



Fertile and grounded

Dora Frankel is a dancer, choreographer, movement director, educator, mentor/coach and choreologist (dance notator).

She is also Founding Artistic Director of Fertile Ground.

In this article she shares a little about her life, focusing on Fertile Ground and also the greatest barrier she has faced



Born in London in 1951 I trained at Rambert School of Ballet and The Benesh Institute of Choreology (now part of Royal Academy of Dance) with, over the years, many additional courses and workshops, most important of which were intensive courses in Lund University, Sweden and Salt Lake City University, Utah.

With an early career in Rambert, American Ballet Theatre and, in Scandinavia, The Royal Swedish Ballet (as choreologist), I then shifted to Malmo Ballet as Ballet Mistress going on to Wasa Theatre Osterbottens Regional Theatre in Finland. There I danced, choreographed, gave actors movement sessions and was both Movement Director and/or Assistant Director creating my own solo touring show Harlequin's Day in 1988. On relocating to Gothenburg Sweden with my family I first worked freelance and in 1993 was appointed to design and lead Angered Gymnasiums new dance programme. During the (almost) ten years I held that post this programme blossomed into three strands, including after school classes and ultimately a prevocational programme. The school lies in a



Left to right: Dora as the spirit genie in Mio my Mio Wasa Theatre Finland 1985; Fertile Ground Artistic Director Dora Frankel. Photo: Peter Fannen

suburb of Gothenburg with a rich mix of peoples and cultures and at that time an exceptionally vibrant cultural scene that included our annual shows.

Returning to London to study an MA in Choreography at Middlesex University I sought work in Newcastle where there was and is a vibrant dance scene and where, in 2003, alongside teaching at FE and HE level, I formed DoraFrankelDance.

In 2013 I decided to relaunch as Fertile Ground, the first and only

early career repertory dance company based in North East England, with talent retention and sector development at its core.

But why relaunch and lose my name in the new title? Well - I had made a considerable number of small outdoor/indoor well-received touring works, sometimes including live music, and I had been instrumental in developing some fine dancers. Our education and participatory work was well respected. However, my ambition was to increase the size, visibility and impact of the company and bring in other choreographers. Changing the name from DoraFrankelDance would remove the focus on an individual and the name Fertile Ground evokes talent, nurturing and development and reaching out to new pastures.

Participatory work and teaching lie at the centre of much that I have done; I first started teaching in 1970 but the delivery methodologies changed and developed through my experiences in the North East as I met different children and young people and school leaders. I believe we are all equal and deserving of respect; the company have skills and knowledge that we're going to share in the 'dance' space with the participants. My ambition is to raise skills, improve endurance and concentration and develop their passion and understanding of dance, or at least get them sweating and enjoying themselves! This sounds optimistic and ambitious but must be the starting point. For those with challenging behaviour I hope they will come to appreciate they are part of a team if nothing else. Participatory



Dora Frankel, 1977 during the creation of Images for Two. Photo: Frank Young

work is delivered from KS2 to adult and quite substantial dance works are often created and presented. Fertile Ground now delivers Arts Award.

With a combination of provocation and encouragement from Newcastle's dance development agency for the North East, Dance City, I began to consider how to build a company that could and would develop the dance graduates in the north-east, raising standards and aspirations, giving them real-life paid experience of making and touring work by national and international choreographers of repute. The company would encapsulate many of my ideas and aspirations developed over many years abroad and would bring some exciting pieces of new work danced by North East dancers. It would challenge, nurture and inspire them and get them on the road touring and performing in often unusual settings.

The transition was tough but surprisingly swift. Once the feasibility study had been commissioned, working with Brian Debnam Associates, we launched in 2014, toured in 2015 and again with a new ensemble of young dancers in 2016. Throughout this process Arts Council England supported us but in a climate of increasing economic constraint, budgets were constantly squeezed and constantly adjusted down.

Furthermore, I'd now hit 65 and was feeling very, very tired and it was at this point that I decided to hand over the reins.

I was ambitious to appoint high powered mid-career leaders who were artists, choreographers and strategists. Quite an ask, particularly for a project based company. First the business plan and strategies were rewritten, creating a stronger structural plan into which new staff could step to build a roadmap. A Development Director, Catherine Scott, was appointed, followed by Co-Artistic Directors Malgorzata Dzierzon and Renaud Wisser and I became Advisor and Board member.

Today the company of four early-career dancers is a company fit for anything. Performing challenging, thought provoking, provocative and beautiful dance pieces at an exciting and high level. Of our most recent production, Fully Grounded, an audience member described it as "a great interpretation of how contemporary dance can express the emotional stories of inclusion and exclusion, life and death, danced by amazingly talented women." Fertile Ground recently acquired charitable status.

But what of me and the 'greatest barrier'? I look back over exactly 50 years when my dream was to

be a dancer with Rambert; this was cruelly truncated by my near fatal illness encephalomyelitis (brain stem inflammation) during my 2nd year at Rambert School of Ballet. Nursed at the (then) National Hospital of Nervous Diseases (now National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Queen Square, London) by a team headed by the late Sir Roger Bannister I was considered unlikely to survive. However, after six months in hospital I was discharged; the follow up was pretty much nil but to their credit Rambert School had held my place and there I slowly struggled back to some semblance of a dancer. At that time Benesh Notation was taught at the school and eventually I not only graduated from Rambert with a diploma but after a year teaching part-time at the school and continuing my dance and notation studies I entered the Institute of Choreology and gained a diploma, now recognised as a degree, joining Rambert Company as choreologist!

My career has taken me to many places and given me many experiences - from working with stars in American Ballet Theatre, such as Natalia Makarova, to performing in village halls in Finland - and it's brought me many fine hours and some wonderful opportunities.

The many twists and turns of my life and career show the resilience of the human spirit and the absolute necessity of grants - both my trainings were grant aided. And there are many other lessons to be learnt from my story - from personal struggle to group support and holding a vision and not giving up.

I'm proud of what I've achieved, especially with the neurological weaknesses that are traces of my illness. I'm particularly proud of Fertile Ground, a new star in the dance firmament. We live in a time of unequal opportunities and I think my story, if nothing else, shows the need for a return to grants in education. So let's celebrate, recognise, appreciate and value the mature female artist, the work they make, made and do, and the journeys we go on!



Alyssa Lisle, Katherine Whale, Guilia Coti Zelati and Lerato Mncube, Leemte by Regina Wielingen. Photo: Brian Slater, with the permission of Fertile Ground

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