
Under Dark Skies



Under Dark Skies. Photo: Jemma Thomas

Amanda Griffkin, Manager of Powys Dance, and **Joanna Young**, Artistic Director of Under Dark Skies, embarked on a collaborative journey to create an ambitious new installation inspired by the people, landscape and night skies of Powys in Wales

During the week of our performance of Under Dark Skies at the People Dancing international event, the Rosetta Mission landed on Comet 67P. We had spent the last five months fascinated by all things space - the sounds, the size, the scale. It was one of those coincidences that cement in your mind the 'meant-to-be-ness' of a project.

When we applied for the People Dancing - Wales Commission, we knew we wanted to make something that was artistically ambitious. There is much talk of the blurring of the boundaries between participatory and professional practice but usually our budget does not stretch to the luxury of intensive residencies with a choreographer, composer and high production values. With this funding, could we make something that possessed the quality of a professional artwork?

We also knew we wanted to make something that was distinctly Powys. Powys is a sparsely populated, large, rural county in the heart of deepest, darkest mid Wales, with more sheep than people. Providing opportunities to watch and take part in dance activity across the county is therefore a challenge. We currently have over 25 classes spread across a county that is 112 miles long and as such, the chance for these groups to work together is rare. The low population means less light pollution and areas in Powys have recently become recognised as Dark Sky zones or reserves, making them particularly great places to view the stars. We thought that the stars could be compared to our dancer-participants, twinkling away in their own space. Logistically, it is difficult to bring groups together, but what if we could make connections (constellations) between two very

disparate groups, members from our Senior Moment(um) over 60s groups and our Powys Youth Dance Company members?

But we were most interested to find out how the participants would view the work. Would it feel like a meaningful collaboration between them and the artistic team? Would it be 'transformational'? Would it feel different to attending a weekly class? And if so, how?

The piece was created through a series of residencies in Powys, specifically in the Elan Valley, a recognised Dark Sky zone. Joanna is originally from Powys and found it was both nostalgic and inspiring to come back and explore this remarkable place through a new lens, and see it from multiple perspectives. As a group we took time to discover this area of outstanding natural beauty, looking at the tiny details and the vastness of >>

the night sky. During our stay, we were also joined by two astronomers who took us on a night walk of our galaxy. We talked about constellations, shared stories and heard sounds from space.

The installation was a frame for all this raw material we collected through our process. We recorded field sounds from the area and interviews with the participants, which were layered into the final installation, using ten speakers and four sets of headphones. The landscape and details of people within it were captured through films of various scales and perspectives. These were embedded and framed within the space through multiple projections, covering the floor and parts of walls and ceiling, some reflected in water, some visible through a telescope. The participants devised movement from everyday life, intrinsically connected to the sounds, recorded images and the questions we began with. Through working with an improvisation process, the group grew more and more in tune with each other and the space, making such an unconventional first time performance experience seem completely natural and un-daunting.

The aim of the installation was to immerse the audience within the film, sound and performers. It was an experiential journey looping from light to dark, rooted in the people and rural landscape of Powys. Both the performers and audience members were being watched and watching, following their interest and both witnessing and transforming the space. We hoped that this equality between spectator and performer reflected the equality within our process. It was a project that belonged to everyone involved in its making.

Working with such an extreme generation gap between participants was fascinating; we all went through the same process, relating it to our own experiences, our own bodies. Joanna remembers being mesmerized by the amazing sense of potential and history within the space we were creating. We noticed how perspective of time changes with age but recognised this ongoing journey we are all on. No matter our age, we are each trying to comprehend our own environments and connections, both micro and macro. This was a reminder



Under Dark Skies. Photo: Jemma Thomas

that nothing ever stops or is finished; we simply carry on.

Filipe Sousa, our Sound Artist, speaks about his experience of the project: "Working with Senior Moment(um) and Powys Youth dancers was a really inspiring and

A day in the life

Kate Castle, former Associate Director of People Dancing, in conversation with **Lisa Spaul** about life as a dance practitioner and the experience of creating a new community dance piece for People Dancing

How did you become a dancer and choreographer?

