

# MOVING MEMORY

## DANCE THEATRE COMPANY

### Gestures of defiance

The following are notes from a presentation by Moving Memory's Creative Director, Sian Stevenson, to the Arts in Society conference, American University Paris, 14 June 2017. It was accompanied by a Q&A with company members. While in Paris, the company performed *Cracking the Crinoline* at different locations in the streets of Paris.



### Introduction

About 8 years ago, a set of personal circumstances, primarily the terminal illness of my father, collided with a performance piece I was making with older tea dancers. My perspective of age and ageing was challenged. I began to question my own views of the dancers I was working with, having witnessed my dear father being treated as old, ill and dying with little interest in the rich and varied life he had led, up to very recently. This made me question who the piece 'Ballroominating' was for – was this for my own personal satisfaction and aggrandisement, or did I really, truly wish to celebrate this vibrant group of dancers for who they were in the present day?

As a result, I began to listen, and to shape stories of friendships that emerged through the various tea dances I attended. And as I did so, I learnt that far from being a group of sad, old individuals passing time in God's waiting room, these were spaces filled with frisson, desire, illicit relationships, passionate lovers and long-standing friendships which told of many a moment. What I saw was moving, and memorable and I wondered at what it is we define as "art". Hierarchies exist within performance worlds between "proper" art and those associated with community settings - and resources and support given to such endeavours, including spaces made available for performance, vary accordingly.

My questioning and the project itself - which had emerged for residents via their love of ballroom dance - unwittingly led to the birth of Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company. This group of older women came together to translate the stories told by the residents through movement. The result was a show, *Moving on Moving*, which incorporated a backdrop of digital footage taken within the workshops and presenting the on a performance platform. The women having performed the piece in two different venues expressed the wish to continue making work, and Moving Memory was born.

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Moving Memory offers workshop and performance opportunities for older women. Participants (most of whom have never experienced any training in dance or theatre) have the opportunity to try out new dance-theatre based skills and make high quality performance projects alongside professional artists. Celebrating life-long creativity, the company challenges views of being an 'old' woman, and offers older women a presence in the world of performance where they are rarely offered the opportunity to participate, let alone be valued and applauded.

### Background

At the core of Moving Memory is our company of women aged between 53 and 84. They are inspired to make work that makes the public question and look again, especially in relation to what we consider 'old', what it means to be creative, and what it means to be 'beautiful'. Very often the work is inspired by the stories the women bring with them, or their views and experiences of the world. Like the women, the content is gutsy, witty, full of passion, and because it is grounded in an authenticity, the performers are connected to the material in a way that allows audiences to relate on a very human level.

Many studies, including a collaborative report on the work of Moving Memory by the Sidney de Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health (Canterbury Christ Church University, conducted as part of the Prosper: Out of the Storm project for Canterbury Festival between April 2013 and January 2014) focus on the instrumental value of such work but there is a need to evaluate into the intrinsic value of such artistic activities, and the work of companies and organisations that offer quality opportunities that move away from traditional approaches. Moving Memory is more in tune with Greenwich Dance Agency, who cite a wish to challenge "stereotypes of what older people are capable of". Such work recognizes participants as individuals with skills, views, desires and hope that, if nurtured and resourced properly over a sustained period of time, can result in performance-making worthy of a national platform.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUt8FJCUjS8>

### Essential Ingredients

*"Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for."* [Joseph Addison](#)

For Moving Memory this makes us:

- Collaborative – artist and participant meet as equals – an exchange of skills – participant as expert in life
- Co-authors – rather than the facilitator predetermining a project, offering skill, an opportunity where both work alongside each other
- Creative – highlighting quality, something 'other', long term sustainable projects which offer something new, challenging and engages the participant as an individual

### Cracking the Crinoline – performers' comments

*"I think that it's only possible to remain committed to anything if you truly believe in it. The genuinely collaborative approach means that every work is our work, something that we have invested heavily in and that, once complete becomes a reflection of each of us as individuals as well as a company. It's an extraordinary privilege to witness a piece move*

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*from the embryonic idea to a fully developed (yet perpetually evolving) piece.”*

*“It’s not always easy at all but as a believer in life-long learning this is a great challenge. Sharing ideas, stories, experience are invaluable tools in the collaborative process of learning for me.”*

*“Performing is complete joy. I never get tired of seeing people seeing us for the first time. If we perform a kind of metamorphosis in our pieces, so too do most of our audiences. That re-evaluation of what it means to be old, to be a woman, to be a dancer is priceless.”*

### Conclusion

My hope in building this ensemble was to sustain a practice within which the women became skilled performers and makers, working towards co-authorship, as opposed to groups that work with young choreographers who choreograph *on*, as opposed to, in our case, choreograph *with*. It is this creative input, that I believe sustains commitment and the hope of the women that this process will never end. I also believe it is because the work strives to be high quality and professional, offering integrity and value, working on a national platform.

If organisations are to be true to strap-lines about “Arts for all” we need to start engaging with the idea that all have the potential to be artists. We need to provide quality opportunities that nurture such a desire. We need to avoid sausage-factory, box-ticking projects or grand schemes that only pay lip-service to artistic intentions and fail to support (financially and otherwise) the work to a performance outcome.

American poet, May Sarton, is one of Moving Memory’s beacons, so I finish with a quote from [The House by the Sea: A Journal](#)

*“it is essential that true joys be experienced, that the sunrise not leave us unmoved, for civilization depends on the true joys - nature, the arts, human love.”*

