

Something in the air...?

consideration are the aims and objectives of the applicant, and the extent to which those aims and objectives can be, and are, met. These should be the priorities, rather than details of methodology imposed by non-arts practitioners that can limit the freedom of the project leaders to act with total authenticity.

It is sobering to realise that a number of studies have concluded that it is the personality, passion and authenticity of the project leader – be it choreographer or dance teacher – that is the strongest deciding factor in the successful delivery of a project and leads to greatest participant fulfilment. It appears that the qualities most admired or respected, especially by young participants are, again: passion, authenticity and knowledge of the discipline in which they are asked to take part.

I believe it is time to revisit the history of community dance, to look at the people who were the pioneers of the movement, the practicing artists and choreographers and their supporters (one thinks of innovators like Marie McCluskey or Nadine Senior) and to ask ourselves why they were successful in turning a once fringe activity into a practice that now permeates every sector of civil society. What did they offer that changed so many young people's lives, that produced so many passionate young dancers and dance lovers?. Who were these 'multipliers'? What motivated them? How did they practice?

We are now 40 years on from the heady days of National Youth Dance Festivals, that brought hundreds of young people, often from the most unlikely backgrounds, together to celebrate their joy in contemporary dance practice.

Nowadays many of the young people coming into the field through community and pedagogic dance courses have very limited knowledge of how the movement began: it is not their fault, time moves on.

Much has been achieved. Let us make sure nothing is lost.

Info

rmaldoom@googlemail.com

When popular culture and dance cross paths, the result, **Marie McCluskey MBE**, Founder and Former Artistic Director, Swindon Dance reflects, is a dynamic explosion of the art form. Here she offers a glimpse into her lifelong journey in community dance from pioneering beginnings as a Dance Artist-in-Residence/Animateur to current day insights

The celebration of 30 years of People Dancing and my own recent retirement from Swindon Dance (formally known as Thamesdown Dance) has provided space to reflect from a distance on the amazing journey of dance in the UK, from the first rumblings of what became known as community dance.

Our current vibrant dance ecology has evolved and survived many twists and turns of funding cuts and political and policy changes, driven by the passion, energy and dedication of several generations of dance artists and practitioners whose commitment made 'dance for everyone' a reality.

I have long been inspired by a talk from the jazz musician and composer, Artie Shaw in which he described that "something in the air"⁽¹⁾ moment when popular culture and an art form cross paths, resulting in a dynamic explosion of the form. My journey into community dance development began in such a 'moment' – this was the 'Dance Explosion' of the late 1970s ignited by John Travolta and Saturday Night Fever!⁽²⁾ The 1977 film featured a young man living in Brooklyn, New York (NY), in a dead end job, whose moment to shine was at the Saturday disco. Penned by Nik Cohn, a British journalist living in NY at the peak of the disco era, it was based on a magazine article entitled Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night.⁽³⁾ The US Library of Congress subsequently deemed it "culturally, historically and aesthetically relevant."⁽⁴⁾

This 'explosion' brought a wave

of new dancers to the classes I was running at my own dance studio. The majority – although not exclusively – were male, 15-21 years plus, not in education or training, often unemployed and complete beginners. They had, however, a raw physical energy and hunger to learn speedily, so as to shine on the club dance floor! It is easy now to understand the impact of the 'Fever' film on a particular group of late 70s young people in the UK who found their new tribe – dance!

I quickly realised the need to discover new approaches to training these late beginners and to work with fully-grown young adults, with minds of their own but whose ambitions were to be great club dancers. And so I decided to start where they were at that very moment: to connect to the 'sign of their times', not just my dance but their dance and culture. As I had a jazz dance background and was a regular at the buzzing 'jazz' classes at both the Dance Centre and the Pineapple Dance Studios in Covent Garden, London this was easy as I was also being inspired by the amazing dance and music dynamic of that era (one of my best-kept secrets is that Jazz Dance funded the early years of my work as then it was not considered a favourable art form or way of working with Young People!). I developed my own version of a contemporary jazz technique, which I hoped would captivate and inspire this new kind of student. Regular performances with original choreography by the group

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and myself sustained motivation and commitment; their progress, especially in creative choreography, was amazing and speedy and what they may have lacked in technique was offset by their innate creative performance skills.

By the time we were invited to the first Youth Dance Festival (YDF) in Leicester (1980) we had become Thamesdown Youth Dance Company, performing contemporary work to Mahler, Tangerine Dream, Julian Lloyd Webber and Velvet Underground. This YDF proved to be a major milestone in the development of today's youth dance movement as it brought together for the first time many of my peers who were working in similar ways with youth dancers. It was a revelation seeing the range and approaches to dance coming from Leeds, Birmingham, Leicester and 'ultra cool' London groups. Organised and funded by Leicester Education Authority's peripatetic dance team, the Festival was a transformational experience for all, and heralded the beginning of today's vibrant youth dance scene. Crucially, it brought together for the first time at a national level the then two approaches of youth dance that were evolving beyond private dance schools - those working in Education and those working in the community. This new raw energy, creativity and inspirational performance and choreography, mostly from the students and group leaders, generated a timely wave of interest from the professional dance world, Arts Council of Great Britain and Local Authorities.

