

Staying healthy, being happy and pushing boundaries

Jemma Bicknell, Senior Hub and Creative Projects Manager at Open Age and an independent choreographer, looks at the benefits of dance and performance, how it can challenge limiting perceptions of older people and the implications this has on dance practice

I manage a community activity programme and creative projects for older people at Open Age, including intergenerational work with local schools. Open Age is a charity that provides more than 350 weekly arts, learning and social activities in London to keep older people physically and mentally active, encouraging social interaction, helping to reduce isolation and keeping them connected to their local community.

As an independent choreographer I have made work for theatre companies such as Fire Under the Horizon and Southwark Playhouse Elders, and have worked at specific sites, such as a railway arch in Bermondsey and the British Dental Museum.

Both roles overlap when choreographing with dance groups from Open Age, and for the past few years have been exploring the possibilities of taking creative risks in older people's dance, first with a piece called Body of Knowledge, which, with a mixed-gender group, tackled the taboos of the ageing female body and ageism. I was later commissioned to develop this into Of Women, a piece with ten female dancers that delved further into older women's experiences of womanhood and ageing, performed at Sadler's Wells Elixir Festival 2014.

Staying active, not just physically but in social, intellectual and creative ways, has become increasingly valued as a key element in helping older people stay healthy and happy as they live ever longer lives. Dance has unique benefits due to the way it combines physical activity with creativity, transcending the repetitiveness of traditional exercise

through engaging in artistry. Aside from the more obvious and well-evidenced physical benefits,(1) dance sessions foster more social interaction and camaraderie than group exercise classes where instructions are simply followed, because of the need to work together interpersonally to create and remember patterns and shapes that intertwine with others. This places healthy demands on mental capacity through problem solving and the use of memory. An extension of the unique interaction that dance can offer is the capacity to enjoy human touch in a safe, monitored environment. A dancer in Sadler's Wells' Company of Elders explained in a BBC documentary that for those who lived alone, the rare opportunity for physical contact had become "a particularly significant facet of the experience [which] allowed a kind of comfortable intimacy within the confines of dance".(2)

Another bonus that dance has over general physical activity is the creativity and self-expression involved, and when working towards a performance, this increases to

include a sense of purpose and shared endeavour as a group. "Dance provides multiple benefits over and above socialisation, including creativity, individuality, self-expression in a non-verbal form and exercise. Dance could also help to provide a holistic image of an individual, encompassing the person's culture, identity and spirituality."(3) In its report on the health and wellbeing benefits of dance for older people, BUPA criticises how the government and policy makers often "overlook the contribution that dance can make to the welfare of older people," choosing to concentrate on sports-orientated exercise. Yet community dance, with its typical ethos of accessibility, has an inclusivity that differs to many sport-based activities because "there are no targets, and no failures".(4)

In terms of a justification for the cost of providing community activities, the challenges that older people commonly face, such as depression due to isolation, or myriad health-related problems resulting from physical inactivity, place a huge amount of pressure on the NHS. Ultimately, those who are engaged in stimulating activities cost the government far less through reduced health appointments and interventions. Dr Julene Johnson, who studies the impact of older adults participating in community arts, states: "Our statistics say that including an intensive arts and music programme for seniors within your care will drastically drop your costs".(5)

As an artform, dance combines movement and music with social interaction and cognitive processing, which can lead to multiple benefits in



Jemma Bicknell, Meet Me By The Water rehearsals. Photo: Jonathon Vines



opinions and experiences, the Of Women dancers created a call to attention, asserting themselves as visible and significant members of society.

A criticism of using the performing arts can be whether, once the show is over and the weekly rehearsals have finished, performers are left feeling bereft. If time is spent making a project an important part of someone's life, what is the legacy when it ends, or is there even one at all? Mary Kate Connolly and Emma Redding from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance counter this with the notion that "the idea of engagement in the arts having a lasting change on an older person's wellbeing is not necessarily the purpose of participatory art. The notion of pleasure and fulfilment in the moment as an impact is equally important in terms of quality of life as measuring impact after the moment."⁽⁸⁾ The memories that are revisited after the event, the sense of excitement and anticipation leading up to it, and the lasting friendships that can be created in a rehearsal period are all valuable but hard to quantify, much like any important life event is to anyone. The fact the performers were able to show another hidden or new side of themselves, and the confidence they built in doing this had a lasting effect, as well as the act of refreshing or learning a new skill. However, it is important to think about how you treat members of a group after a project is finished. Keeping in touch, inviting them to come back together as a group, enabling the friendships to continue, and providing or signposting to ways that they can keep using their creative skills are ways to maintain some of the positive impacts of performance activity.

