

Micheal Seaver on artistic excellence and change

It's been said many a time, but the story of dance in Ireland is the story of individuals. It's a thin history, made up of individual threads of practice that has never been interwoven with schools of thought or aesthetics. The thin warp of personal ideals has never been joined by a weft of collective ideals.



Transformed Through Dance, Arts and Prisons Network event.
Photo: Susan Walsh

programme and the positive education, training and employment (ETE) outcomes. Baseline figures showed high rates of participant retention and attendance, allied with low rates of recidivism. Those that did drop out within two weeks were found to be twice as likely to re-offend. And the bottom line? By stopping one person from re-offending, Dance United saves the public purse about €92,000.

This is a language understood by those working within the Criminal Justice System, who see the changes that programme brings to an individual. Darryl, a former participant, speaks to the camera about how the programme brought structure to his life and awareness of community. But more eloquent is how he walks across the stage, with a concentrated focus and fluidity, in contrast to the restless movement tics of the street.

Summing up, Dave Pope of Bradford Youth Offending Team says, 'I've seen offenders working on building sites, joining in team sports, doing Offender Behaviour Courses and Anger Management Courses. Contemporary Dance, much to my surprise, is the one thing where I've seen people make the most progress, in the shortest period of time.'

Less convinced is the UK's mainstream dance community, which according to Crane has been slow to acknowledge the quality of the artistic

It's the reason that companies and projects have risen and fallen, mirroring the energy, commitment and enthusiasm of individuals. Often less tangible things are lost: the passionate advocacy of an individual to an aesthetic, an ideal or an idiosyncratic way of interrogating who we are through movement. It's also the reason that extraordinary dance work has been produced, driven by the free-range imagination of the individual.

But we're in danger of losing the primacy of the individual. Creative whims can get buried under an avalanche of paperwork as the arts are MBA-ised and personal visions have to be described in the language of tickboxes and mission statements. Every day individuals feel that they must bargain part of their artistic sovereignty in return for financial support.

Dance United is a UK-based company that uses dance to transform the lives of young offenders and young people at risk of offending. It has worked in Bradford, Berlin and Rotterdam and is one of 26 charities chosen to benefit from the upcoming Royal Wedding fund. Speaking at DanceHouse, Dance United's Strategic Advisor Nikki Crane didn't boast a professional structure or highly-charged governance that has led to the project's outstanding success. Instead she simply spoke about a range of individuals - participants, professional dance artists, choreographers, evaluators and back-up staff that are responsible for transforming lives.

The Academy runs a 12-week, five days-a-week, six hours-a-day dance programme for young offenders. Modelled on professional training the classes and rehearsals are supplemented with literacy and numeracy sessions, cooking and gym training. According to artistic director Tara-Jane Herbert it's about 'giving those people the opportunity to do something that gives them the skills to be able to choose'. She features on a short film, Academy, which Crane included in her presentation and is available online at www.dance-united.com. In particular, dance gives them the opportunity to think and then make an action. 'They don't make clear choices. They react,' Herbert says. 'You have to be able to be still before you make a choice or an action. To stop before you begin. It's exactly the same in dance and life.'

Elsewhere, Pauline Gladstone, an Arts in Criminal Justice Consultant, wearily states: 'I spent fifteen years of my professional career frustrated seeing every day how powerful the arts are in criminal justice. Every day working with people but not being able to get through to the policy makers, the people who can make big decisions and really make a difference.'

Convincing policy-makers has meant stringent evaluation and documentation. Led by Dr. Andrew Miles of Manchester University (and including ethnographers), the research outlines the participants' increased capacity to learn over the

engagement. Instead many choreographers and dancers have stayed on a largely abandoned aesthetic battleground, droning on about artistic standard versus community participation.

Dance United, like many arts practitioners and companies here in Ireland, have long proved that social inclusion and artistic excellence are not mutually exclusive. They insist on the best, because they cannot serve the participants' needs by doing less-than-excellent dance. Crane says that although the project has a unique methodology, at its heart it is really just about good teaching practice.

Some of those in attendance mentioned Ireland's Commission on Restorative Justice with two projects in Tallaght and Nenagh and possible ways to translate the Dance United model to the Irish context. While there was enthusiasm on the floor for such an initiative, Crane again stated the importance of the individual leading and effecting a multi-agency approach.

'All my experience shows that when that key, charismatic, brave person goes then you are in trouble,' she warned, adding that although Dance United is well-supported by a voluntary group of trustees, it's the network of people working on the ground that are its greatest strength. Starting with one person they have built a critical mass outwards, so one motivating individual can encourage peers to get a slice of the action and set up other projects.

This is how the Dance United team manages the tension between the individual and the increasingly corporate world of arts management. They are about changing people's lives, but they also know how to use Powerpoint and aren't averse to pulling political strokes. All of their advocacy, networking and fund-raising is in order to change lives through dance.

In the words of Tara-Jane Herbert, 'The performance is a massive step for most of them. For most of them it's the first time they will be seen in a positive light. It's vital that the quality and standard of work is excellent, so they can shine.'

Nikki Crane was in conversation with Paul Johnson at DanceHouse on April 15. Transformed Through Dance was programmed as part of Create's Arts and Prisons Network initiative, curated by Aideen McDonald, in partnership with Dance Ireland and Dublin Dance Festival.

For information on Create's Arts and Prisons Network email: info@create-ireland.ie.