

# Setting people to motion

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As I am talking from a dance artist's viewpoint with a dance background I want to be as clear that I am talking for a particular kind of dance and arts activity. I cannot say that all the activities that come under the general title of dance are of equal value in creating a healthy, knowledge based society.

I am talking about a kind of dance that I believe passionately can bring about the most positive individual transformation, that best promotes harmony, affects communities and ultimately has the power to play a strong role in moving society forward.

This dance is arts led. It has pedagogic ambitions, it is non competitive (that is to say it encourages us to do well, not to gain advantage or ascendancy over others). It encourages us to find our potential through self discovery, interaction with others and with our environment, and acts as a spur to self motivation, self discipline and self knowledge.

I am not talking of dance as sport, or dance as diversion through pure entertainment, show dance, dance based only on technical prowess, social dance, ballroom or disco.

I would include traditional dance where it does not encourage culturally sanctioned gender inequality or exclusivity or reinforce hierarchical power structures. I would include Hip hop when it strives to be inclusive, for women as well as differently able, and where every precaution is taken to ensure that those less able, especially other boys do not feel marginalised and inadequate.

I am talking about dance that encourages the whole self, that promotes physical, emotional, spiritual (in its broadest sense), cognitive and social development.

Perhaps for those who have some knowledge of dance, a combination of Ausdruckstanz and contemporary dance. It is dance that incorporates the best of creative play with a real seriousness of purpose; in my case, dance that may well include performance as an integral and vital part of process. I will talk more about the role of performance later.

I want my work to contribute to a society that strives for fairness and acceptance of difference. A society that values all its members, and aims to provide them with the means to be heard, that gives them a voice, that encourages creativity and exploration.

A sick society based on intolerance, over concentration of power, inequality of treatment, social exclusion and marginalisation is not a good breeding ground for encouraging the pursuit of knowledge or open democratic education.

The arts can be powerful effective tools in the pursuit of a healthy society. Dance has an important role to play in this.

I believe in the importance of culture and creativity in supporting the existence of a healthy, democratic and educated society. But my experience shows that not only is it the case that many do not understand its importance but that they also fear these words and the concepts that lie behind them.

I am constantly told by those I wish to involve through discussion or practical participation....'I know nothing about the arts'...'I am not creative like you' (the reasoning here being that creativity is the private preserve of the artist). This of course is also a view traditionally fostered by artists and cultural institutions wishing to preserve their status, and has in the recent past manifested itself by a reluctance to engage in, or even open hostility to increasing the artistic means of production to the public and the community.

The idea that people are not creative seems to me to fly in the face of all the evidence.

Creativity is a basic survival tool. It involves seeing options, imagining outcomes and making choices. These are things we do every day, weighing up the choices in front of us and making decisions.

On an artistic level, we choose our clothes, decorate our bodies, and modify our environment with design and colour and form.

To watch children at play should dispel any doubts about the creativity inherent in every human being.

As a choreographer and pedagogue for adults as well as children I am exposed regularly to one of the biggest untruths of all, when people say 'but I cannot dance'. Here I am safe in my argument: after 30 years of experience worldwide with people of all ages, abilities, of many cultures, and social and economic backgrounds I have never met a single person who cannot dance.

The reasons for the persistence of these myths are many, and can be debated endlessly. Many of them are cultural, maybe religious, many come from issues of gender, oppression, social exclusion, lack of self worth, fear of sexuality and eroticism and an inability to celebrate who we are, our lives and our communities.

Assuming though that cultural activity is basic to our humanity, what role does my chosen art form, dance, play in promoting a healthy individual and a healthy, educated and democratic society?

I see dance as the most basic and holistic art form.

It is a physical, emotional, spiritual, cognitive and social activity.

Physically it has the potential to impact positively on our bodies, giving strength, flexibility, co-ordination, affecting our physiology, our general health, which leads to improved body image (something that assumes great

importance in our society, and the lack of which often causes great distress, especially to young people).

But this is only a small part of the story. An over emphasis on the potential benefits for health, and a consequent link with sport, has been both a benefit and a hindrance to development of dance programmes in and outside education.

Without this link to sports it is unlikely that much of the dance activity that has taken place within education would have happened. It is traditionally the case that where dance exists in schools it is within the sports programme. Negatively, we can see that dance has often become confused with 'movement', and the social, emotional and spiritual aspects have been undervalued. Dance has often lost its place in education as a vital cultural form with benefits to the individual, their identity and interaction.

