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# Fundamentally embodied

**Veronica Lewis MBE**, Principal, London Contemporary Dance School, The Place, offers a rare insight into her early dance history and the role of gurus and mentors throughout her life in dance

**Peter Brinson, writes in Dance Education and Training in Britain (1980): “Dance is part of the history of human movement, part of the history of human culture and part of the history of human communication.** These three elements are brought together and realised through dance activity. Therefore, dance activity is an important factor in human social development. Some societies have accorded it this role. Not, however, British society today, beyond acknowledging dance has educational as well as artistic value. The national ignorance of the significance of dance has complicated all our work.”(1)

I was adopted into a very musical family in south London and spent

my childhood surrounded by music. Either my brother was playing the piano or my father and my brother were singing or visiting my uncles who played the cello and violin. As a result of a bone disease at 18 months I was sent to dancing lessons in a local church hall and can't remember a period of time when I wasn't dancing about. I have always found it difficult to keep still and was encouraged at my primary school to choreograph. I made my first piece when I was ten, but was frustrated that I was not allowed to sing in the choir at church. Years later I was allowed to play the organ in churches because there was a screen around the organist and no-one knew it was a girl.

At grammar school, music was taken very seriously, but not dance. I found myself hiding in the organ loft practicing the organ with the blower off to avoid hockey or, if it was pouring with rain, 'dance.' In 'dance' I mainly learned to be a sycamore tree. Meanwhile, in the evenings, I was already teetering around in pointe shoes. During the sixth form I used to head off to London to the Dance Centre in Floral Street and then attend performances at The Place. Luckily, both my headmistress and head of music were fully behind my dance, since they already realised I wasn't Oxbridge material and I was sent to see Brenda Last who, together with Mary Clarke, was one of the only two 'old >>

Photo: Alicia Clarke



## Community Dance Reflections

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girls' working in dance. The tenacity and determination of both of them has always really impressed me.

I was also greatly inspired by my first experience of a performance by Ballet for All, introduced by Peter Brinson, who some years later was to become my first great guru. When I finished school, the only college I could get a grant to study at was the Institute of Choreology where we had classes in ballet and contemporary, folk dance, bharatanatyam and repertoire. I loved dancing every day and then when I wasn't watching dance in the upper slips of the Royal Opera House, the gallery of Coliseum or the famously uncomfortable bucket seats of The Place, I was notating everything we'd learnt that day. It wasn't exactly the normal student life and my previous school mates all seemed to be having a really easy time at university, whilst I had homework every night.

Belinda Quirey taught us historical dance and she also worked in the music department at York University. Here was my next lucky moment. In my second year at the Institute of Choreology, she invited me to go to York with her to choreograph a new version of *Les Noces*. I was lucky because I was the only student that could read the Stravinsky score. I loved the enquiring energy of the music department. I later went on to do a postgraduate year at York at a time when the New Music movement was in full swing so my work was greatly influenced by composers such as Wilfred Mellers, John Paynter, Denis Smalley, Simon Emerson and Roger Marsh. Neil Smalley was also teaching gamelan and I had my first experience of playing in a gamelan orchestra. Whilst at York I developed dance classes at 8.30 every morning and about 20 of us used to dance every day. Both Gill Clarke and Judith Mackrell were students in the English department at the time and my life has been influenced greatly by both of them. Whilst at York, I was able to meet Margaret Dunn and together we arranged the first London Contemporary Dance residencies in Higher Education (York and Hull Universities and Bretton Hall College.) Although I had seen London Contemporary Dance Theatre



on numerous occasions, this was the first time that I got to work with them and subsequently I began running workshops in schools linked to their touring activity in the north of England.

Margaret Dunn was my second great guru. She had been an early exponent of Laban's work and showed me that Laban's teaching was not just about being a sycamore tree, as taught by my hockey mistress. She encouraged me enormously throughout my time in York and subsequently Cheshire. She was great at explaining how my teaching could improve without making me feel a complete failure. She was loved by everyone who came across her in dance and played a hugely important role in revving up dance at the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB). I first met her when she came to a performance I directed at York University and, by an absolute fluke, Jane Nicholas was there too. Jane is my third great guru. She had been a dancer with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and then became the first ballet officer within the music department at the Arts Council. Eventually, she, and I suspect impresario and artistic visionary John Drummond, persuaded ACGB that there needed to be a separate dance department and Jane became its first director.

Jane absolutely understood the need for ballet, dance and mime to be developed across the UK and was

a great supporter of regional dance companies, education departments within our major companies and of the development of the amateur movement. I was lucky enough to be on the dance panel of the Arts Council and learned a great deal from the people that worked hard to support dance: Sue Hoyle, Dick Matchett, Ruth Glick, Jeanette Siddall, Julia Carruthers and Brendan Keaney were just a few of them. Dance panels and committees were full of really exciting and visionary people. These not only included John Drummond, but also Bob Lockyer, Colin Nears and John Ashford. When I joined the dance panel the Secretary General was the great brain and visionary educationalist Sir Roy Shaw (who gave me away when I got married). In the regional arts offices there were also some great pioneers in music and dance. Tim Joss was one of these. Tim was the first person ever to teach me to write budgets, but more importantly, he has spent his life developing dance and music in wider settings and supporting research into the wider benefits of the arts to our communities. I was lucky enough to be able to assist in the development of education projects for English National Ballet and Rambert as well as the Royal Ballet. Pamela, Lady Harlech, was also a great influence on me. She was able to be enormous fun but really knew how to get things done.