The importance of the arts and dance in education was 'in the air' at this time as two major enquiries funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, led by Peter Brinson, threw a spotlight on dance and the arts. Firstly, Dance Education and Training (1980) set out the case for "all children to have the benefit of a dance education as a central element of upbringing and education"(5) and secondly, The Arts in Schools (1982) argued the case for the arts to be central to the school curriculum and not just an 'option'. Significantly, both raised concerns about cuts in public expenditure and the demands of educational accountability. Three major issues were identified:

- The profound and long-term changes in the pattern of employment

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and unemployment, especially in young people

- The changing relationships between education and society as a whole which must result from this
- The rate of cultural change in Britain. (6)

These early enquiries, that in some instances still resonate today, led to a third report in 1991 by Peter Brinson entitled Dance as Education - Towards a National Dance Culture, which highlighted and evidenced the huge developments in community dance at that time and enabled him to conclude that:

... "the network of locally based community dance animateurs are one complementary national service, neither extra nor fringe, but a professional and permanent expression of British dance culture created by, and appropriate to, British society at the end of the twentieth century."(7)

There has not been since that time, to my knowledge, any follow up of the depth and magnitude of these three enquiries.

A further life changing moment happened in 1978 when I responded to a notice in the window of Swindon Council's Arts office inviting artists to work in their newly established Community Arts Studios in Swindon's old Town Hall, then a dilapidated Victorian building. This led me on a journey into the world of community arts in a creative arts building (70s rock band XTC worked in the regularly flooded basement) and to the development of my understanding of the power of

dance in the community as an effective tool for change.

Local authorities at that time were dealing with a political agenda which included high youth unemployment and lack of opportunity for young people, social/urban unrest, high inflation and the early days of the Thatcher Government. At the time I was blissfully unaware of this agenda; my focus was simply on creating great dance and dancers!

The building which housed the community arts project was the brain child of a visionary Local Authority arts officer, Terry Court. He believed passionately that the arts were "a powerful vehicle for economic growth and social development and a base to experience the sheer quality of human endeavour."(8) So he immediately understood the transformational power of dance and remarkably, the need for access to arts/dance for all for those excluded/disadvantaged by the socio-economic environment. He created a positive culture in which the arts/dance were nurtured and hence flourished, which enabled Swindon Dance to develop deep and sustainable roots as well as incubating the talent of other artists. For example, David Yates, film director of Harry Potter and Tarzan



Photo: Dave Cox

fame, worked in the building's media studios – his first film was funded by Thamesdown Council!

After much writing of visions and aims, the Council gained support from the Southern Regional Arts Board and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to develop the artists and art forms working in the building. This led to the opening, in 1979, of Thamesdown Contemporary Dance Studio (now called Swindon Dance), one of the very first such centres of dance in the UK and my appointment as the Council's first Dance Artist-in-Residence.

Most of the ingredients that led to today's eventual development of community dance beyond youth dance were in our first season's brochure which ambitiously stated: "Dance is for Everyone, providing Access to Excellence for all"(9) The programme included dance classes for all ages and abilities, a community dance company called Changes (we wanted to change the dance world), a youth company and a unique Foundation Dance Course providing access to late beginners in dance for young people from diverse backgrounds. The vision for this Foundation Course was based on my experience with that first 'dance tribe', whose artistic and choreographic talents were fast becoming evident.

It was from these early 'steps' that community dance in Swindon emerged and with the formal establishment of CDMF (Community Dance and Mime Foundation) in 1986 (now known as People Dancing), many of the first youth dance generation had themselves become professional dancers, teachers and educators and were beginning to influence the professional dance world based on their own early experience in youth dance.

My community dance practice, evolved organically – 'Living it Forward, Learning it Backwards' – from the first youth dance movement, responding as new challenges emerged by developing new teaching and organisational practice. This was the case with REACH, Swindon's first group of dancers with a disability, which Denni Wheeler (one of our freelance jazz dance teachers) started in 1983-4 and is still in existence today. Members of the group eventually featured in Truly Madly Deeply – the iconic Anthony Minghella film. A second new 'tribe'

also appeared at that time, circa 1984, in the shape of Tidal Wave, Swindon's and arguably one of the UK's first Hip Hop Crews, an advance signal of the times to come. Tidal Wave evolved into the Scarecrows, a legendary crew (led by Swindon's Banxy) and the first to win the world Hip Hop Championships. This led to a deepening confirmation of our understanding and practice based on 'learnt intuition', of working with this raw physical talent and of starting with their dance and culture, not trying to change it, but allowing it to evolve and grow organically and creatively.

