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Participation in Community Dance: a Road to Empowerment and Transformation?

The community dance movement in the United Kingdom has been very active in organizing and delivering dance projects for disenfranchised communities and individuals for several decades. But initiatives have gained momentum following a shift in policy for arts funding after the 1997 General Election. This article examines how dance social-inclusion projects seek not only to allow those excluded from mainstream opportunities to participate in dance, but also to empower them. The aim of the paper is critically to examine these aims while acknowledging the work that the dance community has done in welcoming participation from groups traditionally not associated with the art form. Sara Houston firstly sets the political and social context that welcomes notions of empowerment to take root within arts projects, then goes on to debate what practitioners mean by the term within the context of championing a social inclusion policy, and discusses how examples of claims manifest themselves in practice, if they do at all. She examines one three-year initiative for residents of a sheltered housing unit and an eighteen-month project in an adult male maximum security prison, outlining what the projects offered and considering the limits of recording evidence of empowerment. Sara Houston lectures in the Department of Dance Studies at the University of Surrey. Her work on social inclusion initiatives in dance has been published by *Animated*, *Primary Health Care*, and has also been utilized in a Government White Paper.

SERVING life imprisonment for murdering his wife, 'Bob' participated in a series of dance workshops run by Motionhouse Dance Theatre in 2003–2004. He stated that dancing with his fellow inmates had given him the confidence to start to shed the machismo he had embodied until then. For him, dance had been a means to help him see a way out of the 'mistakes' he had made in his life.¹ Such statements of positive change contribute to the idea that community dance can help socially excluded participants to empower themselves and set themselves on a road to a 'better' life.

Oliver Bennett characterizes such statements as 'heroic visions' fitting neatly into the long-held European notion that the arts perform a service in developing civilization.² He argues that the power of the arts to transform the landscape and psyche of social and economic deprivation and disempowerment has been championed by people and institutions from different quarters. For

example, as Robert Hewison has pointed out, the Arts Council of Great Britain at its inception proclaimed the civilizing influence of engaging with (looking at) fine art, while grassroots advocates have championed the radical voice the arts can give to marginalized people through participation.³ Despite fundamental differences over how the message of transformation is best transmitted, Bennett argues that advocates from all sides agree that arts provision can provide a positive environment for social harmony.⁴

The moral imperative of transforming individuals and communities has been a part of perceptions of the value of art over the last two hundred years. Romantic artists nurtured the notion that art transcends the mundane: the artist was the conduit of truth in all its mystery⁵ – the soul's antidote to living in a society being suffocated by its strictures and structures.

Carrying the residue of such Romantic thought, although by no means adherents to

it, nineteenth-century literary critic Matthew Arnold and, later, the English scholar I. A. Richards proclaimed that art (poetry) would give positive value and meaning to a chaotic and sceptical modern world. Arnold took this idea further by stating that art would replace religion as the primary means of understanding the world and of healing psychological wounds – a refrain that Richards continued in his work after the First World War, writing that poetry is ‘capable of saving us’.⁶ Art, in his view, could rescue us from moral degradation.

Transformation as a Moral Good

Moreover, despite the ‘high’ art stances that characterized Arnold’s and Richards’s championing of a canon of work, a similar rhetoric illustrates the views of artists and critics with very different ideas on what type of art is valuable. Take, for example, the words of the community dance commentator Anthony Peppiatt, over seventy years after Richards was writing:

The most central place of radical value and meaning within community dance at this time . . . lies in the body as site. The powerful and transforming experience of discovering pleasure through movement and through the body, of developing physical abilities, of expanding the physical imagination, and of a new liberation of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self. . . . For a society in crisis, art in general and art in the community must have an increasingly significant part to play.⁷

Peppiatt takes a similar theoretical path to Richards and Arnold in arguing that art is important in halting the disintegration of values of community identity. Dance in a community setting is well placed to do this because, Peppiatt explains, it is our participation in an embodied, creative, imaginative activity that gives us humanity and values. Peppiatt quotes Edward Bond writing in the *Guardian* in 1996: ‘We are made human by our imagination. It is the source of our values, the faculty through which we create ourselves by gaining autonomy and responsible social affiliation.’⁸

