

# Rep and reputation



How can a touring dance company build loyalty, real relationships and stay relevant to the communities it serves when it is only passing through? Answer: in each location, deploy the unique skills and personal connections of its freelance community and participatory dance artists as ambassadors.

**Emily Crouch**, Engagement Producer for National Dance Company Wales, tells us more.





Above and left: Dance Ambassadors. Photo: Kirsten McTernan. Far left: Emily Crouch. Photo: Megan Pritchard

**M**y name is Emily Crouch and I am a freelance dance producer. I trained at London Contemporary Dance School and was a professional performer for five years before becoming a mum and transitioning, first, into project management, then full-time producing. At the end of 2021, I moved back to my hometown of Swansea in South Wales after living 13 years in London and have been working as Engagement Producer for National Dance Company Wales (NDCWales) since August 2022.

Since becoming a mum, my love and appreciation for dance shifted as I saw its impact on my children from a very young age. I believe including dance in children's lives is essential to build confident, kind, healthy young people. It's health benefits, the body awareness and transferable skills it fosters, the joy it brings are not celebrated enough in our society.

Working with NDCWales and learning about its engagement models has made a space for me to align my love for dance with the power it can bring. The Company runs programmes that connect the performances with people of all ages. It runs weekly Dance for People Living with Parkinson's classes (in partnership with English National Ballet) in four places across Wales, a Young Associates programme for aspiring dancers, community live performances and Discover Dance, a matinee including participation and performance which runs alongside

touring for young people and families. It also runs a participation programme which engages with freelance dance artists across Wales and England, called Dance Ambassadors.

Interweaving with the performance programme, the engagement work has a core focus on broadening access to dance and advocating that dance is for everyone and can enrich everyone's lives. We know about the transferable skills and health benefits from dance, supporting both physical and mental health. Now we are focusing on investigating how programmes, classes and opportunities need to be tailored so communities with low levels of arts engagement can gain these benefits from dance. It is about stepping into those communities, understanding the local demographic and embracing different cultures so the work can have a real impact.

What is a Dance Ambassador? A Dance Ambassador is a locally based freelance dance artist NDCWales contracts for a set number of days per year, who engages in depth with some of the company's repertoire and develops artistic content with their own local communities. They are each connected to a 'Priority Venue' – places where we have a long-term shared commitment to widen participation in dance and promote interest in dance more broadly. Connecting with a Dance Ambassador is sometimes someone's first encounter with dance and can inspire continuous engagement, >>

so progression routes and pathways to engage are important.

NDCWales currently works with Dance Ambassadors in nine venues UK-wide: seven Welsh Priority Venues (Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Pontio in Bangor, Taliesin Arts Centre in Swansea, Theatr Clwyd in Mold, Theatr Brycheiniog in Brecon, Hafren in Newtown and Sherman Theatre in Cardiff) and with two English Priority Venues (Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield and Derby Theatre).

The Dance Ambassadors act like satellites around England and Wales so they can remain in dialogue with communities, audiences, and participants. This dialogue then informs and shapes NDC Wales' engagement activity to ensure provision is relevant. The Dance Ambassadors interconnect NDCWales with other activities happening in the communities and feed into developing a local audience at each venue. They're entrepreneurial, resourceful people, who build and sustain authentic relationships and place NDCWales in a paramount position to execute its mission of sharing and making dance with everyone.

A Dance Ambassador's work is tailored to the demographic of each location. In Bangor and Aberystwyth, this means it's delivered in Welsh and reflects Welsh cultural experience and interest. The work they do with people of all ages sometimes results in work being presented in the venue around a company performance – foyer curtain raisers, films, or other creative work, all inspired by the company's repertoire.