Meanwhile, in 1976, I was appointed

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Calouste Gulbenkian dance fellow in Cheshire. Cheshire Dance Workshop was born and Peter Brinson came back into my life. Peter was then Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and his assistant was a young chap called Ken Robinson. How lucky was I to be able to chat with them?

The 1980s saw an amazing explosion in British dance, not just in the development of wonderful choreographers and companies, but also in dance in the community and dance in education. All our regional and national companies developed education programmes. Dance education and participation was taken much more seriously as it flourished in community and education settings in Britain as well as on stages across Europe.

Peter Brinson, Margaret Dunn and Jane Nicolas were constantly in my mind, as well as practically there, fighting for dance in their different ways. And the dance they believed in, and supported, was not just ballet and contemporary forms. We had suddenly begun to recognise the importance of South Asian dance and companies whose work was rooted in influences from Africa. Dance exploded, and many young people, at last, found a way to express themselves, a place to belong and an area of education that they could thrive in.

Two of the young people involved in the first ever Rambert Residency (then led by Richard Alston) went on to work in dance: John Kilroy as a dancer with Rambert, and Tom Roden who co-founded New Art Club. They were so lucky to be at a school in Stockport where there was a full time dance teacher (Erica Stanton) and a Head teacher who could see the value of inviting a company in for a week.

The work of Ludus in Lancashire still continues to influence the development of communities and the use of dance to explore difficult and political ideas. Lea Anderson continues to bring really thought provoking work to unexpected places. Some of the young artists and companies of that time are now household (well, 'dancehold') names. Phoenix, Random, CandoCo, DV8, Matthew Bourne and Shobana Jeyasingh were all part of that small scale touring system. They always

included workshops linked to their performances.

There were amazing pioneers driving us forward. We all need people who we can learn from, people who can challenge us in a positive way and people who believe in us. And also, forgive us when we mess up! As I have grown older at The Place, I have realised that, in turn, we all have the responsibility to support, challenge and nurture those who will be the artists, educators, innovators and leaders of the future.

There are huge threats to our education system at the moment. If I had had to sit the English Baccalaureate in all its narrowness, I could never have done what I have. I would have always felt and been thought to be a failure. I flunked everything that involved sitting still at school. A further quote from Peter shows that although in the last 36 years learning through the arts has improved, I believe we are heading for the same problem again as I experienced in my education in the 1960s.

"Traditional attitudes promote the view that the arts are a great civilising force in society, but not an important powerhouse from which society draws its strength. In fact, whilst better teaching of science will help to solve some of our present economic problems, in the long term we need young people with imagination and commitment to drive events to fruitful conclusions. We believe that these qualities are developed just as effectively by the arts as by science."(2)

There are many threats to our arts funding as we face the challenges of the further diminution of public subsidy. The Higher Education system faces the same plight and, of course, local authority support of the arts has diminished hugely in the last five years. The reason that I was able to grow Cheshire Dance Workshop was entirely due to match funding of local, regional and national resources. Let's hope that we can return to that shared sense of buying into something worthwhile.

At Cheshire Dance Workshop and at London Contemporary Dance School, I have been supported by an amazing team from whom I still continue to learn. I am incredibly lucky to have had a life surrounded by exciting

and visionary artists, educators and enablers. I know that I live a privileged life working for the young artists of the future. When having to make decisions, I still think back to the actions of those from whom I learned so much, they still influence me. I grew up joyfully surrounded by music and dance, and was well into my teens before I really understood that politics played a part in everything I was learning at school, including the arts that I was being exposed to. Peter was the person who really forced me to think politically about the decisions I made and the right of all people to express themselves through the arts or be able to access them. He encouraged me to be braver and stronger about sharing what we believed and teased me when I showed signs of crumpling under pressure. He challenged me to be the best I could possibly be, never wavering under pressure from others. Demanding high standards in all that was done, he was very generous and huge fun.

Now, there is a new generation of wise and visionary people who must ensure that young people have a right to experience life through the arts. Dance can play a vital role in the future of our existence on this vulnerable planet of ours.

As Sir Ken Robinson said at The Place recently, I paraphrase slightly, and refer to students as students of any age:

"We have to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them, so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens."(3)

And for many of us we do this through dance, dance at any age, dance in any milieu, dance as an expression of who we are and the communities we serve. "We are embodied creatures, we are fundamentally embodied, not by chance embodied."(4)

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## Info

[www.lcds.ac.uk](http://www.lcds.ac.uk)

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## References

- 1,2. Peter Brinson (1980) Dance Education and Training in Britain, Gulbenkian Foundation
- 3,4. Sir. Kenneth Robinson (2016) The Cohen Lecture 2016, The Place, London