Both the Romantic idea of gaining meaning through art and Richards’s idea of salvation

of values through art are implicit in this argument. Yet some community dance commentators have expressed concern over how the notion that the arts can lead to personal empowerment and social transformation is too often expressed in simplistic terms. Manny Emslie and Sue Akroyd, dance scholars and practitioners, point out for example that: ‘We are passionate about our beliefs and practice and yet when faced with the need to contextualize and confirm their impact we resort to the emotive and generalized use of language.’⁹

Romanticism is a complex doctrine to understand, but in many of the generalized statements used to characterize dance in terms of empowerment, it is only there in the background as the progenitor of myths and ideas. The complexity of people’s lives, of definitions of what constitutes empowerment and transformation, of the ethics of an artist’s involvement in social transformation, and of what an arts project can offer, suggest no quick fixes.

Myths have quickly grown up around artistic initiatives about their power to aid social transformation, but is it justified to create myths, even if occasionally they could be based on real examples? Should ‘Bob’s’ individual experience in the prison dance project service the myth-makers, the heroic visionaries? Should his heartfelt cry that ‘I’m changed’ be directed to those who will document it in the annals of good works, fitting him into an external political framework? Should we be categorizing dance as a medium to empowerment as a result? What does this do to perceptions and expectations of dance?

Is it wise to accept the notion of dance as a transformative medium and thus as morally good for those who participate in it? Indeed, even Romanticism, the artistic movement that initiated the rhetoric of transformation, warns of the dangers of human creativity. The story of Frankenstein and his monster is left as a reminder of the dark, uncertain, and indeterminate face of creativity, with a moral code that is far from fixed.¹⁰

The idea of transformation as a positive force for humankind is a compelling one. It is

a notion that is tempting to adopt for the arts because it gives them a powerful justification to exist (and to be funded). It takes art from mere craftsmanship into a metaphysical realm of spiritual enhancement. Indeed, the concept of transformation is a powerful force in many cultures. The idea of transcending our human failings through the purity and strength of rejuvenation, re-birth or resurrection has been etched in the consciousness of many cultures for millennia. Belief structures concerned with transformation have permeated literature, performance, and visual and applied arts in many parts of the world.

Britain's exceptionally rich literary heritage has thus been influenced by the notions of transformation within Christianity, Celtic, Norse, Roman, and Greek mythology. Folklore around the world, fairy tales, and now science fiction are also steeped in traditions of transformation. Even twentieth-century comic-strip heroes have their place in this mythology.

Even in a secular society, the concept of transformation still has a deep hold, not only on artistic imagination but also on conduct and moral belief. Certainly, one cannot ignore the warnings of cultural theorists such as Jameson and Baudrillard that cultural transformation is being sold as a commodity to be lapped up by an image-conscious public, who thereby embrace amorality through advocating superficiality.¹¹ It could thus be argued that this focus on style and image is the common result of an erroneous conflation of two ideas, material perfection and happiness – as witnessed in the classified advertisements in British women's (and increasingly men's) magazines that promise the reader a new life through a more 'perfect' body if they take up the offer of (expensive) cosmetic surgery. Breast augmentation jostles alongside liposuction to compete for the attention of an impressionable audience.

The idealism at the heart of such surgical options might be misplaced, fed more by a desire to be successful or to fit in than for individual self-realization. Yet even taking such personal aestheticization into account, the main emphasis for artists and politicians has been and still is that social transfor-

mation is a morally good thing to happen to people and to communities, particularly for those that do not fulfil mainstream society's criteria for success or even normality.