Many sports are also highly competitive by tradition. This does not negate the many benefits that sport can bring to young people, but again I have to rely on my own experience as a teacher and community artist that has demonstrated to me on so many occasions that competition can be an enormous barrier to individual development. It produces as a by-product many losers; it marginalises those who are unable, or unwilling to compete. Of course we have to acknowledge that we live, and will probably continue to live, in a society that is highly competitive, but it is also important that we acknowledge that humans are also social animals. At different times in history our competitive nature becomes important, and in the past a stable society could only develop when territory could be protected. In such stable societies, culture and arts could flourish. Now we must question whether such competition, as promoted by almost every aspect of advertising and the media business and government is conducive to our survival. Now it increasingly seems that it is a lack of social cohesion and the inability to accommodate difference that puts our individual and collective futures at risk. Non competitive arts activity can play a leading role in bringing about understanding and tolerance without compromising our commitment to self improvement and success. There is increasing evidence that even industry and business is beginning to question whether competitiveness is the first requirement for success, and the role of creativity, negotiation and partnership are increasingly being explored.

Dance has an important role to play in emotional development. As psychological programmes change the way individuals feel we see concurrent changes in posture, body language and movement. It has been my experience and the experience of many colleagues that good dance programmes bring about these physical changes directly in the shortest time, with subsequent changes in the way people feel, in their emotional state, in their self esteem and their communication with each other and their environment.

As a simple example, one of the problems I face in the early days of a project is the inability or reluctance of participants to extend their arms to the fullest, or to assume their full height. This is a clear indication to me that the person is making an involuntary statement about their value, and their right to occupy the space that should be theirs. By working purely within the choreographic structure, it is easily possible to change the movement, allowing and

encouraging the participant to reach out to the furthest edges of their personal space, and it is wonderful to see how confidence returns, or even arrives for the first time.

Furthermore, dance, accompanied by its precursors, stillness and silence, achieved through strong focus exercises enables a child to hear and feel themselves, it gives listening time, and helps him to focus on himself without distraction of external noise and diversion of frenetic, often involuntary, activity. By beginning movement from this highly focussed point the dancer feels the connection between their emotional state and the movement, bringing them to a state of heightened awareness of themselves and of the environment, including others in the vicinity.

Although this concentration and focus, without external distraction, can at first seem frightening or threatening, if handled properly, in a safe and sensitive environment, a sense of harmony is the usual end result.

### Spiritual

I refer to dance as a spiritual activity. Whilst it may be incorporated into religious ritual in many faiths it is as often excluded from others. In an increasingly secular and materialistic society however, the loss of spiritual direction is keenly felt by many young people, and the damage to society through its absence manifests itself in ways that are often ugly, divisive and socially damaging. True dance for me can never exist without this inherent spiritual dimension, the search for meaning, in life, in the world, and the need to explore ones place within it, ones true identity. This is something that is a constant need for the artist, as well as the means to express who they are and the possibility to communicate their own understanding of the nature of reality and morality. It is my opinion crucial that as many individuals as possible are able to make this contribution to our communities. If anyone doubts the power of dance and movement to influence individuals and society one only need look to the employment of choreography in military displays, national parades, fascist rallies. The strutting steps in celebrations of the power of dictators. The rich and powerful have always understood this, and yet the role that dance and movement can play in enabling the ordinary individuals voice to be heard is overlooked.

### Cognitive

Dance is of course a cognitive and thoughtful activity. Memory, spatial awareness, structure, understanding of time, research for inspiration from literature and the spoken word, relation to other art and cultural forms and reflection on social, environmental and other issues often form part of the artists cognitive activity.

### Social

The most valuable component for the creation of a healthy society must be the social component. Dancing together, we grow together. We learn to share space, to find our own space, to be aware of others space. We learn to negotiate, to compromise, to work together for a common purpose whilst preserving our own identity. We seek with others, creative solutions to artistic challenges. We learn to trust, to support and lift, and, as important as any of these, we touch. Touching and supporting we become comfortable with others, comfortable with difference. This is why I and others have so often used dance in areas of conflict as a means to promoting harmony and acceptance. It is almost impossible to retain a prejudice against someone you have touched, supported, physically trusted.

Prejudice is only skin deep!

