



## Orff-Schulwerk *International*

Volume 2, Issue 2

ISSN 2791-4763 (Online)

# The Life-Enhancing Power of Dance

Royston Maldoom



©2023 IOSFS



Published online: December 2023

Full terms and conditions of access and use can be found online at:

[www.iosfsjournal.com](http://www.iosfsjournal.com)

## Convention 2023 Keynotes

### The Life-Enhancing Power of Dance

*Royston Maldoom*

*[this article is an edited transcription of the presentation]*

I started very late as a dancer, at 22 years of age. I work as a choreographer. I make pieces wherever I am. I give workshops for people who are in, or coming into the field, and when I give workshops, I invariably end up with a piece of choreography.

The 'concept' of community dance began in the UK in the 1970s. The London School of Contemporary Dance had opened and it brought a whole new contemporary dance culture to Britain, based on Martha Graham technique. As a result, within a few years, a lot of young dancers had graduated from the school and, as London was considered to be already saturated with Dance, in order to get money from the Arts Council they were encouraged to go out into the provinces and set up companies. However this meant that dancers, choreographers and would-be dance directors were trying to set up dance companies in places where most people would be unfamiliar with contemporary dance. So (as part of the process) they had to create an audience, and to do this they would take some of their repertoire out into schools to show children, or into community centres, later offering participatory workshops.

At the same time choreographers were beginning to see the opportunity to move from the 'hot house' of the profession into communities and schools. It's worth noting that in those days we worked just as artists. My entry into community dance in Scotland was by chance, and although I was a political person, I had no idea of the social impact of what I was doing. I was simply asked to replace a local teacher who was on maternity leave. In no time I was busy teaching so many classes that my regional authority, Fife, appointed me as, what was I think, the first 'Choreographer in Residence' in Britain with the brief to use my experience and my passion in any way that would benefit the community. So I just started going out giving classes and, of course, I always created pieces. Although people said "Oh, we don't want to perform", as soon as we'd made a piece they'd say "Oh, why can't we show people?" As a result I always say, be very sceptical of people who say they don't want to perform because, if they're anything like me, when you achieve something you want to share it and show people what you've done. In fact, I have never had anyone refuse to perform. They would resist at first and then were very keen to show what they'd done.

So no strong social agenda at the beginning. But I and my fellow artists in residence around the UK, started to discover extraordinary things: the amazing impact that the work had on participants of all ages, all genders and communities. We started to see a growth in self-confidence, positive personal transformation, discovery and rediscovery of talent, ability and potential as well as social bonding, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. All these things we just observed and I think we were so excited that we got caught up in it, it was a wonderful thing to be part of that process to feel that actually you were making a real

impact on people's lives and, very often, on the lives of the community, their friends, their parents and so on.

So in the early days, as I said, we were just being choreographers and dancers and the 'art' was all that mattered. The pursuit of art itself was delivering the kind of outcomes that the pedagogic and social institutes are now asking for. What began to happen was that we would say "well, if we were having all these outcomes, why don't educational or social institutions fund us?" And indeed, that began to happen. The problem was these institutions had their own ideas and very often tried to get us to adapt to their agenda, often at the expense of the art itself. That is something that can be quite hard to resist, especially for young artists entering the field, feeling pressured into adapting their work to placate would-be funders. For me it is easier to fight back, with age and experience, I am more confident and will only accept projects that respect me as an artist.

Another dilemma that I see is that we start in the wrong place, by identifying and categorising our participants. Usually, and quite understandably, because those we work for will need to identify the categories of people that they want us to work with. They say "you're going to work with the elderly, with refugees, with people with cognitive or physical disabilities" and so on. And immediately we separated those people. We've put them in a category which is not necessarily of their own choosing and one of the things about categories, and this becomes particularly relevant when it comes to people in exile, refugees, is that someone coming into the country has the label 'refugee' and once we have established the category we're able to develop strategies called 'working with refugees' as a kind of generic identity. Their refugee status defines them. What we don't see is - a single mother, a gay person, someone escaping persecution or domestic violence and misogyny etc.

In the first instance they are processed as 'a refugee' and this makes it much simpler for us to deal with because we don't have to deal with all these myriad reasons why they've come, all the aspects of their personalities. We've developed a process for them: "You go here, and sign that, then you go there", and it can be much later that they get to be able to define themselves. These categories are not ones they have chosen so we assume that the fact that they are a refugee is an obsession, but it may be something else that is on their mind, other things they want to talk about or that they identify themselves by. And it enables us to ignore the enormous diversity of people in these categories. So even when I worked with a professional company like Scottish Ballet, I was working with a diverse group. It's very easy to say "well they're all white, they've all learned the technique" but everyone of those people was different and identified themselves differently. And not only that, their identity would change within seconds, according to the circumstances or the environment they found themselves in. So, for instance, I would work with people in prison for offences they may or may not have committed. Now, of course, I need to know I'm going to a prison and that they are prisoners, but once I get there it's very important that I don't identify them as such but rather create a safe space in which they can 'research' their identity and 'represent' themselves in a way that they choose.