In real life, where superheroes do not exist, transformed strength comes in the shape of empowerment, which, by the British government's pronouncements, is defined as active participation in our communities. Gordon Brown, now Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer, argued in 1994: 'Human emancipation is impossible without action by the community to tackle the entrenched interests that hold individuals back and to provide people with the opportunity to realize their potential.'¹²

In Britain, it is fair to speculate, it is partly a belief in the moral value of work, or the protestant work ethic, that has shaped this notion of empowerment. The following chain of cause and effect characterizes the mantra expounded: be productive, become good, gain strength. There is no room for the questioning of whether goodness is necessarily linked to being productive and whether non-participation in mainstream society does necessarily lead to disempowerment or a negation of citizenship.¹³

The Political Agenda

For the present Labour government, social exclusion is the term used to characterize a lack of productivity, wealth, education, and social cohesion within communities. Those who are deemed to be socially excluded are not thought of as empowered. Take, for example, a well-publicized speech by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2000: 'On our own the majority of us are powerless. Together we can shape our destiny. To become the masters of this change, not its victims, we need an active community.'¹⁴ Or the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport's (DCMS) claim that 'learning opens doors to full participation in society, the enjoyment of music, art, and literature, and the development of people's potential'.¹⁵ And Tessa Jowell, DCMS Secretary of State from 2002, accentuates the transforming potential of the arts when she writes that personal happiness

and fulfilment 'give us a key to real transformation in society. Culture lies at the heart of this definition.'¹⁶

Chris Smith, Jowell's predecessor in office from 1997 to 2002, often used dance projects to illustrate his arguments for how participation in arts led to empowerment of the individual and transformation of the community. The Hartcliffe boys' dance company in Bristol was a favourite example for Smith. He explained how the run-down Hartcliffe estate was 'written off by the outside world as a place where nothing happened'. In 1999 'suddenly . . . teenage boys on the estate have been introduced to the world of modern dance, helping to transform their lives and the life of the entire estate'. He went on: 'One of the strong lessons that we regularly learn from such cases is that as pupils begin to get involved in art, drama, and music, their academic performance in other subjects improves as well'.¹⁷

The transformation of a group of academically low-achieving boys on a run-down council estate is all the more striking because public perception of the protagonists is far from positive. Large groups of boys are traditionally seen as troublemakers. Run-down council estates also have an anecdotal history of violence, drug abuse, and poverty. Academic low-achievement is targeted by the government as a reason for poverty and social exclusion. The transformation through the involvement of the boys in a productive activity was therefore celebrated with some relief by the government as a way of persuading voters in Middle England that potential male troublemakers were now doing something constructive, while satisfying other more liberally minded voters that creativity was being used to further academic progress.

Participation and Community Dance

This is a good example of productivity being linked to 'worthwhile' participation in society, although it is debatable whether the two ideas above are actually concerned primarily with the empowerment process of the young people. The first only deals with the calming or caging of a potential threat to a particular

vision of social stability. The second realizes creativity as a means to pursue a goal firmly rooted in the idea that academic knowledge will make the student a 'better' person, and thereby make him or her contribute to a more enlightened society. Both contain assumptions that are not necessarily correct, yet the Hartcliffe case suggests that some kind of positive change took place that benefited the boys and their community.

At the heart of the community dance movement lies a set of principles founded on the idea that dance is for everyone. Participation is for the highly trained *and* for those who claim to have two left feet, *and* indeed for those who do not have any mobile feet. In particular, as Jill Green argues, because the community dance movement emphasizes the idea that anyone can dance, it has been linked to groups that have been termed 'socially excluded',¹⁸ and the movement has been instrumental in delivering dance to disenfranchised communities and individuals for several decades.

Initiatives for marginalized groups have gained momentum since the 1997 General Election, following a shift in policy for arts funding. Firstly, with the idea of no rights without responsibilities firmly expounded by the new government, arts companies in receipt of public funds were encouraged to give back to the taxpayer through community outreach work. Smith argued in 2000: 'I do not believe in grants for grants' sake. . . . This is why we have put in place robust funding agreements with each of our sponsored bodies, setting out responsibilities and objectives on each side'.¹⁹

The policy thus described by Smith was the result of certain influential factors over a number of years. During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher developed a way of thinking that overturned the legitimacy of the notion that all had an automatic right to receive state help. Eighteen years of New Right political power created a lasting effect and a real change in policy debate on the economy and society. The agenda of a radically changed Labour Party relinquished the economic project of public ownership in favour of 'ethical socialism', espousing the values of community in

conjunction, importantly, with notions of individual responsibility and opportunity.²⁰