I have worked with dance throughout the world. I have worked with street children in Ethiopia, with mixed communities in KWA Zulu, with working children in Peru. I have created performance for 140 people of all ages for Lithuania's national day of mourning and hope, following the killing of unarmed civilians in Vilnius during the 1991 struggle for independence. I worked in Croatia to create a musical theatre around the theme of 'Love in a time of conflict' with muslims and catholics during the Balkan wars. I have worked with integrated groups of teenagers excluded from school together with children with special needs in Northern Ireland. During the late eighties and nineties I worked with large integrated groups of young catholics and protestants, and participated in cross border projects between The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland during the troubles.

I have danced with people of all ages from five to mid eighties, with male and female prisoners and in schools and colleges through the UK, in Germany and the USA. All these experiences have only served to reinforce my belief in the life enhancing power of contemporary creative dance.

Finally, I want to say something about the renewed interest in educational and community dance that seems to be manifesting here in Germany.

Obviously through the film 'rhythm is it', dance for young people has entered the consciousness of many members of the public, the media, the educational and political establishment, coming at a time when questions are already being asked about the future of education especially following the results of the PISA studies. The film however, and my work in particular, only acts as a high profile focus point for activity and interest that already existed in Germany but that has been often unacknowledged and ignored. Artists have been struggling to share their passions with young people in schools and the wider community. Some schools have managed despite lack of support and funding to include dance in their curriculum. What was shown in the film was a process that I have been involved in for nearly thirty years, it is not new. There are artists in Germany who have been working in this field even longer. Traditionally frowned on as an inferior version of professional dance, these people and their projects have been marginalised by the artistic elite and most professional dancers, choreographers and companies.

Times are changing. As in the UK over the past thirty years more and more artists have come to enjoy the opportunity to share their passion with young people, to reach out to a wider community and to actively seek the challenges that educational and community work presents.

Education too is opening its doors. Courses for dance pedagogues are running throughout the country, community arts programmes are being introduced into Universities and Arts education establishments.

This should be welcomed, but there are reservations on my part.

I believe that education involves a sharing by enthusiasts of their passion and experience. This passion and experience is something intrinsic to the artist. For the teacher or pedagogue who has maybe not lived the life of a dancer, actor, sculptor or poet, it is hard to recreate. If we wish to encourage cultural, artistic activity for an enthusiastic school population arts teachers need to be provided with opportunities to experience the art form as an active participant, preferably to work alongside practising artists. This may be costly, but to ignore it is to invite failure and frustration for teachers and pupils.

Although there are many examples of passionate, committed arts teachers, generations of students have been turned away from music, dance, poetry and literature by uninspired, indifferent teaching.

I firmly believe that courses in cultural pedagogy should be based around arts practice, with teachers working in partnership with artists.

'You can produce 'Theory from Art, but you cannot produce Art from Theory'.

I said earlier that I would mention the role that performance plays in my work. Many people are confused by the emphasis on performance which they see as conflicting with process. In my work performance is an integral part of process, fulfilling several functions.

Firstly, performance is a highly demanding and disciplined activity and participation can encourage focus and self discipline.

Performance gives the opportunity for children and young people to have their work and achievement acknowledged.

It provides an opportunity for family, friends and peers and the community to share in a celebration of the pupils new confidence and applaud their new skills.

It is affirmation from those who matter most that dedication and commitment have produced work that is valued.

Performance goals help to motivate participants and equally important, motivate artists working in education. Teaching is not an easy job. There are frustrating, difficult times. What keeps me going in those moments is the excitement of a coming performance and the effect I know it is going to have on everyone involved.

The performance, as well as requiring additional skills and presenting extra challenges beyond those we meet in a workshop or class, puts children in the position of power. They are in control.

Working with many groups of excluded or marginalised young people I enjoy seeing the growth in self esteem that ensues when beneficiaries become benefactors, and the educated become the educators.

Difficulties often arise when creative dance activity in the classroom becomes linked to performance, without the teaching or acquisition of appropriate skills. There is certainly a place for free, playful creative activity in the curriculum, but the stage is not always the best place to present this work. There is no reason why parents and friends should not be invited into school to observe or participate in such valuable activity, but to propel pupils onto the stage, unprepared and unfocused can only confirm prejudices that see dance as a frivolous, marginal, unfocused and unnecessary activity.

I relish the moments when teachers or parents say 'I never believed my child or pupil could do that' and I can say, 'now you understand the problem'!

Finally, I am often asked 'what are the essential requirements to be a good community dance teacher or choreographer', and for me the answer is simple:

**'an unshakeable belief in the extraordinary potential of every human being'.**

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