
Getting a kick out of dance

One Dance UK Dance Teaching award-winner **Charlotte Tomlinson**, Artistic Director of SideKick Dance, reflects on her journey working as an inclusive dance artist

I've always danced. From a toddler bopping in the living room, to a child taking class in my local village hall, then on to University and fortunately into a career, but it was other experiences along the way that steered me to where I am now.

As a young teenager I undertook work experience in a special school, probably because I was influenced by my much cooler older sister who always cared deeply for helping others, even at a young age. This was an eye-opening experience for me. I was only 13 yet I was given an amazing opportunity to help young people swim who couldn't walk, to write though they couldn't speak and to move to music in way they hadn't before. At that moment I was hooked!

My sister passed away when she was just 14, but her encouragement and inspiration stayed with me. A few years later at Roehampton University I had fantastic lecturers who supported me in many ways, and I was able to work on a dissertation that focused on the accessibility of dance for disabled young people. I was inspired by Sarah Kenny, my anatomy teacher, who introduced me to the world of Dance Science where I was able to learn more about the dancer's body and research further into safe and healthy dance practice.

Full-time employment to freelance artist

Years later, as a lecturer teaching community dance practice to Degree level dance students, supporting them

on their work experience in a variety of settings, I made the decision to take the plunge and became a freelance practitioner. So, rather than solely teaching others to teach, I needed to be out there doing it for myself!

I had been so inspired by companies such as StopGap, Anjali, and Foot in Hand and I had years of experience through research, volunteering and on-going CPD. Yet I needed confidence. One day something clicked and I found it. I spoke again to dance practitioners Louise Katerega and Rachel Liggett who insisted that I was ready. My Dad told me to "just do it" and I could hear my sister's voice saying that "a life without risks is no life at all".

So I found the courage to knock on the door of Simon Coopey, Head of PE >>



Charlotte Tomlinson (pink t-shirt) with SideKick Youth group.
Photo: Freya Clarke.

Inclusive practice

at a school for young people with Special Educational Needs. I knew that Simon had a strong belief in the benefits of dance for all, so I confidently (although nervous inside) encouraged him to employ me as a dance artist in his school. In the past we had both worked with the inspirational dance artist Sue Rosenbloom (known as Bloom to us) of whom we both shared a huge appreciation for her work with young people and dance. I knew that Bloom had believed in me and at that moment I hoped that Simon did too. Dance classes commenced and one academic year later SideKick Dance was born.

And now...

SideKick Dance, a group of adult dancers with various (dis)abilities and/or additional needs meet every Wednesday at Curve Theatre in Leicester. We, myself and my assistant dance leader Kirsty, run both technique and creative dance classes and strive to push the potential of all the dancers in the studio. We are proud that one dancer has now progressed to be a volunteer dance artist with our youth group and another was noticed and asked to go to London and join StopGap for a week to experience work within their company.

After the adult class we then work with SideKick Youth, a group of young people with additional needs who choose to take part in dance once a week after school. Although this is a disciplined dance training environment, it also provides these young people with a sense of true inclusion and belonging, a place where they can learn new skills, improvise and be creative. We build dance works as a group and have performed in Mass Movement as part of U Dance for the past four years, as well as in Big Dance 2014 and 2016. They have also been invited to perform at various events in Leicester as a positive example of what disabled people can achieve.

Each year I assist Simon Coopey, now chairman of Sidekick Dance, in running the Special Schools of Leicester performance at Curve Theatre. These showcases are a fantastic opportunity for young people to gain positive dance experiences and perform in a professional theatre.

This annual event began in 2009 with around 50 students and was run by both Simon and Bloom. Sadly, Bloom passed away in 2015 but we have continued to drive the work forward as Bloom did. The numbers of participants grows every year and our last showcase featured 190 young people from the special schools of Leicester and Leicestershire.

In continuing Bloom's legacy, and as a celebration of truly Inclusive Dance, this year myself and the SideKick team launched the first ever Bloom Inclusive Dance Festival. The festival comprised a week long programme of dance activities across Leicester, providing dance opportunities for all ages and abilities. The festival culminated in

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a mass participation performance outside Leicester Cathedral. The choreography was adapted from that of Laura Jones (StopGap Dance Company), which she created for the Paralympic Heritage Flame Celebration performance with movements based on British Sign Language. This was SideKick Dance's first festival, a dream of mine, and with such incredible support from so many, we were able to make it a reality.

Challenges along the way

Many fellow artists reading this will understand that being a freelance practitioner in the arts is not easy. We work numerous hours, we buy all our own resources, pay for our own

travel and insurance, spend hours searching for inspiration as well as attempting to keep up to date with the latest research, and we undergo as much CPD as we can find the time and money for, all for the simple reason that we care and love what we do. Although time is often against us, a 'make-do class' is not good enough. I try to create every session so that participants either try something new, achieve something, or progress further than they have before. This takes both time and effort but hopefully results in exciting and innovative dance experiences. I'm far from perfect and I've made lots of mistakes in my teaching practice but I've learnt to reflect and evaluate rather than

dwell, so that I can move forward and improve next time. A quite stressful challenge that I have faced, as many practitioners do, is getting funding. Thankfully Simon has managed to apply to and be successful with fantastic charities and organisations, such as Children in Need and Awards for All, who have seen the worth of what we do. On top of this the rest of the SideKick team, and our friends and family, fundraise in numerous ways to keep the work of SideKick Dance alive.

What's next?

This year over 300 people took part in the Bloom Inclusive Dance Festival. Next year I want to increase this figure and make more dance opportunities accessible to all. We currently have a youth group and an adult group. We aim to start a Primary age group in the coming months, as well as an advanced company class to help people to take a step towards further training or employment. We aim to help in bridging the gap between community dance and dance as a profession for more talented disabled artists.

SideKick is achieving its goals because of the people and the passion they hold. We have a fantastic committee team made up of volunteers who dedicate their time, energy and expertise. We have also been very fortunate to have secured funding and sponsorship from a wide range of sources. We regularly attend courses such as British Sign Language, behaviour management and safe guarding because we want to offer those involved the best experiences we can. Credit also goes to the dancers themselves, who attend every week with a desire to dance and to move freely, to train and to express themselves in an environment where they feel that they belong.

I'm truly grateful for everyone who has inspired me and encouraged me to dance. Some are still with me today, some, sadly, are not but their passion, drive and enthusiasm for me to follow my dream is why I am able to do what I do and why I have achieved what I have. Dance is amazing and thankfully it is a huge part of my life.



Info

www.sidekickdance.co.uk