

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

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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

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a meaningful and engaging session?” To explore this further I will take a closer look at a compliment I once received.

“... It was incredible how well you were able to adapt to the group’s needs and ensure that everyone was participating and enjoying their time.”

Three points stood out from that remark:

‘Adapt’

From my work I find that community dance sessions include participants who come with different life experiences. It is essential to be flexible and ready to adapt all aspects of the session, such as content, language, the pace of introducing new movements and thematic variations to meet the diverse needs and abilities of the participants.

‘Participate’

Community dance is an experiential art. It is the desire to taste, learn and be inspired, refreshed and revived from taking part that brings people together. I introduce the movement materials in manageable chunks and often make references to the participants’ lived experience. For example, I may teach an arm movement by comparing it to

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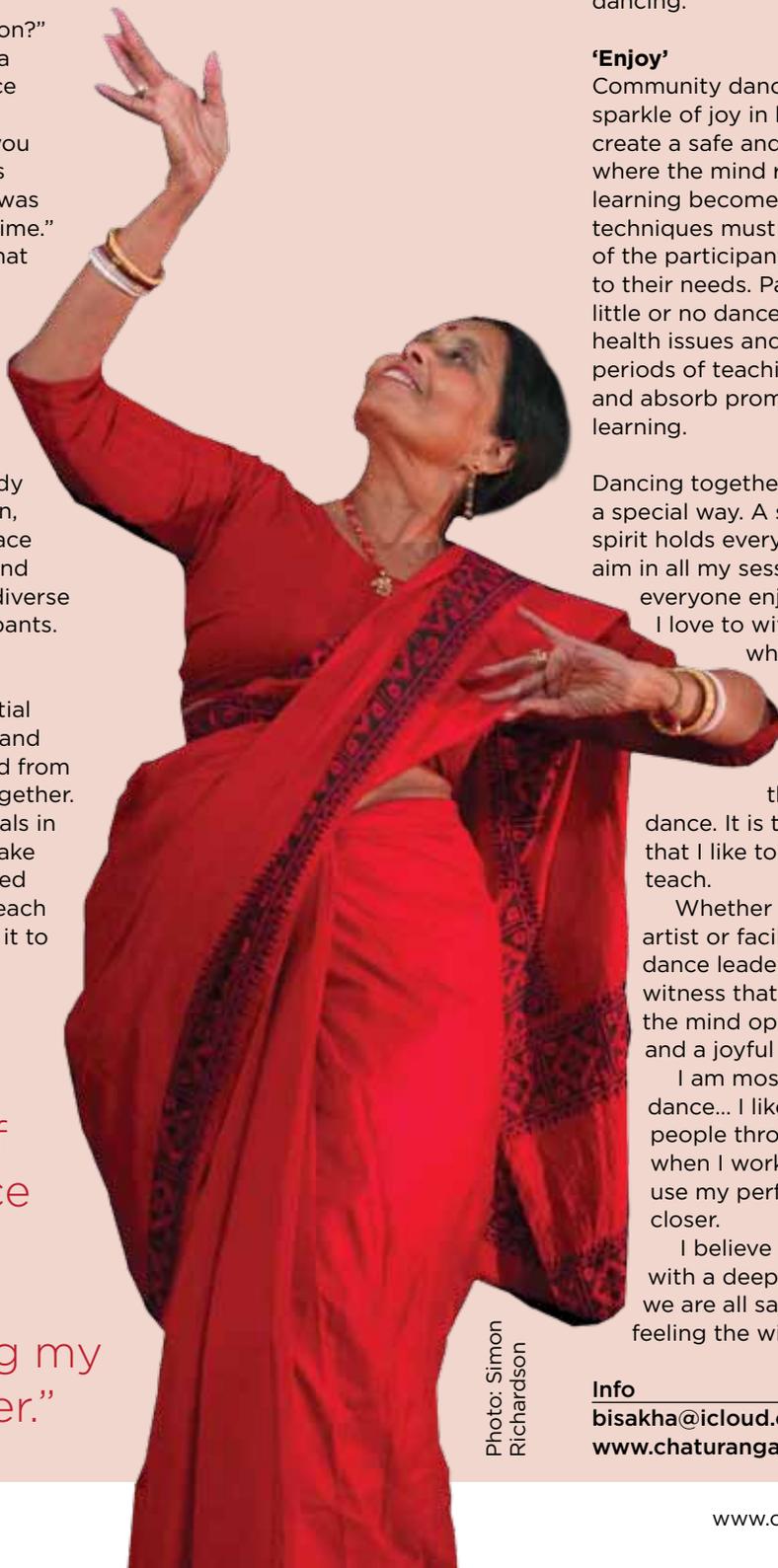


Photo: Simon Richardson

the wipers of a car. It makes sense, the movements become spontaneous. I like to set achievable targets throughout so that each individual can be reassured with praise, gain a sense of achievement and experience the joy of dancing.

‘Enjoy’

Community dance sessions can add a sparkle of joy in life. Accessible tasks create a safe and friendly atmosphere where the mind relaxes and the learning becomes effortless. Teaching techniques must maintain the interest of the participants and be sympathetic to their needs. Participants may have little or no dance training or may have health issues and tire easily. Alternating periods of teaching with time to rest and absorb promotes the enjoyment of learning.

Dancing together connects people in a special way. A sense of collective spirit holds everyone. My ultimate aim in all my sessions is to see that everyone enjoys the experience.

I love to witness the moment when understanding intellectually turns into absorbing emotionally. The participants lose themselves in the dance. It is this joy of dancing that I like to share with everyone I teach.

Whether I am performing as an artist or facilitating as a community dance leader, I wait to sense and witness that magic moment when the mind opens like a lotus flower and a joyful feeling starts to flow.

I am most honest when I dance... I like to connect with people through my dancing, and when I work in the community I use my performance to bring us closer.

I believe that dance binds us with a deep inner connection as if we are all sailing together as one, feeling the wind on our faces...

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