So important for me as an artist is, that although I need to know for strategic purposes who I am working, and where, it's very important not to go with a set category in mind. This is for the therapist or the psychologist. It is not our job to do that. If we focus on the art in a safe space we can be sure that it will start to deliver in an extraordinary way the outcomes that people are looking for. But it's really important to me that we insist that we are engaged as artists. If you want therapists, or a psychiatrist, then engage one. Don't engage me to be that. Let me do what I do because in 55 years of experience I have discovered that it works.

I can give some examples:

When I went into Holloway Prison which is a holding prison for women most of whom had been caught carrying drugs or other offences, I asked the women "why did you come to do this project?" and they said "well, once a month we're brought to the main hall for what's called the marketplace and there are stalls [offering things] we can sign up for. Things like 'getting a job on release', 'dealing with drug addiction', 'family separation'"...and all these things were mirroring back to them the fact that they were problems, criminals, incarcerated. It was simply reinforcing their identity...and our stand simply had 'dancers wanted' and it was for them so different, nothing to do with their status. I'd been asked to go into the prison and I said "why not, I'd find it interesting to work with women prisoners" and once I got in there, I was going to make a piece. At the end, the prison governor said "you know, of over 50 projects, this has been the most successful". All the other projects focused on what the deliverers thought was relevant to the prisoners or offending status and all I had done was make a little piece to music by Cesar Franck. Of course, as time went on they would come to me and say "I want to tell you something I have not told anyone else"... and start to reveal their stories. I never asked them to reveal them publicly. We would get to know each other, and all these things would come out. And it was extraordinary the difference it made. Not only for the prisoners but for the prison itself, the atmosphere began to change and the prison wardens began to see these women as people, as talented, able to learn, and eager to learn. So that helps to change the prison mentality. That's the community impact.

And I started something at Sadler's Wells [a main theatre in London] many years ago. It was called at that time 'Senior Citizens Dance Company'. After the first year we decided to invite other groups from Europe to join us for a festival. Various artists would work with them for two weeks and we would present a performance at the theatre. I produced a piece to music by Pachelbel, a very lyrical piece for the group who were between 60 and 78 years old. For many of them it was the first time that they'd taken part in this kind of performance dance. At the end we asked the audience if they would like to comment and one woman said "I was disappointed in Maldoom's piece because he didn't draw on the experiences of the old people at all". Before I could answer, the oldest person in the company said "I'd like to answer that. If he'd even started on that nonsense I would have left... I'm not just a memory bank for the next generation. I wanted to dance and the dance liberated me".

I remember that she died a few years later with her friends around her and she said "I'm happy to die because I danced".

So you have to be very, very careful.

I can remember one funny example of how I learned this. I was invited to Milton Keynes to make a piece with a group of single mothers who had decided they'd like to make a dance. I turned up with ironing boards and various things that, naively at that time, I thought they would relate to. They said "we don't want to work with that bloody stuff, we want to dance, We may be single mothers but we're all different".

Now I'll probably know in advance something about the people I will be working with, for example, a mixed group of refugees and local people....but once they come into the room that's all totally irrelevant. My job is to create a safe space where we can meet to make art. I can imagine certain choreographic situations and ask them to find solutions, but it can't be found if they compete, so competing doesn't work. The only way to resolve the task I put in front of them is through cooperation, because I am convinced that one of the great things about dance is that we cooperate and don't need to compete, as we are so often encouraged to do in daily life.

The other thing we have to be careful about when we identify people, is that our identities are very fluid, forever changing. For example, when I am in England, a multicultural society, I don't walk around thinking "I'm a white man". I have that kind of privilege. But when I was in Ethiopia and walked through a village the children came out, screamed and ran away; and then brought their mothers out to look and stare at me. I was very conscious of being white. My identity had switched. And it's the same thing for a gay person. I don't walk around thinking about it but if I am in front of a group of very aggressive heterosexual men or I go somewhere where there is a very negative attitude towards homosexuality, I become very aware of my gay identity. So we are fluid and we have to remember this, especially with young people in schools where I work a lot. The kids come into the studio/classroom often having been ordered or coerced to take part. They may have assumed an identity picked up from those around them: attitudes of parents, peers, teachers. A teacher may have labelled someone as not very capable, parents may not be very attentive. They come with a placard of what I call the 'adopted child', the composite of all that they have learned from others about who they are. And part of their defence is to say "don't tell me I'm stupid, I know, I can tell you beforehand". I'll not work with this adopted child, I want us to find out ourselves who you are and who I am, it's a process for me as well.

