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# Giving communities a voice through professional collaboration



Community dancers, Rumpelstiltskin. Photo: Luke Waddington

balletLORENT's Founder and Artistic Director, **Liv Lorent MBE** and the company have worked for over 25 years to incorporate the voices of communities into their artistic programme by collaborating with diverse groups and individuals from all over the UK. Here, **James MacGillivray**, Education and Projects Manager, unpacks this crucial relationship

**balletLORENT's works have featured** community casts aged 2-92, and additionally pregnant women and babies. The dance theatre works include: *PassAge to Passion* (1996); *La Famille* (1999); *Strange Glitter* (2000); *The Ball* (2002); *MaEternal* (2008); and *The Night Ball* (2013). The contribution from and inclusion of untrained dancers into a professional production has been inspirational. Their input informs - their ability determines artistic content - and their individuality enhances the aesthetic.

These communities are representative of our audiences. They bring a vision of real life to the stage - an authenticity - reflective of the communities we serve, and the stories we tell.

balletLORENT's core aim is to break down actual or perceived barriers to engagement by targeting underrepresented groups in communities of high socio-economic deprivation. We choose to work with individuals who have no, or very little experience of dance, made accessible by working with primary schools and communities in these areas.

## Participation

### Community casts - fairytale

The inspiration behind balletLORENT's trilogy of Brothers Grimm fairytale productions (2012-18) for family audiences, was to tell stories which had true representation of the society in which our audiences live, and the fairytales we were representing.

The first of these productions, Rapunzel (2012), had babies, toddlers, their parents, and 12 young people alongside the professional ensemble. The young people were engaged through the nationwide Centre for Advanced Training schemes and we held open workshops for families to attend.

The second, Snow White (2015) was to have ten children aged 5-9 to be cast as village children who also became forest animals who loved Snow White dearly. The children in Newcastle were found through creative workshops in primary schools, and we held open workshops in each of the communities we toured.

Despite our best intentions we discovered that open workshops were predominantly attracting children with dance experience as opposed to those who perhaps couldn't afford weekly dance classes, lacked the confidence to attend an audition, or simply due to

lack of opportunity, never knew they had creative talent!

The vision for the third production, Rumpelstiltskin (2017) was to engage an intergenerational community cast with an ambition to ensure that we reached underprivileged children and older people and to provide opportunities for some children who had taken part in our previous fairytales to take on more demanding roles.

Experience told us that we had to adopt a new model of working to fully achieve these ambitions in each place we toured. Children were selected through creative workshops with Years 1-3, partnering with primary schools in areas ranked as socio and economically deprived. 1,952 children (5-9yrs) took part in workshops, with 137 performing on stages across the UK.

We delivered workshops with older adults in the same communities including community centres, knitting groups, day-care centres, and residential homes. So many wonderful people crossed our paths, but often we were unable to overcome some of the barriers to engaging further with our project due to the support needed outside of their care setting, or being unable to commit due to cultural, health or family situations. 380 older



people took part across the UK aged from 63-92. 56 performed on stage, of whom many have continued to send us knitted socks, leg warmers and hats and are advocates for their new balletLORENT family!

"It has been a privileged experience to work with such a creative, dynamic and talented group of people. Something like this is very important for older people, because we are lonely, and need something to look forward to." Dilys Pritchard, aged 75

These methods of working proved hugely successful, achieving outcomes that we aspired to and were transformative for our participants, young and old. Apart from knowing that many of the children who appear on stage with balletLORENT had never before stepped into a theatre, there are many examples of what we have achieved.

We took a risk on offering ten children featured roles as the young Rumpelstiltskin and young Shepherd's Daughter with an opportunity to perform in at least two theatres, giving them more independence and the chance to hold the stage alone with a two-minute duet. The risk paid off.

One boy with autism began to find focus through school workshops and joined us in out-of-school rehearsals.



Gwen Berwick with a member of the audience, The Night Ball. Photo: Jane Hobson



Clockwise from far left:  
 Kelly Wilson and community dancers, MaEternal. Photo: Bill Cooper  
 Debbi Purtill and community dancers, Rumpelstiltskin. Photo: Iolo Penri  
 Community cast, PassAge to Passion 1996. Photo: Aedan Kelly  
 Gavin Coward and community dancers, Snow White. Photo: Iolo Penri

For long periods, he was fascinated by props, creating delicate solos or duets with our Creative Associates. His contribution informed some of the personality of Rumpelstiltskin, and his movements became embedded in the choreography.

A 9-year-old boy we encountered in a school workshop was very reluctant to take part in Snow White, his teachers and parents doubted he would see the project through, but he did; he has since engaged in a children's boxing group, which has kept his focus. A year later he was enthusiastic about the opportunity to take on the role as the young Rumpelstiltskin and he got the part!

"Susie suffers from anxiety, but she completely opened up during her experience and she cried at the end as she enjoyed it so much." Louisa Turner, Development Worker, Bennochly Parish Church of Scotland

### The Lost Happy Endings

So, what next? The Lost Happy Endings (2019) (TLHE), an original story by Carol Ann Duffy, is a venture away from our previous fairytale works. When all the happy endings to well-loved stories are stolen, it is up to Jub to create new, alternative endings in time so that all the children of the

world can hear the stories they have grown to love before bedtime. The story needs children to play out the roles when their bedtimes are being disrupted as well as perform a fairytale fantasy scene where new endings are possible.

How do we grow further from our past experiences? We want to support the development of more children who have taken part in our previous fairytales but discover new talent alongside. We are doing two things...

Firstly, The Lost Happy Endings research and development programme in Newcastle partnered with four primary schools, three of which in areas ranked amongst the 10% most deprived in the country, and highly culturally and ethnically diverse. 340 children took part in 68 creative workshops to develop material for TLHE. We discovered incredible children who we have invited to join us for out-of-school workshops to continue their development. We aim to give 15 of these children a part in TLHE in Newcastle and repeat this deeper engagement project in at least three disadvantaged areas on tour if funding is achieved.

And secondly, 24 children who performed in Snow White and/or Rumpelstiltskin will be given an

opportunity to play central characters in TLHE and perform in three different locations. They will be on tour!

Whilst the success of our programmes is proven, we continue to reflect and refine the processes, to hear the voices of our local communities and to provide opportunities for those who otherwise lack access due to geographic, economic or life circumstances.

Our aim may not be unique, but we believe our approach may be – to work with children, young people and older adults, who do not have a 'dance training', and to give them a platform on stage with the company is no longer risky to us. The moment they step into the studio they are treated as equals to any other dancer. Their voices are heard, and their opinions valued. They are the artists who contribute to our productions, and our work is continually enhanced by the artistic gift of children and adults who bring their different physicality, age and life experience to our studio and our stage.

### Info

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