

Is there a gender play gap?

Artistic director **Karen Gallagher MBE** and community dance artist **Jennifer Hale** have been looking at their dance practice at Merseyside Dance Initiative to see how they can adapt and develop their work with different community groups. As they piloted a new project, Men! Dancing! they asked themselves - what role does gender play in influencing their choreographic choices? Karen, boldly, takes up the story...

Jennie Hale has been a community dance artist with Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) since 2008. Now in her tenth year with the organisation, she works part-time and is also a co-director of Taciturn, an all-female dance company based in Liverpool.

MDI first met Jennie when she was 12 and a member of Knowsley Youth Dance Company taking part in a community dance project called Barging In, a work on the canal. The relationship between the artist and the company has developed into a long one.

Jennie leads another group, 50 Moves, an all-female dance class set up in 2005 to promote physical movement and creativity for people aged 50+, though the average age

is more like 65 years. The group was never created to be all-female, but men have rarely taken part on a regular basis. Jennie inherited 50 Moves when she took over from a previous artist, Lisa Dowler, and has been leading the group since she joined MDI.

When asked about her approach to creating her dance sessions with this group, Jennie recalls that her original idea was to deliver a planned class, as she knew how, with a regular structure, warm up, motif, share/appreciate and warm down. However, she was very new to the sector, having recently graduated from The Place, and her natural technique used a lot of floor-based movement and exercises. So she needed to rethink

how her work could be adapted for older bodies with limited ability for floor work; a balance needed to be found. This has been refined over the 10 years Jennie and the group have worked together, which has helped to form a strong and trusting relationship between them. The social side of 50 Moves is vital to many of the group, providing support in times of need as well as just a good old natter before the class starts (and sometimes after!).

This relationship means that members of 50 Moves are very happy, and encouraged, to voice opinions about what they like and what they don't like. Yet the majority prefer to be led by Jennie rather than explore their own creativity. Finding ways to differentiate between exercises that





Maxine Brown and 50 Moves, We Are Born To Move, choreography: Henri Oguike. Photo: Alan D Smith.

dance forms. Yet, for some, this is shifting, especially when there is an opportunity to see Jennie performing with Taciturn dance. This development gained profound impetus when, in 2014, the group was selected to be part of the Elixir festival at Sadler's Wells. Seeing other people of similar age up on stage and performing alongside different companies from across the UK gave them the confidence to seriously consider themselves as artists, with some deciding to take part in an additional project with internationally renowned choreographer Henri Oguike.

The group began to consider its creative potential; this sat alongside Jennie's ambition to move them from a copying mindset to encouraging the group to make its own material. Though there are some who are eager to experiment, others are happy and open to offer ideas but remain reluctant to fully explore their own individuality, preferring to work as an ensemble and in unison. Jennie wonders if attending a regular class every week is a constraint? She has been thinking a lot about how to manage her choreographic approach when there is a hesitancy to make individual material, always trying to find new ways to tease out movement material without the daunting task of 'creating' something, then handing it back in a way that remains 'theirs'.

The total flip side of this is Men! Dancing! Jennie has had to make a considered transition when working with this group of men. The session still begins with a warm up, but movement material is introduced very early on, rather than through the exercise-based class with the women; a more creative process is occurring quite naturally. The men are very involved, are far more direct and have a need to analyse movement, placement and ideas in a much more rigorous way. Maybe the way the project has been set up – a pilot project with a performance outcome over a specific time – has created a different expectation, instilling ownership of what is being produced and securing investment in the ideas, to the point of taking tasks home to work on.

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warm up the body in preparation for moving and the concept of making material that creates a dance work has been a gradual and continual process. This shift includes the style of the performance piece, moving from 'doing routines' to a creative process and the piecing together of developed material.

In 2013 Jennie introduced the group to the work of German dancer and choreographer Pina Bausch, and what

followed was a shift in perception. This introduced more discussion on how dance is constructed and performed and established an opportunity to create work in response to a particular stimulus. This led to 50 Moves creating its own version of Pina's choreography – The Nelken Line.

The majority of the group rarely watch contemporary work. Their preference tends to be for ballet and musical theatre and other



more kinaesthetic when it comes to movement and creativity? It's got us really thinking at MDI and posing many thoughts on the many different approaches that can be explored based on what we know so far. It's very early days but we are keen to investigate. How do we learn creatively and is there a gender bias, one way or the other?

With our interest piqued we have found that there is limited conclusive research to explain any major difference in gender and creativity. However, Baer and Kaufman(1) conducted an extensive review of what existed at the time and there are some really interesting findings and provocations, ranging from ideas and discourse to arguments of nature and nurture. Abra and Valentine-French(2) consider both nature and nurture arguments with a possible explanation ranging from differences in specific cognitive abilities and in educational opportunities to differences in selfishness and competitiveness. They conclude, "Creative achievement depends on both biological and environmental factors because men and women differ in both factors... Either or both could produce the achievement differences." There are theories of biology, environment, and development that can further explore the reasons why there are maybe some differences and Helson(3), when

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explaining perceptions of the creative accomplishment of men, argues that it's cultural value, social roles and sexist thinking that contributes.

Ruth and Birren(4), having reviewed works in relation to low instances of creative influences by women, suggest that women appear more interested in the creative process itself than the end product. This could be a possible explanation for the difference in the two groups at MDI, with the men so concerned with the end product that their approach to the process is different as they explore it through the end focus.

Or are we reading too much into it? Yes, one group is female and another male but the set up of both groups was very different, with a specific purpose and with one much larger and with a lot more history than the other. The expectation of one group is predominantly to socialise and exercise together, with the

performance being secondary; while a new group is created specifically to test an idea, with performance at its heart. The funding for Men! Dancing! supported by the PH Holt Foundation, will conclude with the sharing of the work the groups have been creating, but we would like to see if there is a want or need to continue the session indefinitely.

We are excited that these two companies – 50 Moves and Men! Dancing! – performed alongside each other at our International Dance Day event, in April 2018. This was the premier for the Men! Dancing! group, both for the piece and the participants. Let's see where we go from here.

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