



Lucie Labadie & Kayleigh Price, Connecting Communities Parade. Photo: Natalie Willat.



All The Good Stuff: FRONTLINEdance turns 21

In a heartfelt blend of fact and feeling, **Rachael Lines**, Artistic Director of FRONTLINEdance lets us in on the struggles and satisfactions of over 21-years providing creativity, care, access and connection for their local and the national community of disabled dancers, makers and leaders.

As I write this, FRONTLINEdance has been going for over 21 years and I can honestly say that still, every day, I get to work alongside some very special people that make my heart sing and fill my soul with all the good stuff.

For those who are only hearing about us for the first time, FRONTLINEdance is an artist-led company based in Stoke-on-Trent in the English Midlands. We place disabled people and those with long-term health conditions at the core of our organisation – as leaders, dancers, artists, participants and audiences. We are a not-for-profit organisation, established in 2001 by myself and Mike King and we recently joined the Arts Council England's National Portfolio for 2023-2026.

As makers, FRONTLINEdance explore how we can create exciting, relevant, and thought-provoking contemporary dance with deaf, visually impaired, disabled people, neurodivergent people and hospital patients as co-creators and audiences. This means that we co-create across ages, backgrounds, and experiences, naturally integrating people together, reducing isolation and improving physical, mental, emotional and social health and well-being. Our work is mostly performed in non-traditional theatre settings: libraries, museums, hospitals, hospices, children's centres, outdoors, school halls.

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Above left: Connected Communities Performance 2023. Above right: Maurice Greenhan, Moving Stories. Photos: Natalie Willat.

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Throughout the last 21 years, key themes have come through from our participants: “A place that (people) can truly be themselves... A warm sense of community, feels like a family... The richness of collective experiences.”

Our audiences pick up on this too as their comments reveal:

“The feeling of oneness in the company was beautiful.”

“The empowerment that was evident through the performance was really emotional for me, because I cast my mind back to my younger days and wish that I could have been involved with such an inclusive group that empowered me as I was growing up.”

Of course, this deep sense of inclusion we foster and working with those with long-term health conditions over time inevitably comes with the emotional price-tag of having to say goodbye to or with some of our members. It’s at these moments that family feel and how very deep our bonds created by dancing together come through for me.

For example, at a funeral some time back, a few of us stood together to say goodbye to one of our participant’s wives. One FRONTLINE member, who had stopped dancing due to losing his wife just six

months prior to this, reflected on how we’d been dancing together for nearly seven years and he felt like we were all family, had created our own community. He expressed gratitude that dance, such an enjoyable activity that everyone can enjoy and do, had brought us all together from different backgrounds and walks of life. He reminisced how we always laughed and how much joy was shared; how we all connected so naturally and then he said to me: “It’s all because of you, because of FRONTLINE!”

This, of course, filled me up with the warm fuzzy stuff I mentioned earlier, catching me off-guard – sometimes easily done when I am often so caught up in the relentless workload, problem solving and proving ‘the need’ for FRONTLINEdance.

I think that is the toughest thing about my work – constantly having to explain what it is! Declare the need, prove its worth, defend it – all the time!

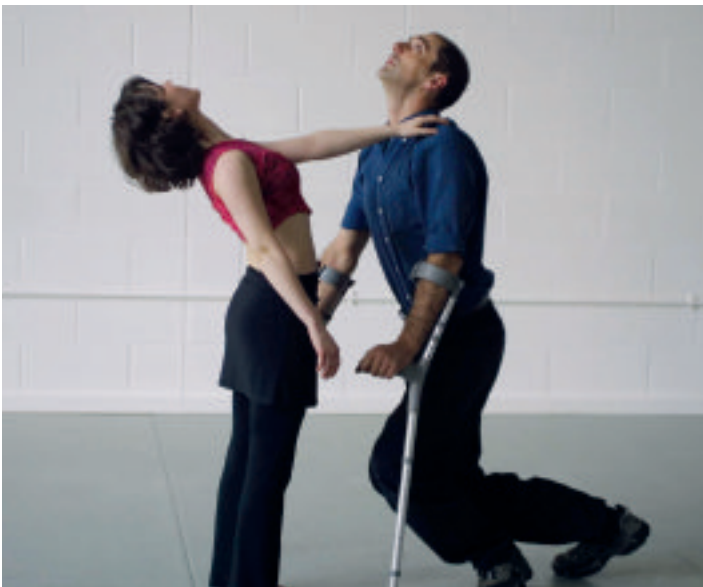
One issue, for example, is that there often seems to be no legacy in some organisations we partner with. If we are lucky enough to get someone who cares and is interested, it is often just a singular person in that organisation; when they leave so does all the hard work.

But I’m a very determined person!

