

Keep dancing

Vina Ladwa travels the country teaching classical North Indian dance and performing with her own company. Here, **Katrin Binder**, dance student and South Asian dance scholar, writes about Vina's inspiring work with older people



Vina Ladwa has taught the classical North Indian dance style, Kathak for many decades. She delivers a variety of workshops in many contexts, and performs with her own company, Manushi Dance, at South Asian melas, community festivals and other events. Wherever she is working she shares her Indian cultural background in an accessible, joyful way and it is this enthusiasm to build bridges that inspires her work with older people.

Vina initially started working with Asian elderly people through a mentoring project funded by Dance4. Fascinated by what can be achieved with an age group not often on the radar of South Asian dance projects, and motivated by the participants' feedback, Vina has gone on to deliver projects with many different groups of older people. She has worked with both men and women, people with learning difficulties and dementia, wheelchair users and terminally ill patients.

Asked about what to her is most important in working with

older people, she quotes from a review, commissioned by The Baring Foundation, on the impact of participatory arts on older people, which says "it is evident that engaging with participatory art can improve the wellbeing of older people and mediate against the negative effects of becoming older." (1) Vina strongly feels that dance has a vital contribution to make here. Right from her first project, she has seen older people enriched by the social interactions within the group and their experience of dancing.

I accompany her to a session she is currently offering for Age UK. A group of older British ladies gather on a sunny afternoon. They are chatting happily as their teacher enters. The week before, she had created some mehendi (henna) designs on their hands and they discuss their experience, how long it lasted and that the Indian person at the corner shop commented on it. To establish a connection between her and the participants, Vina makes sure everyone feels



Top left: Vina Ladwa with participants, ICCA Nottingham. Photo: Alison Denholm

Far left: Vina Ladwa and participants. Above and left: Participants, Indian dance sessions, Age UK. Photos: Katrin Binder

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relaxed. Taking the group through gentle movement and dancing to familiar music have emerged as important tools. With music playing, the ladies are led through their warm-up, hands joined in the Namaste (a form of greeting) mudra (a symbolic or ritual gesture usually with hands and fingers), they breathe in and out, moving their arms up and down. They follow slow, repeating motions to the melody of Lord of the Dance set to Indian music. (2) With deep concentration they perform their steps and basic movements. They already know the routine well. In a group of non-Asian participants, the music may not be familiar, but it nevertheless unfolds its magic, carrying everyone along: feet seem instantly lighter, the movements suddenly appear to flow, and moods brighten.

There are multiple ways in which the use of traditional Indian dance forms provide a new experience to British older people in particular; one is the music, and another is the way

dance can tell stories with hand gestures, facial expressions and emotions. And of course the content of the story is new, too. This I witness on another occasion when Vina takes the group through a traditional story about a golden deer. Using their hands, faces and entire bodies, they move through the room to enact the story. It does not matter that some hands struggle to take the precise shape of the deer mudra or some feet may not spring as elegantly through the imaginary forest – all are deeply immersed. There is a wonderful mix of engaged focus and light-heartedness throughout the session. Again and again, the ladies burst into peals of laughter that comes straight from the heart.

When working with Asian elders, some of whom are very religious, Vina has found that stories about Indian gods strengthen the connection to their roots, which in turn helps to overcome any emotional resistance to dance. So the same aspects of Indian dance can have different, yet equally strong >



Vina Ladwa and participants, Indian dance sessions, Age UK. Photos: Katrin Binder

and positive, effects on groups of different backgrounds. It is also important that in her classes real Kathak and folk dance movements are used, which gives the classes an authentic feel and opens the door to meaningful cultural exchange.

The biggest challenge is to get older people to dance in their bare feet, says Vina. She has not yet found a solution to this problem. Watching the ladies this afternoon, I can also see the difficulty in taking some of them out of their comfort zone of movement. And yet she makes sure that their entire bodies receive a gentle workout. The necessity as well as the benefit of classes like these is immediately apparent as balance, coordination and range of movement are all exercised. The routines also exercise the brain as they involve counting, concentration and consideration of the cultural references and imagery.

The positive group spirit is very palpable on this afternoon. Moving together definitely encourages supportive communication and group confidence. They have only had a few sessions together, but they seem a very tight-knit group already. Vina has also witnessed that sessions can have an enormous impact on self-esteem and self-expression and for a brief hour every week, this group of ladies become dancers. Some look like they are recovering a joy for dancing they had in their youth, some may discover this joy for the first time in their lives and for some, it might be the first direct encounter with Indian culture. All leave the class with rosy cheeks and a sparkle in their eyes.

Before starting a workshop in any setting, the seasoned dance teacher tries to get a clear picture of whom she will be working with to plan accordingly. For those who find it difficult to stand or are restricted in their ability to move, a lot can be done from a chair. Feedback has always been positive and Vina has returned to many day centres by popular demand from participants for more projects. At present, she is working with the day centre at the Indian Community Centre Association in Nottingham, Age UK and the Asian Elders group.

Vina has also done two projects of eight sessions each, at Nottingham hospice with terminally ill patients. Sessions in such a fragile context are not easy to plan and it turned out that participants here were responding particularly to individual touch. Working in very small groups enables her to engage in direct conversations with each person and making direct eye contact establishes and maintains a close connection throughout the sessions. In this way, Vina receives direct feedback about what is and what is not working. When things go right, she knows that people whose bodies do not allow them to move often 'dance inside', sometimes to the point of feeling a strong impulse

to get up in spite of their physical condition. Breaking down movements into the smallest details also helps those confined to a chair to follow in their mind. The facial expressions of participants – a vital part of South Asian dance known as abhinaya – show that even 'dancing inside' can facilitate feelings of connectedness and joy.

It is inspiring to see how Vina's enthusiasm and creativity not only focus on her choreographic work for her company, but extend to her work with older people. Her vision is that there is a unique contribution that South Asian dance has to offer. She is already using mudras and traditional sets of head, eye and neck movements (bhedas) as exercise tools, but she feels that there are still many unexplored avenues such as mudras for emotional and physical wellbeing. Vina is thrilled that her company, Manushi, has recently been awarded funds by The Big Lottery Fund for their project Creative Healthy Movement with Older People. As part of this project, she will lead a number of sessions at day centres while mentoring company members to deliver this kind of work in the future. The project will bring together dancers, musicians, younger and older people to work towards a public performance at New Art Exchange, Nottingham in November 2014.

Working with older people for Vina has brought into focus how dance can transcend barriers of age and physical ability. It draws attention to the necessity to continually look for appropriate ways to communicate and share dance. Whilst her experience has taught her that it is possible to focus on practice even with people with a limited movement range, she is constantly drawn to learn and explore more, especially when it comes to the potential of South Asian dance forms. Her work is indeed true to the name of her company – Manushi means humanity – and her belief that dance is universal.

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(1) An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People, page 4.

www.baringfoundation.org.uk/EvidenceReview.pdf

(2) A production by Mantra Lingua Ltd.

visit uk.mantralingua.com/product/dance-cd-rom