

The bubble that didn't burst: dance animateurs in the 1980s

Jayne Stevens, Principal Lecturer, Dance, School of Arts, De Montfort University, explains the debt those of us who cherish and champion participatory dance today owe to those pioneering the art form 30 years ago

It is 30 years ago that the **National Association of Dance and Mime Animateurs, a precursor of People Dancing, was formed.** For some time now I have been interested in, and inspired by, the legacy of that initial organisation.(1) It seems highly unlikely that the community dance practitioners who came together in 1986 to form a fledgling, self-help association could have anticipated the organisation it would become today. This is by no means a reflection on any lack of ambition, imagination or creativity of those involved – indeed they possessed all of these qualities in abundance – but rather because in 1986 dance animateurs (as they were then called) were a very new kind of dance artist struggling to establish a “newly identified profession”(2) with practices and values that challenged those apparent in much mainstream, theatrical dance of the time.

Between 1976 and 1979 the first dance animateur(3) posts in the UK had been established and taken up by Veronica Lewis (in Cheshire), Molly Kenny (in Cardiff) and Marie McCluskey (in Swindon). The Arts Council of Great Britain's offer of seed funding for similar posts in 1981 led to growth of provision throughout the 1980s. By 1985 there were 31 dance animateurs in the UK(4) and two years later the number had more than doubled to 75.(5)

The term ‘animateur’ originated in continental Europe where in the 1970s, the notion of encouraging greater participation in arts, sport and culture through the activities of “a special, highly skilled coach/teacher/leader of the unskilled public”(6) had

gained widespread support among cultural policy makers. There were many reasons for this but among them was recognition that public engagement with the arts was very limited. In 1978 it was reckoned that only ten per cent of the population in Europe considered themselves to be art going; for the remaining 90 per cent art was seen at best as irrelevant and at worst, as elitist.(7) Those that did engage did so primarily as appreciators and receivers of art – an involvement that was basically non-creative and non-participant. In Britain a 1976 report(8) on support for the arts in England and Wales argued for placing special emphasis on efforts to widen public participation in the arts.

Consequently, many dance animateur posts established in the early 1980s were co-funded by local authorities and regional associations seeking a resource efficient way of developing dance participation in their area and by the Arts Council of Great Britain who also sought to create audiences in the regions



Photo: Rachel Cherry

for the increasing number of dance companies set up, for example, by graduates of the London School of Contemporary Dance.(9)

The demands placed on these dance animateurs were considerable. The role involved not only teaching dance and organising classes, workshops and performances but also developing the local dance provision by working with performing companies, venues, educational institutions, youth services and private dance schools. A national evaluation in 1986 noted that one person, usually working alone across an entire geographical region, was “being asked to act as administrator, adviser, choreographer, dancer, diplomat, entrepreneur, fund-raiser, politician, promoter and teacher”.(10) Moreover there was at this time very little – if any – training for the role and most animateurs had to learn ‘on the job’ acquiring skills in administration, marketing and fund-raising. More significantly perhaps the animateurs recognised the need to develop pedagogical practices capable of engaging a broad range of people and of realising the creative potential of individuals and communities through dance. In doing so these animateurs began to draw on a range of educational, community and theatrical practices, combining them in innovative yet pragmatic ways.

Much of the dance taught within the UK's formal educational system until the late 1970s was ‘creative movement’ or ‘modern educational dance’. Derived from the work of Rudolf Laban, it prioritised free self-expression and creativity for personal development rather than an appreciation of the art of others or the acquisition of technical skills. As such it bore little relationship to the world of professional, theatrical dance where American modern dance techniques (notably those devised by Graham and Cunningham) were

ANIMATED!

The National Association of Dance and Mime Animateurs

A group photo taken at the Dance Animateur conference in 1985, used as the cover of *Animated* in 1986

having a major impact on training, choreography and performance. Some dance animateurs had teacher training as well as professional, technical training and performance experience. They were able to apply educational methodologies to technical and choreographic teaching and so began to develop new ways of teaching in the community. This pedagogy, by synthesising aspects of educational and theatrical dance, dissolved previous distinctions between teaching for product, technique and performance and teaching for process, expression and individual development. It was key to the role dance animateurs played, for example, in expanding the out-of-school, youth dance provision in the 1980s.

By epitomizing a new kind of dance artist, by working across a range of cultural and social sectors, and by bridging educational and theatrical dance, performance and participation, dance animateurs in the 1980s changed the nature of the British dance profession and the public perception of dance.⁽¹¹⁾ They helped to forge a more integrated, fluid and adaptable dance profession that created a climate in which the UK's regional dance development agencies of the 1990s could – and did – take root.⁽¹²⁾ Significant as this legacy is,

the 'survival' of community dance at the time was by no means clear. As Marie McCluskey recalls, there was a sense "that community dance might not be here to stay. It was a bubble that could burst".⁽¹³⁾ This fragility perhaps explains Linda Jasper's recollection that "we were very fired up – that's what enabled us to work as hard as we did".⁽¹⁴⁾ And work they did! The overwhelming enthusiasm, determination and creativity of those first dance animateurs to establish a new profession with new practices and core values deserves our admiration and our thanks. Their experience also provides an example of what can be achieved in a climate of austerity and uncertainty.

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residence, dance worker, dance co-ordinator, dance fellow

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