

Inclusivity at the heart of dance

Rose Beeston, Manager at Dancefest, talks about their inclusive project, Jigsaw, involving disabled and non-disabled people of all ages in devising, production and performance

Before becoming the dance development organisation for Herefordshire and Worcestershire in 2000, Dancefest started life as a festival, curated to raise the profile of dance in the community, education and in performance. Inclusive practice and the creation of dance opportunities accessible to everyone are embedded in our ethos and delivery. We have always aimed to inspire by using dance as a creative tool and to enable people of all ages and abilities to take part in high quality participatory activities through the provision of projects and a community programme of classes.

There are many barriers to disabled people taking part in dance, particularly independently, everything from lack of confidence to transport. Through numerous projects specifically for disabled people, in schools and with community organisations, often with people who have never danced before, Dancefest aims to demonstrate the wonderfulness of dance and its ability to enable good things to happen, from developing new skills to making new friends. We collaborate with others to increase independent opportunities for disabled dancers and aim as much as possible to be accessible to everyone who wants to dance.

Jigsaw is a project at the heart of Dancefest's work. It began in 1999 in Herefordshire, as a small inclusive project involving disabled and non-disabled people of all ages in all aspects of a dance project from devising to production and performance. In scale and vision the work has developed; initially dance was the only artform, and now in partnership with the Music Pool (Herefordshire's music agency), music plays a central

part too, with musicians creating new music that is played live during rehearsals and performances. Film has also added an exciting visual element.

Great importance is placed on the work being given the appropriate setting, and the use of a professional theatre with high production values has been key to the development of the project in Herefordshire, to engage new audiences and to raise the profile for inclusive performance. The final performances take place at the Courtyard Centre for the Arts in Hereford, a partner involved over many years. This approach has seen schools, youth dance groups and organisations become regular participants and seen audiences grow in expectation of an exciting event.

Jigsaw also takes place in Worcestershire but with a slightly different remit. The process in both counties begins with 6 to 12 weekly sessions engaging participants in creative devising sessions. In Worcestershire there is less emphasis on the final performance – instead all participants come together for a sharing day. Some participants are more profoundly disabled young people and we aim to find ways of enabling everyone to take part, sometimes by creating a film to be shown. The support of teachers and care workers is vital, enabling each individual to fully benefit from their involvement and for participation to be targeted to their needs and abilities. The final day, sometimes in a theatre and sometimes using site-specific spaces, starts with a fun getting to know each other warm up, followed by a showing of each group's dance and lunch. This year the sharing took place at Longlands





Main image: Lovely Bugs, Jess Allen (Ladybird) and Eleni Edipidi (Bee). Photo: Dave Provis.
Top: Jigsaw Herefordshire, Mole in a Hole at the Courtyard, Hereford Senior Youth Dance and Transitions Dance Company. Photo: Georgina Barber. Middle: Rose Beeston, 12 Moves flash mob, Dancefest's Dancing for the Games project, Bewdley. Photo: SDNA. Bottom: Lovely Bugs, Lisa Spaul (Incy Spider), Jess Allen (Ladybird) and Eleni Edipidi (Bee). Photo: Dave Provis

Care Farm, home to everyBODY dance, an organisation born out of Blue Eyed Soul, that specialises in inclusive dance in unusual spaces (www.everybodydance.org.uk) and after the groups performed, they watched everyBODY dance's aerial performance, Lovely Bugs.

"It's a fantastic experience, the children learned so much, beyond the dance experience in terms of cooperating with others, tolerance and teamwork." says Michelle Horsburgh, teacher at The Brookfield School, who have taken part in Jigsaw in Herefordshire for several years.

It is important that provision exists beyond these projects and that there are long-term opportunities for disabled dancers to participate and perform. The Jigsaw Performance Group was set up in 2011 for dancers aged 16 and over who had been part of the biennial project in Herefordshire and wanted to continue to dance and perform beyond the life of the project. It is now a thriving group who meet weekly and create regular performances. They have a hectic performance schedule and performed at Hereford Library in a piece specially created for our film, *Virtually Dancefest*, and a pop up performance in Hereford city centre alongside other Dancefest groups in the summer. We are currently working with a special school in Hereford to develop a Jigsaw Juniors group for younger dancers. We have built independent opportunities for disabled dancers as part of our weekly classes and are developing more.

Recently we have been working with Rachel Freeman of everyBODY dance offering inclusive sessions, with the long-term aim of forming an inclusive company of dancers, and increasing performance opportunities.

We have a long way to go but it's very important to Dancefest that we are an organisation known to provide an excellent participatory experience for all abilities and that we work with artists, schools and community organisations to develop the offer, provide progression routes and ensure that inclusive work is a natural and vital part of our dance ecology.

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