



Lizzie Ball, Sandy Jones and Julia Wolstenholm, March of the Women, choreographed by Jennie Hale. Photo: Pauline Phillips

Where past and future are gathered

This past year has been very significant for Liverpool based dance company Growing Older (Dis)Gracefully Dance. All members are over 60, the oldest 88 and between them they have about 400 dancing years. Long-time member **Judy Smith** shares their journey

How did we start? What did we do for the next 21 years?

In 1997, Liverpool City Council had a big incentive to get the over-50s active and several local dance teachers took classes all over the city. It was realised that there was an appetite for more such opportunities and Growing Older (Dis)Gracefully Dance (frequently known as GODS) was founded. In late 1997, funding was obtained and a local community dance artist called Liz Bruen, who sadly died in 2008, was commissioned to make the first major work with the company. This piece, Where Past and Future are Gathered, first

performed in the Bluecoat in early 1998, is now the signature piece for the company.

GODS continued on a project basis, coming together to create work when needed. Then, in 2002, having received Arts4All funding to make a film, Framed (choreographed by Manny Emslie with Dan Williams as film director), dancers started to work together on a regular basis. A targeted launch of the film did the trick and this was the beginning of our now well-established group.

In 2002 there were about eight dancers, including three who were there from the start and by 2003

there were more than 20. The present company was well and truly established. And what follows can only highlight some of our more significant moments. In 2006/7, we were selected to dance at the re-launch of the Festival Hall, in London. In 2008, we got funding for another film SCHUHT, in the grounds of Speke Hall. Since then we have performed locally at many venues including city squares, churches, bus stops and local parks. Further afield, we have performed in Devon, Taunton, Gloucester, Bakewell, Royal Academy of Dance - London, Sadler's Wells - London, Hull and Worcester.

Older people dancing

If we were asked what were our most memorable performances we would all have our individual special moments but we would probably all agree – dancing in the pouring rain in Williamson Square, Liverpool, with the only audience being the Spanish football fans who had come for a football match; performing at Elmhurst Dance School, Birmingham, on a stage so large that we almost crawled off, having been determined to fill every inch of it; taking part in the Welsh Choral Society's Titanic Concert, in Liverpool Cathedral – the atmosphere was breath-taking; our trip to Saddler's Wells when we were standing in the Lilian Baylis Studio where many of those who had inspired us to dance had been before – it was just awe inspiring; and finally, our two performances in 2018, when it was impossible to describe the sense of pride and achievement that we shared as a group.

How did we come together? Why do we stay together?

GOD's members initially join the group because they are able to do something they love but frequently

they find that the weekly session offers much more. We appreciate the benefits of dance; enhanced physical and mental wellbeing; increased resilience; and a feeling of empowerment through shared experience and teamwork, all making it an extraordinarily satisfying activity. The social aspect of the weekly meet is also something the GODs acknowledge as an important reason to keep coming back. As one company member has said, "it was the dancing that brought us here but it is the friendships that keep us here."

In our performance we exude a common passion for dance and demonstrate the positive physical and mental benefits that result from this involvement. We are challenged by different choreographers and the work, which is always inspired by non-age-related themes. It is fantastic to be able to share this with wider audiences and thus increase our advocacy for continued health as we all age. Perhaps the most exciting thing we can share is the fun and excitement we gain from being involved in healthy, skilful and creative activity.

How was this past year for us?

This year, leading up to our 21st Anniversary Performance at the Unity Theatre, Liverpool in 2018 has been challenging and very hard work. We have had many aches and pains and our brains have been taxed to remember all eleven dances. It has often been frustrating and tempers did get frayed, but wow, in the end what a sense of achievement. It's been amazing to see how dancers have grown as performers, all working to remember a very impressive and varied repertoire; we had our ups and downs but in the weeks immediately before the big day there was, for everyone, a growth in confidence. It has been wonderful to see how the group has become more unified, with lots of people stepping up to take on roles they would previously not have done.

How was the performance for our audience?

Our two performances were almost completely sold-out – the audience consisting of family and friends, dance colleagues from the Merseyside area, our choreographers and their families as well as the Lord Mayor and other civic dignitaries. It was also wonderful to welcome members of the dance world from far flung places such as Essex and South Wales. They gave us a rapturous reception. Here is a quote taken from some of the responses they sent following the performance: "A repertoire perfectly balanced to really illustrate your phenomenal creativity and performance skills – emotional and deeply connective, you managed to squeeze every reaction from the audience and some of the moments of real emotion had us spellbound at times."

How did we feel?

Exhausted, effervescent, emotionally drained but also uplifted and ready to face the coming years. What a journey we have had – so many fun-filled years and experiences we would never have had if we had not been part of Growing Older (Dis) Gracefully Dance!

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Kit Oi Chung, Julia Hanly, Chris Maddock, Judy Smith and Julia Wolstenholm, Class, choreographed by Irene Dilks, LEAP Festival. Photo: Janet Hollinshead