In a speech to his constituency party in 1995, Tony Blair thus proclaimed that, 'We are . . . members of a society or community of people who owe duties to one another and who, by acting together, can use the power of all for the good of each.'²¹ He emphasized the idea of a community of individuals who have responsibilities for one another and who promote the public good. Similarly, Gordon Brown explained the party's philosophy to a News International Conference in 1998:

Opportunity which matters depends on the exercise of personal responsibility . . . so for me a vital key to the dynamism and cohesion we need is opportunity for all in return for obligations shared by all.²²

The government's sense of community lay in the idea that, although in a democratic society people classify themselves as individuals, to achieve and develop that civil society they have to be aware of obligations to their fellows. In the same way that the rampant free markets would be conditioned by communal responsibilities, so the public sector would be made more accountable to those who paid for its upkeep.

Secondly, New Labour's emphasis on social inclusion has meant that it has been easier for arts groups to obtain funding for projects with the socially excluded. In July 1999 a report was published by Policy Action Team (PAT 10), one of eighteen teams drawn from government departments investigating how particular initiatives could act on social exclusion, in this case with responsibility for arts and sport. The report recommended that arts organizations in receipt of public funds 'should acknowledge that social inclusion is part of their business'.²³ In other words, as part of the objectives of a project, working to achieve or facilitate social inclusion amongst groups, individuals, and neighbourhoods *ought* to be incorporated.

PAT 10 also stated that not only are the arts important for regeneration, but also that they are 'fundamental'.²⁴ Its report concluded that the arts are integral to encouraging involvement in regeneration projects, and

are essential for the particular community to have a sense of owning the inclusion initiative, individually and collectively. This gave a green light – and a hefty push – to arts organizations to pursue a social inclusion agenda.

While the two reasons listed above for the escalation of social-inclusion projects may seem very pragmatic, many of those who are involved in community dance do sincerely believe in the general public's right to dance, if they are interested and given a chance to do so. Many dance leaders have simply seized the opportunity offered to them by government policy to augment and publicize their project initiatives.

Empowerment in Community Dance

But, as pointed out at the beginning, the principles of the movement go further. Ken Bartlett, director of the Foundation for Community Dance, wrote in 1996:

Community dance has traditionally embraced a set of values that . . . recognizes the power and contribution of dance in transforming and empowering the lives of individuals and their communities.²⁵

The community dance movement is not solely involved with inclusion through participation, but is also concerned with the notion of the empowerment of participants. Take, for example, a statement endorsed at the Foundation for Community Dance's conference on youth dance in 2000:

Dance with young people is an empowering process of personal, social, and artistic discovery. The empowerment comes from creative engagement with the medium – doing it, making it, sharing it, watching it, reflecting on it – owning it.²⁶

Here it is believed that active participation – doing, making, sharing, watching, reflecting – is fundamental to the personal, social and artistic development of young people. Importantly, empowerment comes from the feeling of ownership of the process and product.

Emslie and Akroyd describe the motivations behind facilitating community dance as follows:

We often use creative dance techniques as a way of encouraging a process that is not leading to performance or product but rather is working towards transformation of the individual. . . . In essence, we want to find ways of supporting the dancer to shelve personality and to replace this with discovery of the true self, the core of one's being: a self who has a uniqueness of identity, who embodies a freedom of expression.²⁷

In his 1997 research project into the social impact of the arts, *Use or Ornament?*, François Matarasso cited examples showing a transformational process in many arts projects. His report concluded that 'participatory projects can . . . be empowering, and help people gain control over their lives'.²⁸ The idea of widening participation here goes beyond the goal of inclusion to a concept of active engagement not only in dance, but also in society at large. Dance, therefore, so the logic of the argument goes, becomes a medium through which participation in society can start to be accomplished.

But to transform participants, self- and community affirmation must have a lasting, sustainable impact, and this implies a striking change in outlook or identity to give participants such a renewed sense of agency. It suggests a political radicalism in enabling participants to take control of their lives. Can this political radicalism, or empowerment, be seen in dance projects?

