big Dance Pledge 2014. Photo: Richard Parr

“The opportunity to spend time with the dancers individually learning the moves was particularly special,” said another participant. “I can honestly say that the day was really inspirational – Scottish Ballet is really making ballet accessible to the whole community.”

And the opportunity to connect to the work of the company is something that Scottish Ballet is proud to offer for participants of all ages – starting with Wee Mice parent and child classes for those aged three years and older. These developmental movement play sessions are delivered weekly at the company’s base at Tramway in Glasgow, and around the country during tour time – with special Christmas programmes held during holiday times in both Edinburgh and Glasgow as part of the company’s commitment to offering early years initiatives.

In 2011 Scottish Ballet introduced a special matinee performance of the festive production to encourage families with very young children to come along to a first-time ballet experience. With dancers dressed in character ready to greet families in the theatre foyer providing a fun and welcoming atmosphere in the auditorium, and a special performance with the full orchestra, the company is serious about engaging with young people and igniting that passion at an early age.

But perhaps one of the most exciting developments of the last year is the huge growth in the company’s ballet sessions for participants aged 50 years and over. Scottish Ballet has increased classes from one to four a week – and such popular demand suggests that the company could easily fill more – so much so that Scottish Ballet is now offering regular drop-in Silver Swans workshops and delivers a series of Ballet Café events where participants can spend the afternoon with members of the team enjoying a beginners’ class, tea, cake and conversation – as well as hearing more about the forthcoming production.

As part of Scottish Ballet’s ongoing commitment to dance for everyone the company have also recently announced that they are working with the Foundation for Community Dance on this year’s Big Dance Pledge.

We have shaken things up a bit this year, creating a dance we hope is fun, infectious and accessible to everyone. For the first time participants have the opportunity to make a dance in their own style inspired by our choreography, and you can also learn the Pledge dance via our new tutorial film.

“This year’s Big Dance Pledge aims to include everyone, regardless of age, ability and gender,” added 2014 Dance Pledge choreographer Lorraine Jamieson. “Dance is instinctive in many ways; we see this behaviour in babies who move unprompted to music, sounds and rhythms. We dance because it’s fun!

It was so important to encapsulate that by creating a Pledge that is not only enjoyable and infectious, but also gives participants permission to adapt the material to suit their own style and ability.”

Resources comprise three films; a showcase film, the tutorial film and a film of new community dances created in several styles in response to the 2014 Pledge dance. For more information visit www.bigdance.org.uk

visit www.scottishballet.co.uk
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Participants, Dundee Woodland performance, Hansel & Gretel, and Me. Photo: Andrew Ross