



Children of the Mills, 2004. Photo: Chris Webb Photography

# A community, dancing

27 years ago, independent dance artist, **Debi Hedderwick**, committed to building a practice in her new home village of Wirksworth in Derbyshire. Here, she reflects on the unique rewards and challenges of an embedded, yet still evolving, community dance practice in rural England

### I sit down to write this article

having just returned from an inspiring performance week at Edinburgh Fringe Festival with my youth company, Wirksworth INdependDANCE. I begin here, because this company, established in 2000 and focused on collaborative, inclusive participation, is representative of the strengths and depths of my Derbyshire practice. It embodies success, challenge, impact and, most importantly, the sheer joy gained through long term commitment to:

- engaging an entire community in dance, whatever their age, experience, ability / disability
- making the practice as accessible, inclusive, inspiring, innovatory, diverse and collaborative as possible
- offering consistent ongoing opportunities for people to engage with dance for personal benefit -

creativity, confidence, connection, health and well-being; community cohesion.

My practice, as a whole, grew from the incredible experience I gained growing up in Cambridge Ballet Workshop led by teacher Mari Bicknell who inspired generations of young people. My career also developed during decades of expansive growth in community dance development and establishment of regional dance centres.

Previous to relocating to Derbyshire in 1992, I had been working predominantly in London and East Anglia as a performer, choreographer, teacher and animateur, and on tour with London Contemporary Dance Theatre Education Unit. However, on moving to Wirksworth - population approximately 5,000 - I decided to focus on developing an independent community dance practice. My aim

was to achieve as wide and deep participation as possible by sharing my own passion for dance, using creative approaches to contemporary dance as the key driver, underpinned by the sincere belief that dance is a powerful tool for personal development.

But what characterises a long-term, embedded community practice? How does it compare to the work of regional dance centres or more traditional dance schools who deal in single classes and projects? For me, the answer is best illustrated in personal stories.

### A very personal practice

There is a unique privilege I feel in working with children from the age of two throughout their entire progression (in life as well as dance). I get to know people so well through my work - sometimes several



Debi Hedderwick (bottom), Ruby Mortimer, Theresa Peltier, Objectification, 2019. Photo: Chris Webb Photography

members of a family, and even second generation children - resulting in a feeling of belonging to a growing cross-generational dance 'family' within the community.

There are shared memories and narratives of intensive projects we

have come to call 'Extreme Art Adventures!' e.g. performances at Edinburgh Fringe, the International Youth Arts Festival, in France and Germany, and the opening of the Millennium Dome in London. This mutual experience creates close

bonds and deep friendships; young adults in Wirksworth stop me to reminisce about a project they participated in and relate the impact it had on their thinking and learning.

There is true inclusion and variety with a diverse group of people

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“Amid this positivity, there are challenges, but challenge often leads to the strongest outcomes and the most learning.”

participating in or supporting innovatory production projects e.g. site specific pieces in quarries, caves, and heritage buildings; combining extreme sports, dance and film at the skatepark; collaborations with local artists and members of the community communicate local history and heritage with participants and audience excited to see dancers as farmers, weavers, children of the mills, shadows of history on a cave wall... there is the excitement of seeing 300 people dancing in outdoor heritage spaces for the Wirksworth Festival Community Celebration.

There is the importance of the practice being exactly where people are living, thus removing all geographical barriers to inclusion, and addressing issues of rural cultural deprivation.

And there is being known by everyone as ‘Debidancing’ – precisely because my identity is completely tied up with participation in dance.

### Dancing through the challenges

Amid this positivity, there are challenges, but challenge often leads to the strongest outcomes and the most learning.

One of the biggest is, of course, financial! Working as an independent practitioner without regular funding has meant that earning a living whilst achieving affordability for participants has been a constant balancing act. However, whilst Arts Council England (ACE) funding has become increasingly difficult to achieve, local authority funds can provide project funding. Also, in not attempting to own or manage a venue, programmes can be planned with a fit-for-purpose approach. Plus, making projects happen on a shoestring has led to true problem-solving creativity, resulting in new and unexpected outcomes!

Then there is maintaining the essential consistency required



Clockwise from top left: Children of the Mills, 2004. Photo: Chris Webb Photography; Wirksworth Festival Community Celebration Event, 2013. Photo: Phil Richards; Wirksworth Festival Community Celebration Event, 2014. Photo: Phil Richards; Unmasked youth dancer, Olive Turner, A Letter to Alice, 2019. Photo: Phil Richards

for regular class schedules whilst developing other interesting strands of professional work e.g. developing Dance Interaction, a one-one programme for young people with complex needs; or travelling to participate in international collaboration. This has sometimes presented a challenge, however, I have found different areas of practice constantly feed, influence and inspire each other, resulting in richer and more nuanced work.

Another positive challenge has arisen from balancing rural Derbyshire’s lack of diversity with the desire to celebrate the diversity of dance culture. I have addressed this by introducing specialist South Asian artists from nearby Derby and Birmingham, developing cultural exchange projects (e.g. with South African artists from Mamelodi), and influencing diverse workshop and performance programming at Wirksworth Festival (e.g. ACE dance



and music and Sonia Sabri). This has had a positive impact in terms of the community's exposure to, participation in and appreciation of cultural diversity, and highlights the unique learning gained through the non-verbal language of dance.

The embedded, long term nature of my work with young people means I am required to meet the fascinating challenge of creating effective scaffolding for progression combined with engaging, inclusive

delivery. Without the support of an exam syllabus or curriculum, I have explored effective structures for progression in both technical skill and creative development (improvisation and choreography) through on-going cycles of doing, evaluating, changing and improving, and have enjoyed my own learning process. This has resulted in a strong framework in which individuals can find their own place and pace to develop, learn, explore and express themselves over many years. Within this I have prioritised inclusivity as a core principle: a cornerstone of my practice is creating accessible dance environments in which all can enjoy working together.

Pouring a significant proportion of my creativity, focus and artistic ambition into community practice has led to ambitious and innovative projects, with open-minded, enthusiastic and extremely talented people. This, in turn, has led to a local dance culture in which innovative contemporary dance work is a naturally accepted and widely enjoyed activity, within which people can work together across generations to develop mutual understanding and respect, appreciation and support - dance really does bring people together!

#### **Longevity leads to loyalty leads to legacy**

One of the most rewarding aspects

of my work has been the impact on and benefit to young people, as documented by their many affidavits and heartfelt feedback - particularly in respect to their emotional and mental health, communication skills, social benefit, leadership skills, and increase in confidence in regard to taking on challenges and making aspirational life plans.

Additionally, having grown up within the programme, absorbing a deep understanding of its values, young people can develop excellent leadership skills through work experience and opportunities and some progress into and return from professional training. My team is growing and the impact of my 'strength-in-depth' approach is becoming increasingly evident. This not only allows for more potential in staffing the programme with experienced and talented facilitators, and added benefit from individuals' unique contribution, it also develops potential for a strong and lasting legacy.

And so I return, in conclusion, to INdependDANCE and their recent performances at Edinburgh Fringe. A professional reviewer not only captured the meaning of the piece, but also managed to sum up the essence of what I am trying to achieve with young people and with community dance in general:

"This [section] perfectly set the scene for a key theme of the work: relationships. Also, crucially, how in the formative years, those relationships pave the way to the future... This company is an inclusive and inspirational group of people who clearly believe in the transformative power of learning through art."

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