It must be stressed that not all dance projects explicitly aim towards political radicalism. The majority of schemes merely aim to provide a sense of well-being and are offered as a leisure pursuit rather than as explicitly seeking to overcome discrimination or oppression.²⁹ Having said that, the principles of community building which the radical type of practice upholds tend to occupy the rhetoric attached to arts projects, particularly those co-ordinating with government schemes.³⁰ In connecting to social policy, as Matarasso suggests, the arts can become 'a force for development in a complex world'.³¹

The concept of empowerment will be discussed by examining two initiatives with which I had involvement as a researcher. *Burn and Rave* was the title of a three-year dance project for residents of four sheltered

housing units in Bristol, which ended in 2001. Run by Bristol Area Dance Agency, it consisted of a weekly movement class for each residential centre, with annual sharings of work for friends and family. *Burn and Rave* was billed as a project that would help with the physical and psychological fitness of older people, most of whom were between seventy and ninety.

Dancing Inside was an eighteen-month dance project run by Motionhouse Dance Theatre from 2003 to 2004 for inmates of HMP Dovegate, an adult male maximum-security prison. Volunteering residents participated in all-day sessions of contact improvisation for a week or two at a time every month, or, in the last of the projects, every three months. They produced two performances for fellow inmates and prison officers. *Dancing Inside* was one of six dance projects to receive Arts Council England funding specifically to demonstrate what impact dance has on socially excluded groups. The evaluation was co-ordinated by the University of Surrey's Forensic Psychology Unit and Department of Dance Studies. Although there will not be a detailed ethnographic account of each project, I will highlight some of their aims and outcomes in the context of discussing the issue of empowerment.

Case Study 1: Dance for Older People

Burn and Rave was divided into four groups attached to sheltered or residential housing. The content of each session varied, depending on what the participants and facilitator wanted to do. Many of the groups used chairs from which to dance, producing movement from the manipulation of scarves, feathers, balls, candles, and other objects. One group involved themselves in the local carnival, making props and costumes; at other times participants dived under parachutes, practised a high-kicking routine with top hats and canes, created a seated line-dance, sang along to the music, and used the sessions as social occasions in which they could laugh, make jokes, and get fit together.

The sessions were flexible and creative in general, with routines being learned for the

sharing of work between groups and their families and friends, which happened once a year on average. The weekly sessions were timetabled alongside other activities, such as bingo, but the dance groups were frequented by a core group of volunteers, who attended regularly. Many of them called *Burn and Rave* their exercise class.

Even though *Burn and Rave* aimed to augment the good health of participants, it was in many ways a project that was concerned with empowerment. Even its title suggests the promotion of agency. It comes from the Dylan Thomas poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day.'³² During interviews with the dance workers and the project coordinator, all constantly stated the belief that in order to facilitate a creative dance programme in sheltered housing, they first of all had to cut through the dependency culture they believed existed there. Reni Brown, one of the dance workers, commented that:

A lot of [the residents] have become identified as being people in warden-sheltered accommodation so they take on those roles, those behaviours, and that mental set that goes with that. . . . You know, 'It's the old dears from across the road.' They're no longer seen as people in their own right. They're not seen as being useful or productive or any of the things that this society values.³³

There was a distinct sense of trying to overcome the situation the participants were in, which the dance workers believed made them vulnerable to discrimination and insularity. Director Ruth Sidgwick cried out at the beginning of an interview:

It hurts! It makes me feel, is this what I'm facing in thirty years' time? And it's not good enough! . . . Why should they be discriminated against just because they can't get out and about? . . . It makes me feel really passionate about why shouldn't they have it?³⁴

In corroboration, one resident remarked: 'This project has made a difference. It's opened us up and we've met all sorts of people we'd never have met, because we can get a bit, well, you know, institutionalized in a place like this.'³⁵

During their dance sessions, participants were encouraged to experiment with movement and props and to show their work to others. The wardens noted augmentation of confidence and sociability, and Bristol Social Services were notably impressed with what the scheme gave to participants. But for Sidgwick this did not amount to empowerment. For her, it was still an ideal, a goal to aim for with the participants, rather than a certain outcome.

