



Image taken from Dancing With Your Neighbours film (c) Yorkshire Dance. To watch visit <http://bit.ly/1piHD4r>

I feel I know you better now

Hannah Robertshaw, Yorkshire Dance's Youth & Community Dance Director, reflects upon the making of a short film created by young people from Yorkshire Dance Youth. Filmed on location in inner city Leeds, the film presents a personal insight into these communities, presenting conversations through dance

Standing in Shirley's front room in the middle of Seacroft, Leeds, watching her demonstrate that, at 54, she can still get her leg behind her head was an experience beyond the usual realm of community dance. "This is a special place," remarked Shirley when she was asked about living in this particular community of inner city Leeds. We couldn't agree more and our time spent with Shirley, Barbara and the many other people that we encountered on location in Seacroft reminded us that people are at the heart of what we do and that their stories, humour and personality are

central to the art we make with them.

Dancing With Your Neighbours, a youth dance and film project, was part of Juncture 2014. (1) It enabled us to explore a new way of approaching community dance that led us directly into the heart of a community, onto the streets and into people's homes.

We wanted to challenge the very notion of community dance. To site something in a community, to involve people beyond the usual sphere of an arts project, to dance in unusual spaces, to teach dance in people's kitchens, sitting rooms, front garden and on the road outside their house, to gather a series of interviews alongside

developing a choreographic response to the theme. We wanted to find out when dance had touched people's lives, what their first memories of dance were, why they danced or why they didn't dance. More than anything, we wanted to get people to open up and to talk, and ultimately... to dance.

Dancing With Your Neighbours took the young people of Yorkshire Dance Youth on a journey to the place they live and with the people that live around them. It took dance – and conversations about dance – to people without the need for a large-scale campaign. "I feel I know you better now," remarked Sammi, a Yorkshire >



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Dance Youth member, to one of her peers in the group.

The young people from Yorkshire Dance Youth represent some of the most deprived areas of Leeds. Seacroft is an outer-city suburb/township consisting mainly of council estate housing covering an extensive area of east Leeds. The area's population is 18,000 and includes one of the largest council estates in the country – the second largest in Yorkshire – so large it is often referred to as a town.

The project builds on a long-standing commitment that Yorkshire Dance has to its surrounding neighbourhoods in Leeds and further develops the work with Yorkshire Dance Youth and their families. The bond between the organisation and these communities has been strengthened over the past three years by nurturing young talent of those living in this community.

Whilst much of the work to date has focused on bringing young people out of this community, Dancing With Your Neighbours explored placing dance back in the heart of the neighbourhood.

Moving beyond the confines of a dance studio and onto the streets of Seacroft felt like a gamble and the idea of approaching their neighbours presented a genuine challenge for the young people involved. The group

worked for four weeks in preparation for two days' filming on location in their neighbourhoods. They explored a new movement vocabulary with guest artist and choreographer Anthony Middleton and worked alongside local artist Danielle Byars to shape interviews and explore the themes of the project. The filming and editing was beautifully done by Leeds-based arts organisation Space2.

The partnership with Space2 further strengthened the delivery of this project with the belief that the arts can work as part of the solution to some entrenched issues in some of Leeds' most challenged neighbourhoods. The expertise offered by the Space2 team enabled the young people to feel fully supported as they performed and interviewed people on the streets of Seacroft.

Connecting people through dance is a theme that runs at the heart of many community dance projects but the majority of these projects involve people actively seeking out the experience and more often than not, travelling to an arts venue, sports centre, community centre or school. Very few projects actually bring the experience to the people, right into their streets and homes. This way of creating dance is an imaginative way

to access a new audience and to inform a new model of participation. It also enables an intimacy that often gets lost in larger-scale participation projects. Indeed, arguably the most successful aspect of this project was not the dance at all but the interviews that captured a real snapshot of the characters within this community. The truth is that real people are fascinating and interesting and if we can develop a choreography of words, movement and film that can capture even the briefest moment of this, then surely this is worth exploring.

The concept for this project was inspired by Louise Wallinger's Annoying the Neighbours, a piece of verbatim theatre (a form of documentary theatre constructed from the precise words spoken by people interviewed), performed at Juncture. Louise's work focused on gathering interviews from her own neighbours and those dealing with neighbourhood disputes such as council officers. The wealth of material she gathered was inspirational and was reflected in live performance, which presented the humour, the drama and the absurd behaviour that can take place within a neighbourhood.

When interviewing Louise, the young people asked her about how easy it



had been to collect her interviews; “People are happy to talk about the bad stuff,” she shared, “it’s the good things that people find less easy to talk about.” This sparked a debate amongst the group about newspapers and television and the reporting of bad news. They reflected on their experience of conducting interviews in Seacroft and how challenging they’d found it to get people to share their positive stories of dance. Maybe Louise simply had a theme that lent itself to people opening up to her? Maybe dance was more something to experience rather than to talk about?

The very idea of speaking to their neighbours was daunting for many of the young people involved. They have grown up in communities in which they are not encouraged to develop a relationship with people in their neighbourhood. We’d asked the young people to approach their neighbours to ask if they were happy to participate in the project and we had a mixed response. Several young people simply felt too uncomfortable with this task and so we further supported them in finding people who they could approach. Many people were uncomfortable being on film and some of the responses to our presence on the streets of Seacroft

had to be edited to suit a family audience! Consequently, the film reflects interviews with only a handful of individuals and their families and doesn’t fully represent the breadth of conversations and encounters that the young people experienced during filming.

The final edit of the film was screened at the Juncture festival to an audience of professional artists, producers, arts officers, young people and their families. Many of the neighbours who took part also attended to share in their creation and there was a sense of complete ownership by the community in which it was shot. In front of this kind of audience, the film is a very powerful statement about how we might move community dance away from some traditional models and towards new territory.

For Yorkshire Dance, this has left an imprint that will inspire a new way of approaching community dance. Artist-led community practice remains at the forefront of Yorkshire Dance’s artistic policy, but taking dance onto the streets, into people’s houses and directly into people’s lives is a springboard for future creative practice.

The full legacy of *Dancing With Your Neighbours* remains to be seen but, in

the short-term, what is clear is that this shared experience has strengthened relationships between the young people and their sense of identity in their neighbourhoods.

The important aspect of this project was about uniting people who otherwise might not exchange anything other than a glance in the street.

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(1) Juncture 2014, a festival of contemporary performance, movement, theatre and film work curated by Wendy Houstoun, took place at Yorkshire Dance in March 2014. The festival brought together a range of contemporary performers and theatre makers from across Europe to share in a two-week programme of performances, workshops and installations. The challenge to connect the festival to the communities of Leeds and, in particular to young people, formed the basis of a bid to Leeds Inspired to create the Juncture Youth Fringe.

To watch *Dancing With Your Neighbours* please **visit** <http://bit.ly/1piHD4r>