Since 2001, we have integrated community and professional performers together and our work is often intergenerational. We’ve always used the co-creation model and a methodology of dancing with as opposed to ‘making dancing by’ or ‘doing dancing for’ participants. This is what people pick up on when they watch our work and I feel proud of our achievements, which have often been delivered on a shoestring with inevitable compromises along the way. In the words of an audience member:

“As a person with sight impairment and health challenges, it was wonderful to feel included in all of the performances. It was respectful, inclusive and, for someone who finds accessing the community without support a challenge, it was an experience

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Top: Charlotte Arnold, Amal Nefi, Vicci Riley, Soundness of Heart. Photo: Dominic Erik Davies. Above left: Rachael Lines and Mike King, Co-founders of FRONTLINEdance 2001. Photo: Peppy Hills. Above right: CCAppetite, TheBigFeast2023, Hanley. Photo: Jenny Harper.



Rachael Lines and participants, Moving-Together-2020. Photo: Natalie Willat.

“It was great to show new audiences that we are not all the same, and the work we make is different from each other.”

that made me want to attend further performances. Thank you to everyone involved!”

By 2019, we began exploring how sign language and visual description whilst using the ‘relaxed performance’ model can be embedded into the creative process and performances we do. We are constantly examining how our work will engage and be of interest to who we want to reach with it, including those who are learning disabled and those that have profound and multiple impairments.

“It’s the second time I’ve seen a performance by FRONTLINEdance. The thing that encouraged me to come is that I love watching performances, but, being deaf, I don’t always find them accessible. FRONTLINEdance are amazing in ensuring there is access for everyone, but they do it naturally, without making a big fuss about it. For example, the BSL interpreter is there and moves around as needed and I caught sight of volunteers ensuring there were chairs available for anyone who was unable to stand. These were moved as the show moved along the path and were placed so anyone could take advantage of them, without having to

ask... it’s this kind of proactivity and seamlessness that allows true accessibility to occur.”

Also in 2019, we produced our first City-Wide Arts Festival, FRONTLINE Arts Festival, (FAF) that had audiences access needs at the centre and showcased the work of disabled artists of all art forms. StopGap Dance Company, Shropshire Inclusive Dance (SiD), independent artists Welly O’Brien & Kate Marsh, Aby Watson, Billy Read and FRONTLINEdance all performed very different dance work in it. It was great to show new audiences that we are not all the same and the work we make is different from each other.

Though rooted in our home of city of Stoke-On-trent and county of Staffordshire, we continue to support emerging disabled artists and offer consultation and support around inclusion, access, and programming of disabled artists both locally and nationally. The simultaneous range and depth in the way we work was summarised by one of the producer/mentors at FAF:

“I was surprised at how integrated the community/grassroots art was with the professional

makers. I was surprised at the breadth and magnificence of the programme. I didn't know there were so many disabled artists making high quality work which was great role modelling for my emerging artist."

The way our work evolves and changes as new artists and participants become part of it, is continuous and exciting. Our plans now we are an NPO (National Portfolio Organisation) means we are better equipped and can provide even more of the good stuff!

Look out for:

- new work in hospitals
- a tour of existing work The Explorers
- a new children's puppet and dance theatre work
- an increased digital presence
- new screen-dance work
- a new advanced training programme
- and a new 'families' session that means we can run sessions for PMLD children & young people, whilst their siblings dance in another room and their parents in another, but all in the same building at the time.

We are continuing to raise awareness and developing our work in dance sector development when it comes to including disabled people. What's all the FAF about? is a four-month awareness raising project that started on 30th November 2023 (our 22nd Birthday). It began with us sharing a Dropbox link to a folder that contains toolkits from a range of people and organisations that help support making venues and practices inclusive and launching a City-Wide Manifesto.

We will also produce a two-to-three-day event in March 2024. It's aim is to increase the number of deaf/sign language users, disabled and neurodivergent artists working, commissioned and showcased in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire, as not enough currently are. The whole project will broker and support relationships between programmers, producers, venues and disabled artists.

Regarding our long-term legacy, FRONTLINEdance wants Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire - and the rest of the world - to be a place where deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people can enjoy arts and culture with ease and thrive as artists, leaders, makers, producers.

I love difference and love to bring different types of performance personalities, bodies and ways people move together when I make work. The uniqueness of the individuals within our community settings is precious. I love all the different personalities, lack of filters, movement produced, the way they connect and move within their bodies, the 6th sense, unique nuances, the range of processes, ownership of self and all the different ways we communicate and engage with each other. The quality, depth and richness is simply



Top: Kayleigh Price, George Fellows and Matt Byatt, Seeing Me at FRONTLINE ARTS FESTIVAL 2019. Photo: Natalie Willat.

Above: Charlotte Arnold, Katie Albon, David Jowett, EXPLORERS 2022. Photo: Dharmendra Patel.

brilliant! We grow together. I have been dancing with some of our participants for twenty years. I feel incredibly fortunate.

Community is at our core and a strong driving force that we've been building for years. It grows and develops as new people join and work with us. In fact, the best thing about being me, is the people I get to meet and the variety of conversations I get to have every day. The richness and diversity makes me smile as much today as it did in my early 20's! I feel lucky to have found what's right for me, and what's right for FRONTLINEdance.

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<https://youtu.be/sWayMs3SqW8>