From this early youth work we learnt experientially that dance was 'another way of learning'. We also learnt that personal development occurred through the act of dancing, performing and creating, transforming lives and leading to careers. This is still important and never more so than now because dance is unique, in that it is an art form that can provide meaning through movement and a voice to express deeper thoughts. It can teach values of tolerance through collaborative working; encourage creativity; and is a 'tribe' where people can belong and flourish regardless of class, race, gender, ability, disability or religion. These are values that undeniably resonate today, just as in the past. As echoed in the words of Robin Howard, Founder of London Contemporary Dance Theatre and School:

"Given the patterns in which mass behaviour, including mass education is organised art is the one vocation that keeps spaces open for the individual to realise [themselves]. A society which lacks the presence of self-discovery and self-developing individuals, but in which passive people are only acted upon by their environment hardly deserves to become a human society."(10)

To be able to continue such amazing momentum during this current time of change it will be important to rearticulate these core underpinning values – to ensure a clarity of purpose for our big dance family, to both celebrate these and advocate for the future.

In 1989 I wrote an article Living dance forwards, learning it backwards(11) for Animated, which likened the first decade of community dance in Swindon to a huge jigsaw with pieces gradually falling into place.

The jigsaw now looks more complete, but with still some gaps and areas to be filled by future generations. Much has been achieved and dance will, I am certain, continue to develop and break new barriers on its journey of creating the dance and dancers of tomorrow. Rising from small and serendipitous beginnings, Swindon Dance reaches over 30,000 people annually, as do many other dance organisations and agencies of all 'shapes and sizes' throughout the UK, proving that dance really is for everyone. To create this future we need to ensure that access to inspirational and excellent dance experiences continue to be possible for all.

Relevance today

There is in the air today great debate on the importance of the arts in the National Curriculum. I believe that arts experience should be an entitlement and a prerogative for all children and young people, and not a privilege. Luminaries like Professor Ken Robinson and Julian Lloyd Webber are leading advocates for the current debate around the importance of the sciences verses the arts/humanities. We, in dance know that our art form has and will continue to touch and transform many lives – it is a universal language that can trace its origins (like other arts) back to the dawn of civilisation when early man danced for joy, sorrow and celebration. We now can track and evidence that dance offers another 'way of learning' and communicating and so it is vital to advocate for access to excellence for all for inspiring dance experiences.

To make this possible we need to invest properly and fully in the current and future generations of dance leaders, practitioners/artists and companies. The context currently is not the one in which the seed of youth and community dance grew and flourished and yet with some strategic infrastructural development this can still be achieved.

We need to nurture and develop fully the talents of the next generations as advocates and leaders early on in their careers.

We need to produce hard unequivocal evidence. We can draw on the wealth of anecdotal, qualitative evidence but we need to demonstrate >>

the success of dance in actually transforming lives and changing the world, so as to move beyond anecdotal stories.

We need to ensure that the intrinsic value of dance as an art form is protected and access to seeing a range of great dance is maintained, particularly in the regions as Local Authority funding for venues and organisations recedes.

Perhaps it is time now for an extensive in-depth review and study of dance, resembling that of the Brinson/Calouste Gulbenkian era, to take us forward. Strategic change and development can take time – now is that moment to act!

Info

swindance@aol.com

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Lifting the colle

Dancing together can bind us with a deep inner connection. **Bisakha Sarker MBE**, Artistic Director, Chaturangan, deliberates on how culturally diverse dance can enhance the cultural and social fabric of people's lives and generate a collective sense of community. This, she suggests, requires searching for and evolving an ongoing style of practice, both as a community dance leader and as a performer

It all began with a red tutu. In a missionary school in the Indian city of Kolkata, little girls knelt in a circle, their heads forming the centre of a poppy, the red tutus the petals. 'Maa' was one of them. This fired her love of dance and whilst my mother could not take up dancing, she passed on her passion to me.

I joined Uday Shanker India Culture Centre to train in Creative Dance and learnt to perform by taking part in amateur and professional performances that took place all over Kolkata, in both mainstream theatres and makeshift open-air stages. This widened my perception of dance... I realised the power of dance, irrespective of where it took place.

My life was to take a different turn when I crossed continents. Arriving in Liverpool in the 1970s I found opportunities for South Asian dance were few and far between. Even though our qualifications were not recognised, our performances spoke for the quality of our training and experience. Gradually, through performing, I established myself as a dancer. This opened doors to all kinds of interesting and creative opportunities, igniting my deep-seated love for community dance.

I was thrilled to discover the joy and fulfillment of community dance and I became deeply involved, without forsaking my performing career. Both

are equally precious to me ... they feed each other.

My first faltering steps into community dance began when I was asked to dance at a fundraising event to support training at the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. It made me question how to make my performances more accessible. I began my search by offering an after-school dance class for blind or partially sighted children and there I found some answers.

Whether 'dance' is for refugees, care home residents or children at a hospice, the main purpose of all artistic intervention is to enhance people's sense of wellbeing and uplift their spirits through fleeting moments of joy and engagement. Every time I facilitate a dance session in the community I feel that I receive more than I give. I am humbled and overwhelmed to think of the kindness the participants shower on me. For me teaching is not just about transferring skills and techniques – it is an open invitation to share my love of dance. I take it as my responsibility to empower those I teach, by getting them in touch with their own unique creativity. The bond of friendship that grows between us may be momentary but it is real and it is rich.

At the heart of all community dance lies the idea of 'time well spent', which brings us to the question: "What makes