I started dancing as a young child, and so have always danced and can't imagine life without it. It's the same with choreography too. My first actual job after my dance degree was to choreograph and dance in the amazing Cheddar Gorge caves.

What part of Wales do you live in?

I live very close to where I grew up, which is in Colwyn Bay, North Wales. Though I spent ten years away from the area living in Canada, China and England.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

There is no typical day ever! It really depends on the work at the time, but there is always never-ending admin.

How did you get the idea for the sealife creatures dance project?

I was commissioned to create a piece in a swimming pool in March 2014. I developed a half woman, half jellyfish character in collaboration with visual artist Femke Van Gent. The idea has grown from that. Plus I've been wanting to dance with my own two children for quite a while.

Tell me a bit about your collaborators on the project

Femke is the visual artist who I have worked with before on a few different projects. Femke has assisted the children in creating the shapes and decorating their fish headdresses. Rob Spaul is the musician and he has used an instrument recycled from empty gas cylinders, called a Temple Drum, as the basis for the music. Community dance practitioner,



joyful experience. It was a true collaborative process from the very first idea to the production. This allowed each layer of the project and mediums involved to blend; creating seamless connections between the movement, sound and film. We delved

into the parallels between space-time, aspects of generational gaps, and ways of life in Powys. We brought our worlds together and built a world that was ours." Gerald Tyler, the project's Lighting and Environmental Designer, reflects on watching the installation: "It was (as always) fascinating to watch different audiences experience the same work. I was lucky enough to be a part of one of the more involved groups and got to feel the orbiting energy of that broad range of women and their palpably different energies and was able to watch other people as they listened to the text, walked in the images and generally 'unfastened' their conventions within a gentle and supportive environment."

The project also left its mark on the participants. One of our Seniors said, "When reflecting on the process and performance, I have lovely memories: the enthusiasm of the younger dancers, the commitment of Jo and Filipe, the wonder of the topic, the opportunity to be yourself without worrying about what others think. This all adds up to an amazing experience, which felt 'out of this world'. It would be lovely to be able to perform it

again." A youth dancer also shared her thoughts on the project: "Under Dark Skies can only be summed up as a truly incredible opportunity. For many of the participants, including myself, the opportunity to work closely with cameras and sound was once-in-a-lifetime. Unlike most 18 year olds, celebrating their birthday with a night out, I spent my weekend at the Elan Valley Lodge surrounded by people who had so much passion for dance and this project. I do not regret this decision at all. I took away memories I will treasure and was able to take part in something I will not have the chance to do again."

In fact, we are hoping to perform it again; firstly, somewhere in Powys and then, who knows? It's a vast universe!

Info

Powys Dance is a community and educational dance company in the rural heart of mid Wales, delivering creative, engaging projects in Welsh, English and bilingually.

www.dawnspowysdance.org
amanda.griffkin@powys.gov.uk
www.joannayoung.co.uk

Emma-Jane Sutcliffe has assisted me in the sessions and she has a wealth of experience in facilitating dance.

What do you think a dance project like this offers to parents and their children?

This project offers parents and children the chance to dance with each other in a really creative environment. Working towards a performance at the People Dancing event in the Wales Millennium Centre is also a really special opportunity for the group.

Has it been useful to have a mentor on the project?

My mentor is Bronja Novak from Sweden and it's been really interesting finding out about her work and how she approaches things. Bronja runs EMBLA dans & teater company, which was formed in Gothenburg in 1989. They create dance performances for both children and adults and tour both in Sweden and internationally. We hope to keep the links going between Wales and Sweden.

What's your next project?

I have several ongoing projects where I'm working for other people. Straight after this I'm taking my short family piece, Time for Tea, into some primary schools in Conwy, Wales.



Aquarium performers, including Lisa Spaul and Emma-Jane Sutcliffe. Photo: Rob Spaul

If you could change one thing about the current dance landscape, what would it be?

More funding for struggling artists like myself would be nice!

Info

lisa@lisaspaul.co.uk 07962 424 410
www.lisaspaul.co.uk / www.little-light.co.uk