



Primary School dance residency with Shobana Jeyasingh Dance. Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou

Defining new participation practices in contemporary dance

In 2018, two projects helped Shobana Jeyasingh Dance develop and nourish its ambition: a year-long residency in a London primary school, and a digital project, *A Most Contagious Dance*. Learning Manager, **Alice Odin** illustrates the benefits of this strong commitment to learning and participation

We were keen to broaden the students' knowledge and appreciation of contemporary dance and observe how dance could have an impact on childrens' overall learning and wellbeing

Goodrich Community Primary School residency

In 2017-18, we developed and led a year-long contemporary dance residency at Goodrich Community Primary school, one of Southwark, south London's, biggest state primary schools. The project was delivered by three of our company dancers who engaged more than 150 pupils from Year 1 to Year 6, each week, over 24 sessions. In the first term, we introduced students to active and fun ways of moving the body while working in small groups. In the second term, we familiarised pupils with dance exercises and creative tasks and supported them in devising short choreographies, which were showcased in school, in front of peers, parents and teachers.

We were keen to broaden the students' knowledge and appreciation of contemporary dance and observe how dance could have an impact on childrens' overall learning and

wellbeing. We soon discovered that introducing contemporary dance to young participants on a weekly basis is challenging. At first, students were keen to take part in a different type of dance activity: hip-hop, street dance or ballet. Once past the novelty of the first workshops, students didn't always understand what contemporary dance was and that the exercises we set or the creative tasks they responded to, were part of creating movement. We readdressed this in our first term of the residency by giving a stronger structure to our sessions, explaining in more detail how each activity linked to movement creation, and by the second term, students really enjoyed dancing with us.

"There was so much objection at first when we started the residency; the students kept saying: 'Why can't we do street dance?' But at the end of this residency, they absolutely loved it." Year 6 Teaching Assistant.

Throughout the residency, we made some unexpected discoveries. We knew pupils enjoyed dancing and being outside their classrooms but we found out that students particularly enjoyed being creative in small groups. Teachers said this also made some students, who were usually shy or less academically inclined, use the dance sessions as a space to shine.

"The residency has been good in levelling abilities. Some girls who are not so good in subjects like maths have found the dance classes have helped them be more confident in other subjects too." Year 6 Teacher

We had to iron-out practical problems throughout the year (such



as the use of school halls, timings, length of session, exam weeks etc) and while we thought we were meeting regularly with teachers and staff, we still found some teachers were resistant to the residency. A few clearly saw their weekly dance session as an 'extra something' they had been told to do by senior staff and, at first, used the time to do other things such as marking or going to meetings. We addressed this quickly early on, but in retrospect, we should have made more of an effort to meet with each class teacher before the start of the project as well as outline the residency with the headmaster, heads of year, and the PE coordinator. However, most teachers and teaching assistants did commit to the residency thoroughly and actively encouraged their



Above and left: Primary School dance residency with Shobana Jeyasingh Dance.
Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou

online platform, A Most Contagious Dance, offers further information about Contagion and a creative online dance project. Visitors to the site are encouraged to devise their own choreography via a tutorial by our Associate Artist, Avatāra Ayuso, who guides them step by step through the process while demonstrating two phrases from Contagion’s repertoire. At the end, viewers are invited to create and upload their own dance videos and a simple location tag will track locations of the videos, creating a powerful digital map of ‘dance contagions’. The map shows the spread and mutation of the work globally, illustrating cultural and international interpretations of this production.

Devising, creating and launching A Most Contagious Dance has been, as anticipated, a long process. We started actively working on the website in March 2018 and the platform went live in August 2018. We are working constantly to promote the platform and encouraging audiences to engage in the project. Groups we are delivering workshops to, in touring venues, have been keen to participate.

Informing and getting individuals to take part in this project is our next objective. We have recruited a marketing specialist to help us spread our message to new groups and individuals. This is the first time that we have devised an online participation project and while we are still navigating the ins and outs of promoting and running it, we are really enjoying working in this new way and being able to showcase the work we do.

If you haven’t already visited A Most Contagious Dance please visit the website and take part in our viral dance contagion!

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students throughout the year.

Overall, the residency was a great success, with students gaining an understanding and enjoyment of contemporary dance. The feedback from students and staff was very positive.

“I loved dancing – it was fun and we had a chance to be creative.”
Year 5 student.

Our participation work as a company has been enriched through this experience and we are now planning three new residencies in primary schools in early 2019.

We are actively looking at other similar opportunities in primary schools in the UK and internationally. If you’re thinking of organising a dance residency in your school, please get in touch with us.

A Most Contagious Dance

Contagion is Shobana’s latest work investigating the metaphor of war as a global virus. It explores how the Spanish flu pandemic spread internationally in 1918, causing one of the deadliest disasters in human history.

To accompany our current Contagion tour, we devised an ambitious learning programme which includes dance workshops, cross-art activities and community participation throughout the country. We also wanted to trial online engagement to work with remote and non-dance specialist audiences and those who wouldn’t be able to attend our performances. Mirroring the way in which the Spanish flu virus spread throughout the UK, our