

October 2013

Dear LUTSF

I have attached my report about my visit to Magpie Dance. Please would you kindly also pass on the following words to all at the Management Committee meeting:

"I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to all at the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for this wonderful opportunity. I would also like to thank you for extending the dates for me as I have had to manage my daughter's ill health. Whilst I have had to take a break from my community dance practice at the moment due to a lack of funding, I feel certain that I will return to it as soon as the opportunity arises, and will be able to use all I gained from my experience at Magpie Dance"

With many thanks Judith

All best wishes

Helen

REPORT

Helen Venn: Visit to Magpie Dance

Spring 2013

Moving to North Devon was a long time dream. Living near the sea, Exmoor up the road, visible seasons, strong sense of community, a great place to bring up children. All of these things I still greatly appreciate 8 years later. One thing, however, which has been more of a challenge living so rurally, has been access to dance, for both personal and professional development. As a Community Dance Practitioner, I have been lucky to meet a number of inspiring artists, cross art form, and have been able to work on many exciting projects with a range of community groups. However, access to dance classes and professional development opportunities are more limited, largely due to geography and, with less dance artists living locally, less demand. Having worked for the last 7 years with two groups of adults with learning disabilities on various theatre and dance projects I felt that I needed a 'boost' as I embarked upon a new dance venture. What I was looking for was new inspiration and ideas, a chance to reflect on my current practice and the opportunity to develop a wider network of contacts in this field of work which could be sustained and developed. This is why I applied to The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. I knew that there were a number of dance companies with specific expertise in working with dance for people with learning disabilities whom I would have loved to meet and share experiences with. However, with travel and accommodation costs being so high, this was proving difficult. I was lucky enough to be awarded funds to help me with those costs.

So in April, I packed my bags, waved goodbye to North Devon and headed off to London for a week to see what happens at Magpie Dance in Bromley. Artistic Director, Avril Hitman, was extremely supportive, organising for me to attend a range

of sessions throughout the week, including youth sessions and both community and dance company sessions for adults.

It was a joy to be a participant in someone else's session, to dance with different bodies, to be guided creatively by inspiring leaders – a stark reminder of the need to participate in dance, to still dance for oneself, to remind yourself of why you do what you do, to move feely and joyously. Each of Magpie's facilitators had a different style of working but what was shared amongst all was a high standard of expectation of both themselves as facilitators and each of the dancers who had come to attend the sessions - an ethos of not making excuses for disability. It was about enabling each of the disabled dancers who attended the sessions to be able to become the best dancer they could be. There can be challenges associated with working with this particular group of dancers - availability of carers, transport, routines of the residential of day care facilities some attended the sessions from, but Magpie have made the decision to take a professional approach to all sessions setting clear and high expectations from all involved, thus giving value to the work they do as a company and all of the dancers who attend.

Sessions were highly structured, using a physical warm-up which is repeated each week leading onto a series of technical and creative tasks working with a different theme. For the youth and adult company groups this was about different choreographic techniques and the adult community sessions about physical connections. The structure of the sessions was both informative and reaffirming. Many of the ideas I was already using, however, seeing what was happening in Magpie sessions has also given me the confidence to try some new and adventurous ideas.

Avril was very generous in finding time for us to meet and talk. It was helpful to understand more about how Magpie operates as a company. We were also able to share ideas about funders, discuss strategies to improve provision (from supporting care staff attending sessions to managing attendance) and ways that we might be able to support each other in the future.

Overall I have bought home some magical images. Reaching arms, hands clasping, rippling red cloth, tender moments of connection, wild frenzy. I was lucky to see some beautiful dancing. I have bought back new inspiration, ideas, a freshness and eagerness to try some things slightly differently. I have also made connections with others who work in this wonderful field of dance. It was a great reminder of the necessity to chase opportunities for CPD and, indeed, any opportunity to enjoy just being a dancer for the love of it. After all that is why we do what we do.

Helen Venn