Some implications for practice

- Older people's performance work can challenge stereotypes of older people in society as well as their own limiting perceptions of their own abilities. Finding and creating opportunities for older people to perform in a variety of contexts can nurture this
- Engaging in performing arts can have multiple benefits for people

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Clockwise from top left: Rose Hayles and Heather Wheeler, *Of Women*; Mieko Werthiem, *Of Women*; Open Age dancers, *Of Women*. All photos: Jonathon Vines

health and wellbeing. More specifically, BUPA states that "dance has been shown to be beneficial in the direct treatment of a number of conditions including arthritis, Parkinson's, dementia and depression. Taking part in ballroom dancing has been shown to reduce the chances of getting dementia by 76%."⁽⁶⁾

When older people perform, it can challenge typical perceptions of them from passive to active members of society, particularly if artistic risks are taken that defy the expectations of audiences and make their voices heard. I played with this concept literally in *Of Women* with older dancers from Open Age. The sound score featured the voices of the women performing, in which they talked openly about

womanhood and ageing, addressing taboo subjects such as sex in later life, the menopause, ageism and marital conflict. Challenging perceptions can also relate to how older people might view themselves and their peers. One dance group member said, "I'm always watching my grandchildren perform, now it's their turn to watch me for once. They're going to be so surprised!"⁽⁷⁾ Reminiscence is a useful and commonly used tool for thematic material in older people's arts work. However, it can sometimes be over-relied upon; whilst it's valuable to be aware of what an older person did when they were younger, it's also important to appreciate what they contribute in the present as older people. By expressing their current

of all abilities; therefore, it's essential that those who are hard to reach, or otherwise would not have access, are offered opportunities

- What older people experience and think in the present as older people is just as valuable as what they did when they were younger. Reminiscence is a great way of encouraging people to share and celebrate interesting lives, but it's important not to over-rely on it in older people's arts
- People can assume that if they were not creative or artistically trained when they were younger, it's too late when they are older – challenge this. Allow the space, time and encouragement for people to discover new skills or refresh their creativity
- Along with physical aspects, also consider mental and emotional factors when working in older people's dance. The part memory and self-esteem can play might be better understood with specialist training in this area
- Build a legacy for friendships, talents and skills that have been developed during a project. Make new opportunities or signpost people to existing ones, and enable friendships to continue wherever possible.

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Dance science research: a new perspective

Senior Lecturer in Dance and Course Coordinator for the MSc in Dance Science at the University of Bedfordshire, **Imogen Aujla** PhD explains how a relatively new area of dance science research can help to support the continued development and diversity of community dance

Dance teachers and practitioners are well aware of the benefits that dance can offer. However, research is only just beginning to validate and provide evidence for this intuitive and observed knowledge. Dance science is an area of research and practice that aims to enhance the training, performance and wellbeing of dancers using scientific methods. The disciplines of psychology, biomechanics and physiology are frequently drawn upon in dance science studies to better understand topics like nutrition, injury and performance anxiety. Initially, the majority of dance science research focused on elite professional dancers or dancers in vocational training. Researchers investigated how to enhance performance, prevent injury and develop talent. However, more recently dance scientists have begun to turn their attention to recreational dance activity and public health. Studies have started to look at the positive impacts that leisure-time and community dance involvement can have across a range of populations and topics. The aim of this article is to outline some of the developments

in this area by summarising research evidence, which falls into three categories: dance and young people; dance and disability; and dance and older people.

Dance and young people

Several studies have reported decreasing levels of physical activity among young people in Western societies, and adolescence has been identified as a key period for dropping out of physical activity altogether. This is problematic given that physical inactivity in childhood and adolescence tends to track into adulthood, indicating that a whole generation could be at risk of health problems related to physical inactivity. Furthermore, girls are twice as likely as boys to be inactive. In the face of these worrying statistics, Western governments have prioritised increasing levels of physical activity and documenting its benefits.

Dance has been suggested as one of the ways to increase physical activity levels among young people. A number of studies have investigated the health impacts of dance among school-aged young people with