Advocacy as Empowerment

Ruth Sidgwick's definition of empowerment encompassed the notion of advocacy. She wanted participants to act as advocates for the dance work, going out to speak for themselves about it. But although she knew that some had the confidence and willingness to do that, the rest of the system let them down. Factors including transport, timing, and duration of conferences were often too much to handle for the residents. The dance project may have given them the incentive to become advocates of their own work, but other infrastructures were inhibiting them.

Advocacy was Sidgwick's idea and not that of the participants, so it could be argued that it took away the sense of ownership and empowerment the dancers might have had from the activity. But one can sympathize with Sidgwick's idea in propounding advocacy as a tool to empowerment because the dancers would not be regarded as passive receivers of a service, as is often the case with older people: they would be active participants in a potentially life-enhancing event.³⁶

For some participants, the dance sessions became a support structure, not in terms of empowering them but as a way of managing things. One woman in particular, who had gone through several traumatic experiences, physically, mentally, and emotionally, found herself less able to move as the three years progressed. She still attended the dance sessions not in order to get better or to transform her life, but as a support structure to manage her life. A shift towards being able to manage could be seen as being enabling, but not empowering.

Another participant demonstrated how the dance sessions did produce a heightened awareness of self-identity, but that this for her was not a positive experience. She felt a frustrating alteration in her self-image because dancing highlighted the deterioration of her physical health. There was a realization that her body could no longer cope with the movement she could have executed earlier in life.

Yet the project gave the majority of participants a sense of pride in their work, connectedness, and, above all, enjoyment. They had a laugh, and this was all they wanted. Jean, one of the participants volunteered that: 'We just done it for enjoyment quite honestly. We don't really think seriously about it at all, we just come and have a good time.'³⁷ Such comments bring up the debate about whether transformation has to be a reflective process. Is change perceived by others therefore to be discounted when evaluating transformation? Is there a potential problem in listening to the views of the project facilitators, who are affirmative about proceeding towards a transformation, while not taking into account the thoughts of the participants themselves, who might not feel that any change is important or desired?

Emslie and Akroyd voice similar concerns when considering the motivation for and the consequences of community dance work:

We find ourselves questioning whether, in setting out our beliefs, we have created a framework within which we are bound to operate, therefore contradicting the desire for non-prescriptive methodologies and freedom to stray from the confines of a predetermined model.³⁸

In trying to adhere to the Romantic notion of art as the means to self-discovery, there is a danger in formulating a transformation framework to create meaning about community dance that stifles the inherent fluidity of art and the transformative experience, as well as overlooking other experiences.

Case Study 2: Dance for Male Offenders

Dancing Inside used the method of contact improvisation in the workshops. As with

other types of improvisation, contact is a form of dance that is unpredictable and spontaneous, where both partners need trust in the other and where each needs to be very sensitive to his or her partner in order to anticipate safely and creatively what he or she will do next.

Male and female members of Motion-house Dance Theatre helped to facilitate the sessions, partnering the men, whilst artistic director Kevin Finnan led the group. Participants first of all had to undertake a vigorous warm-up, which included slides or rolls to the floor, various forms of push-ups, sit-ups, hand/headstands, different forms of locomotion to travel around the room, and partner exercises. The warm-up led seamlessly into extremely athletic and challenging contact exercises where, in partners, the men had to find ways of linking rolls, lifts, catches, balances, and jumps together. These involved a high degree of physical strength and trust in a partner to do well.

Once confident with these exercises, contact jamming was introduced, as well as creating phrases and rehearsing for a choreographed show. The participants also learnt how to stretch their bodies safely. As part of the prison's own arts festival, they performed a choreographed piece twice over the eighteen months in front of the other residents and prison officers.