A lot of people I work with are traumatised, they have difficult backgrounds which is their business, not mine, although some will want to (and do) tell me things, some extraordinary stories. But that's their choice. It's not my business to know or for them to know about me. We discover each other face-to-face in the studio, body-to-body, word-to-word. So I say, "leave the rucksack of victimhood outside". Let us meet each other fresh as human beings. Integration is easy – inclusion happens because people have the urge to be included, and an urge to connect. You have to give them, through your demeanour, the assurance that each of them is a valuable human being, that you believe in the unlimited possibilities that face them.

One example I can share. I was in Northern Ireland and I had the idea to put a group of teenagers, who were in a centre for excluded and self-excluded school students (they were very difficult and quite violent) with another centre for severely physically and cognitively disabled children. I would work with each group separately for two weeks each and then the

final week would be making a piece with the two groups together. The teachers of the teenagers said that this would be dangerous ...some of the children looked very strange. They suggested bringing photographs of the children so the teenagers wouldn't be shocked. But I said "certainly not - we all look strange – leave it till we meet and start work". When the groups met it was an instant success which I was sure it was going to be because these teenagers suddenly had something to give. They saw themselves and role models, as leaders. They were not beneficiaries but benefactors, and the children loved it. The next day the teenagers prepared cards for the children. And after the week ended, they asked to meet up with the children in a café in the town...they'd all adopted a friend. It happens and it's really easy.

We know that we're working with diverse communities. We work with inclusion and once we know that we have to recognise that everyone is different yet at base we have so much in common and we should work with what we have in common: our humanity, our desire to be loved and to love others, our desire to be together. It's natural. Just provide the space and the methods.

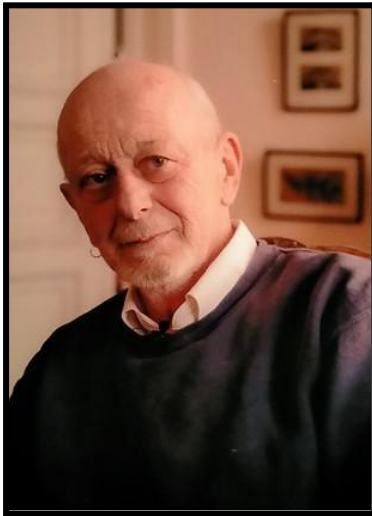
Many young people have come to me and said "I've just completed a course in dance for schools, or community dance, and I am terrified because I did my first project and none of my tools in my toolbox worked". This is so common. You have to remember, yes, you may have the theory, but when you go into that room/studio you have to look at yourself, your human experience, draw on that.

I have been criticised for going and working in other countries, for instance, working with street children in Ethiopia and bringing my own cultural experience with me. I made a project in South Africa when Mandela was just elected President. I decided on *Carmina Burana*, I knew it well, and the last thing I wanted to do was mess around with other people's culture before I was familiar with it. *Carmina Burana* has a universal theme, and I had no problem with the dancers and the audience. But the critics said "this is cultural colonialism". They didn't have a problem with porno films imported from the US and Europe – they made money, but when it comes to 'culture' – big problems.

I did the project with *Carmina Burana* which is about fate and fortune and how much you can influence it or give in to it. And at the end of the performance an old Zulu lady came up to me with tears in her eyes and said "how could you have known what it is like to be a black person in South Africa".

I will end with the words of a very wise sangoma, Kredo Mutwa, in South Africa. When I asked him about cultural imperialism he said "the only thing of value in any culture is that which you can share with other cultures".

So I've taken that to heart.



**Royston Maldoom** is a choreographer/Community Dance project leader who has worked in over 30 countries, often in crisis areas. Where the unbearable social and political conditions make it impossible for people to live together peacefully: in South Africa during the apartheid regime, in the Balkans and in Northern Ireland during the civil war, in the Baltic states during the transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with marginalised street-kids in Ethiopia or children and youth in the suburbs of Lima, Peru - and in Berlin schools in the "social hot spots" in Kreuzberg and Neukölln.

He has always seen dance as an answer to, and as a way out of, the impasse of exclusion and hostility. As a cultural antidote to dogmatism, populism, racism and sexism of all kinds.