

Big differences through dance

Jon Beney is one of a team of 18 artists delivering Big Dance Pledge training to professional artists and teachers for Akram Khan Company and People Dancing. He reflects upon his career working in participatory settings and how Big Dance has been significant for him

My route into dance was perhaps not one you'd consider 'normal'. I played rugby league from the age of 14 and was heading for a professional career. I played for Great Britain in the under 18s and was awarded British player of the year in 1998, when a bad head injury cut that dream short. I had always been interested in performance. I took dance and drama at school and so training in ballet seemed like the obvious next step. Rugby, just like dance, is a team sport: you train every day with your teammates in readiness for the imminent match, much like you rehearse everyday with your fellow company members ahead of the upcoming show. Just like sports men and women, dancers must encourage and motivate each other in the dance studio, and push their bodies with rigour and artistry to keep themselves fit and ready for the job. So there I was, 19 years old, a 15 stone ex-rugby player who had just fathered his first child, learning to do pliés and tendus in leotard and tights. I loved it.

Since graduating from Northern School of Contemporary Dance I have worked solidly as a performer, teacher and choreographer. My job has allowed me to travel the world and to work with a vast range of communities,

cultures and nationalities. One thing that I have consistently found, whatever the nationality, whatever the context, whatever the content of my work, is the sheer volume of joy, enthusiasm and energy that participants exude, and how much I get affected by it. There is something undeniably compelling in facilitating an experience that has such an impact on the participants and becomes even life changing for some of them. My time at Dance United showed me this. Often the people who take part in these projects have never had any experience in dancing or performing, at least not at a professional level, so I feel in a position of privilege as a facilitator introducing them to these worlds.

I first became involved with Big Dance in 2012 whilst working with Luca Silvestrini's Protein Dance as a performer in a show called (In)visible Dancing. The show is performed outdoors, along the streets and bustling pedestrian shopping areas of towns and city centres and was developed especially for the 2012 edition of Big Dance. One of the things that I love most about this show is just how many people it reaches. As the title itself suggests, the dancing

is not obvious at first; shoppers and passers-by are initially unaware of the performers around them, acting as characters you might spot on the British high street, such as a builder, an office worker, a parent and so on. The show then develops as it becomes more and more visible and builds up towards a grand finale involving the whole community. Passers-by become audience members as they stumble upon our antics and on a busy Saturday afternoon that can easily amount to hundreds of people.

In each city where the show has been based we have recruited local musicians and dance groups from all ages, styles and disciplines to perform and at the end of each show we also teach a fun dance routine to willing audience members who then perform it as part of the grand finale. This hands on approach and deep relationship with communities is what I love most.

In the last few years I have worked on large-scale performances in big stadia for several Rugby League tournaments. When it comes to coordinating as many as 500 performers on a rugby pitch it's so important to make sure that everyone is on board and to work with absolute





Jon Beney on a break but still directing! Photo: Andrew Billington

Case study: Big Dance Pledge 2016

Louise White is a dance artist based at The Old Town Hall in Hemel Hempstead and leads Let's Dance, an older people's dance group. Having signed up to this year's Big Dance Pledge, Louise shares with us her approach to using the online resources and developing a version of Akram's choreography that's unique to the group.

Having trained as a dancer in London and previously worked for Darts (Doncaster Community Arts) and with the South Yorkshire Dance Consortium, I relocated to Hemel Hempstead and started work by getting involved with my local theatre. I have been delivering dance workshops for older people for Get Set Go Dacorum – the local Sport England physical activity initiative, alongside working in schools.

Let's Dance meets weekly at The Old Town Hall theatre in Hemel Hempstead, where we dance on stage for an hour and a half. The group are active older people, both men and women ranging from 50-87 years of age.

Being able to begin with Akram's choreography and develop movement with Let's Dance provides an opportunity for us to focus on the creative process of making dance. The dancers experience new movements, creating a dance language that is meaningful and unique to them, expressing themselves and exploring the themes within the context of their own lives. Dancing standing, sitting or kneeling provides a choice, which has no judgment and means that the piece is varied and accessible.

As a dance practitioner it's highly exciting because it's Akram's work, requiring you to stop, think and keep thinking. It means that the process (always the best part for me) is all about creative engagement, a fantastic artistic journey that we are taking together.

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clarity. My teaching experience and my experience in a rugby team definitely came to my advantage, as I knew how to make sure everyone worked together: some of the participants only got to meet on the day of the match itself! The highlight for me was in 2013 when I got to replace Gareth Thomas in the opening of the World Cup final, ending the show by scoring a try. That was a real dream come true, scoring a try at Wembley stadium and hearing my name called by the commentator in front of 75,000 people! This year I've been commissioned to choreograph the half time show for the Rugby League Magic Weekend at St James Park, Newcastle.

Working on the Big Dance Pledge this year draws together lots of that experience, so I'm confident to step in to any situation with the huge breadth of people using Akram Khan's choreography. Learning from Jennifer Irons and Jose Agudo, Rehearsal Directors for the project, we spent a lot of time exploring the material's adaptability. I can see it working effectively for a variety of community and young people's groups. I imagine participants will also love it; it's really beautiful movement to perform.

As Big Dance artists, we know that

we might be called upon to support in a number of ways. It might be to facilitate training with fellow artists and school teachers to work out how best they can use Akram's work. Or it might be about developing it for a specific set of participants, their dance style or for mass performances with loads of groups in a public space. In all cases, I expect this to be a three way collaboration: as practitioners we have Akram's intention to follow, we'll have to respond to the needs and creative ideas of the groups and their leaders, while also offering our own artistic ideas for consideration. It's challenging work but rewarding; when I will get to see the smiles on the faces of the participants, their joy and pleasure to be creating dances and performing together, then I will know my job will have been worth it and I might have just had a positive impact on their lives.

So perhaps this is what Big Dance is about, not necessarily about making dances that are big, but about making big differences through dance.

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