As an outsider, it is very difficult to analyze someone else's feelings of empowerment – all the more so if one is only allowed to see project participants while dancing and not at any other point during their lives. How can a baseline be established from which to measure empowerment if one cannot see the dance's influence beyond the studio? Such challenges were all the more acute when evaluating dance in HMP Dovegate. Prison rules dictated not only that we were not allowed to see the prisoners outside of the dance studio, but also that we could not see their behaviour records either.

The participants did like to stress how the dance was making them feel better about themselves, that participation in dance was giving them the confidence to step outside the *personae* they cultivated whilst 'inside'.

Although how they were behaving while dancing, and off-the-cuff remarks made during that time, verify some of these comments, it is difficult as an outsider to take their remarks on their own as concrete evidence of a growing sense of empowerment. Long-term prisoners are used to playing the game, to being assessed to see if they merit parole or downgrading. They are used to telling people what they want to hear.

The Dovegate project was unusual in that, along with my qualitative evaluation, the prisoners and scheme were analyzed by psychometric tests and dance therapy picture analysis.³⁹ But even with all these different methods, qualitative and quantitative, the precise extent of transformation remains inconclusive. Data from interviews with several participants nine months after the end of their time on the project indicate that some of them have retained positive life views developed at the time of the dance project.⁴⁰ More research needs to be carried out, however, in order to ascertain how much this was to do with the dancing as opposed to other factors. It is worth reflecting, however, that it is extremely hard to capitalize and sustain feelings of empowerment and transformation while locked up in a tightly regulated institution for ten to twenty years.

But, for Motionhouse, to develop feelings of empowerment was one of its aims when embarking on the project. Like Sidgwick, Finnan had his own interpretation of the concept of empowerment in this context. For him, giving the individual the tools and experience to pursue development in dance can empower people, giving them integrity and a depth of communication. In this way, understanding and applying skills in dance, particularly the type of intimate contact work advocated by Motionhouse, can facilitate communal understanding and dignity, which Finnan believes to be in itself empowering.⁴¹

This echoes Christine Lomas's belief in empowerment through community dance:

To empower implies a challenge to prevailing systems, with emphasis on the authentic, on non-traditional aesthetics, and on a way of working predominantly concerned with facilitation.⁴²

In the *Dancing Inside* project, participants were given the skills to create their own performance material, and increasingly the men themselves decided what to do in the workshop setting. Dance was therefore facilitated rather than taught. The improvisation techniques used did not create contrived movement, but were honest in the sense that spontaneity and unforced positions were a focus, and that the dancers needed to put their trust in each other.

Achieving a Sense of Integrity

In this way, the movement did have a sense of integrity about it, whilst using a mode of dancing that did not force individuals to move in a specific way. Finnan never constrained participants to dance like him or each other; instead he encouraged them to find their own voice within the movement. The participants did use their skills to create an impact on their audience. Not only were their peers vocal in their appreciation of what the dance group did, they also showed how the performance had affected them by giving some of the members a standing ovation when they came back to the wing.

Whether the dance sessions had empowered the residents in a more permanent, transforming way is more difficult and too early to judge. Such a judgement would have to take into account how each resident had actively decided to take positive initiatives to affect the course of his life, and would therefore have to involve a long-term study of all aspects of the resident's life outside the dance sessions as well as in them. As indicated above, it would also be difficult to ascertain whether it was just the dance sessions that had actually instigated the change: all the participants were undergoing therapy at the same time, for example.

Having said that, in a filmed group interview with the residents on the day of their performance, they were all vocal about how the dance classes had given them a sense of achievement and pride in their work. One man volunteered the opinion that the project had given him the opportunity to rethink his life on the outside. He now felt he

could make another choice other than crime and the dance sessions had given him the confidence for this. But whether the post-performance euphoria had pushed him into saying this, or because he was speaking to a camera, cannot be certain. Even if he were serious in his belief, the study would have to wait several years until he gets his chance to take that opportunity. With this in mind, a long-term dance project would certainly have more chance of empowering residents than a short-term one. But in a system where prisoners move from institution to institution, dance will not always be accessible to them.