Angharad Harrop, a freelance creative, who has worked with NDCWales for many years, is the Dance Ambassador for North West Wales and supported the company's visits to Bangor, Pwllheli and Caernarfon. Angharad shares the following about her experience:

"In 2019 I collaborated with young dancers from Pwllheli School of Dance to create a curtain raiser for the Roots tour that drew inspiration from Ferghus Ó Conchúir's *Rygbi: Annwyl*, which emphasises the importance of the landscapes of Wales to Welsh culture. The young people created a piece inspired by their relationships to the landscapes in which they live and, through creating the work, we explored our connections to our locality and how it shapes our identity.

Opportunities for young people to participate in high quality arts provision in Welsh is a vital part of Cymraeg 2050, the initiative to reach 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050. This project, in particular, grew a sense of pride in the Welsh language as we explored our connections to the histories and stories of the



National Dance Company Wales Young Associates.  
Photo: Kirsten McTernan.

places in which we live and integral role Welsh has in our identity.

The theme of the 2022 Spring Tour was "dance that connects us". I worked on several projects as a Dance Ambassador with schools and community groups using connection as a starting point to explore how movement can bring us together.

Young dancers from CR Dance Academy, Llandudno, created a curtain raiser inspired by our connections to nature and the freedom of a bird's flight. As the first performance for these young people since the pandemic, dance became a safe place to process the periods of isolation that kept us apart. In community halls, we met for 12 weeks enjoying each other's presence and reflecting upon what we found was important to us during the time we were apart. The vibrant performance took place in the foyer of Pontio, Bangor with 26 young people sharing their stories of connection through dance.

Also as part of this phase, in collaboration with musician Henry Horrell, we worked with Year 3 pupils at Ysgol Ein Harglwyddes, Bangor, to co-devise a project inspired by our connections to nature. We worked together across six weeks with the children, exploring what we can notice when we take the time to be still with nature. Our explorations led us to look at the journeys of different seeds and how wildflowers bloom wherever they find themselves.

The freedom of the Dance Ambassador role allows



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Someone I have come to know and feel has an exciting voice at NDCWales, is Jack Philp. Jack is currently part of the engagement team, but has worked freelance as a teacher and Dance Ambassador. His understanding of the company, wealth of freelance networks and understanding of the current Welsh landscape is instrumental to the team. He says:

“As a dance company, it is vital for us to think about how we can be outward facing with our work and to ask who that work could be with. The Dance

Ambassador model is vital to that thinking, as it's a way for us to meet and engage artists, participants and audiences in all that we do. Collaborating with artists, with local understanding and a breadth of experience, allows us the space to build relationships with those local communities and audiences in truly authentic ways, whilst investing in those freelancers at the same time. It creates space for conversation, ideas, experiences and develops partnerships which ultimately champion the role and benefit of dance in the world”.

The aims of the Dance Ambassador model are multiple and having the right freelancer in position who can work collaboratively with the NDCWales Engagement team is vital to its success. Part of the role is to inspire local people through their own active dance practice by offering information about routes into dance for every level of experience, whilst raising the profile of dance in their local community.

All this work extends the company's reach across Wales and supports the viability of artists careers/lives in every corner of it. The sustainability of freelance dance careers and performance venues here is fragile at the best of times, but with the current cost of living crisis and continuous uncertainty of arts funding, NDCWales is trying to deliver on its role to support freelancers and venues who support their touring work so dance can remain present in people's lives. As a freelancer myself, I understand and appreciate this.

A mere three months working at NDCWales has deepened my passionate belief that dance is a space in which people from all over the world can express and connect.

For me, local people must be at the heart of all engagement and arts companies and organisations delivering engagement work must constantly be asking who are they making opportunities for, why are they the ones doing this work, why is it needed?

It is very easy to make assumptions about what different people want or need. As Wales becomes more diverse, we are working to broaden the voices and perspectives we see in creative spaces. Without the eyes, ears and work of the Dance Ambassadors, NDCWales would not be able to sustain relationships and I am looking forward to seeing how its work in communities across Wales makes an impact on people in future.

#### **Info**

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