Empowerment and Transformation

In both *Burn and Rave* and *Dancing Inside* there were clues indicating that the dance sessions were indeed benefiting participants in various ways. It is certain that during the duration of each project the life of many participants was enhanced, but it is only possible to speculate how lives will be affected in the long term without more longitudinal study, which is difficult to organize.

Yet it is also possible to note that change will alter lives. For some people, as noted above, this is not always positive or wanted, as in the case of the participant in the Bristol project whose increasing infirmity was exaggerated by engagement in the dance sessions. If dance enhances the confidence of prisoners and their understanding of theatricality and sociability, it could be that one or two inmates take these skills and reoffend in a more confident and convincing way. There have already been instances in therapy where patients have used their new-found confidence to enhance old habits rather than to take on new patterns of behaviour.

But this worry sits on the shoulders of those who have already wished for dance to empower in a particular way, which will fit into a way of acting accepted and endorsed by mainstream society. As Lomas points out, 'by giving them freedom you have handed over responsibility; it is no longer yours to judge', even if one does not like the results.⁴³

If dance professionals are going to aim to

develop empowerment, they must be alert to the possible consequences and to the ethical responsibilities. Change may not always be welcome. Even if the project has had a positive reception, what happens to the participants after the dance workers have gone? Are they left without support and encouragement? Will life seem even bleaker than it seemed before the project? A counter-argument is that if one is empowered one will have stepped beyond such states; but one has to reach an empowered state first of all, and there can be no guarantee of that.

Exit strategies in projects thus become extremely important. The *Burn and Rave* project used an exit strategy by training wardens to lead sessions so that, once funding for trained facilitators had stopped, someone within each community could still lead dance sessions and ensure continuity of support for participants. The unfortunate drawback was that not all of the four groups had wardens who wanted to do this.

The residents involved in *Dancing Inside* spoke of trying to keep up with the sessions after Motionhouse left, but this would have been hard to do considering their tightly regulated days. But it is even harder to retain dancing sessions if moved to another prison, as many prisoners are, where the culture does not invariably welcome such initiatives.

Despite the embedded notion of the transformative power of the arts, evidence shows that it is difficult to categorize dance and, specifically, community dance *per se* as a transforming phenomenon; but it is possible to see clues that suggest that, in particular contexts and for certain participants, some dance practice can contribute to individual feelings of empowerment. As Lomas argues:

Community dance does not empower communities; rather individual empowerment, self-intimacy, interaction with one's authentic self, a sense of fulfilment, a feeling of achievement; all these become apparent . . . the community of solidarity, the 'we' and the 'ours' which we sensed as individuals and as a community of individuals.⁴⁴

During *Burn and Rave* and *Dancing Inside*, there were instances where individual participants felt that the dance sessions enabled

them to respond to their situation in life in a positive, affirming way. With the older people, it resulted in a space where they had the freedom to laugh together, a chance to celebrate inhibitions. With the prisoners, this resulted in some being able firstly to separate their outward persona as a criminal from their life as a responsible person capable of giving and receiving, and secondly to value the latter. Lomas's community of individuals was created in both projects.

The clues that participants give to suggest that dance can aid in counteracting the marginalization of their situation are there in a variety of instances. But as discussed above, researchers, practitioners, and commentators need to be aware of how these clues are translated and the responsibility put on them in doing so. Statements therefore need to be qualified and specific, rather than general and all-encompassing.

It would be wise also to bear in mind Oliver Bennett's comment that studies showing the impact of dance have often been commissioned by interested parties with the specific aim of proving that the arts have a particular economic or social value rather than questioning whether or not this is actually so. More often than not, they have been produced in the spirit of advocacy rather than that of the search for truth.⁴⁵

Participation may be a potential road to empowerment and transformation, but that road is far from straight or smooth. The complexity of dance practice necessitates some caution in proclamations of transformation. At the same time, the community dance sector might feel confident in its ability to act in creating a space where something empowering might happen. In creating that space, practitioners, commentators, and politicians need to respect the power that dance may have to change lives. Without inflating its potential or ignoring the right of the individual to explore and to experience dance as he or she wants, they can simply provide, through dance, the framework of a bridge that participants may or may not wish to build on and eventually cross.

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