KEEP DANCING!

So you think you can dance - and why not? Just because you're white-haired, maybe a tad rheumy or carrying a stone or two, more than you'd like, doesn't mean it'll be too late to release your inner Astaire or Russel. There are more and more opportunities for people of all age groups and abilities to express themselves through dance. Anything goes. It's as broad as it is long - as, ahem, you may be Strictly Come Dancing, too, has done its bit to show that the over-fifty-fives can still make a good fist of, more appropriately, an ankle, on the dance floor. Look at Pamela Stephenson and Russell Grant.

For anyone, but especially the more mature of us, dancing of any kind is a marvellous way of socialising, losing that feeling of being an anonymous silent blob; getting your life back and... belonging. Great for your health, too, encouraging group awareness, increasing confidence, giving a structure to your week, getting you out of the house. So, win-win every way.

SO WHAT IS CREATIVE DANCE?

There have always been distinct markers for older people to participate in partner and group dancing, such as: Ballroom, Latin American, Folk Dancing and Line Dancing, not to mention Tap, Zumba and Salsa etc. Indeed, many of us have spent some of our best years - and continuing - hoisting in operatic and musical society shows!

Creative Dance, on the other hand, is not concerned with the sequences of formalised steps and positions that characterise most dance genres. It specifically sets out to encourage freedom of movement - but within a structure. Apart from solo work, it requires strong teamwork, a shared sense of rhythm and timing - whether to create pure abstract movement, a specific mood or emotion, or a narrative thread. It can involve a wide range of sound stimuli; any suitable music or other sounds, even verse; percussive rhythms and, of course, props. Work for older physiques tends to concentrate on movement at its most interpretative. Importantly, dancers are encouraged to be actively involved in developing the choreography, incorporating their ideas. It can, however, be enjoyable and challenging to learn a dance sequence from the dance artist/teacher.

DANCING FOR THE FUN OF IT

A non-profit-making inclusive group, Creative Dance 60+ meets regularly for ninety minutes every Wednesday morning. Participants are asked to pay a fee of £25.50 for each open session they attend.

A teacher for some years, Jackie Richards has moved on to develop and manage a range of vocational qualifications, notably for the Care sector, so she knows all about people's needs and skills. Leaving full-time work at sixty meant she could concentrate on her other love, dancing, and getting back into the community. Now, as an older person herself who has moved into the next phase of her life, as well as running CD60+, she is also doing a work-based doctorate based on 'Active Older People Participating in Creative Dance'. A social enabler, she hopes her research may help influence policy and decision-makers in this sphere.

She explains that CD60+ is a grass-roots group (presented funded from the Community Development Foundation) on a very different scale to some of the more ambitious, performing setups, which sets out to...

"Promote positive images of active older people as full members of the community, with experience and talents to share with others the enjoyment of dance...to be healthy, creative, have fun, to make friends and to encourage neighbourliness and break down barriers. Our diversity is one of our greatest strengths."

(See: www.creativedance60.net)

It's a bright Wednesday morning when I arrive at the Bernie Grant Arts Centre in a socially eclectic and lively corner of North London. I open the door of an airy modern studio to find professional dance artist/teacher Gae Lin Little guiding seven mature women and two men through some initial exercises. Gentle but motivating music emanates from loudspeakers in the background: "Curl your body...now unfold...make contact with another person...and rest."

Everyone is totally absorbed and looks completely at home in the space - and with each other. Most participants have been coming ever since Jackie set up the group three years ago, whilst more recent enrolments have gradually settled in well. Despite the differences in their previous experience of dance, the overall impression is one of aesthetic harmony and total group sensitivity.

Later, over hot chocolate and home-made cake baked by one of the members, I chat to them about what they get from the activity.

Barbara says it's "very liberating." She enjoys "the interaction...it's my kind of group: friendly, comfortable." Also "I have arthritis and need to keep moving."

Judith joined a few months after retiring...
from full-time work. It’s her sort of group too: “I’ve been in other dance groups run by earnest young pros who are more interested in teaching steps; they take all the joy away. There aren’t many groups where you can dance just for the fun of it.”

Pew tells me he “…first danced in [his] teens, doing Latin American and Ballroom.” He’s a founder member and one of the few men. I was not surprised to find that still-glamorous Hazel had previously “won models for disco dancing”, whilst Evelyn had “especially enjoyed it when the group took part in an event at Alexandra Palace.”

For those who wish to perform, however, CDSSD+ participants can volunteer to join ‘No Dance, No Joy’ which dances locally and beyond. The dance group and sessions are led by their regular teacher/dance artist Molly Wright who recently set up her own ‘Dann Fine Dance’ performing company.

Intergenerational work has included organising a Big Dance 2012 project with a local school campus on the Broadwater Farm estate, whilst CDSSD+ has also developed friendly links with the local professional dance company, ‘Tavaziva’.

Years ago as trainee teachers, Jackie and I had both received a grounding in Creative Dance for use in schools, concentrating on awareness and use of Space, Effort, the Body and Relationships (i.e. working with other people). Watching the dancers at CDSSD+, I couldn’t help thinking how appropriate it is that dance with similar criteria can increasingly be used to enable people stay fit and motivated later on in life too.

CHALLENGING HEARTS AND MINDS

A quote from one seventy-two-year-old on the website of theSadler’sWellsinternationally renowned ‘Company of Elders’ reads: “It’s always been an inner feeling in my body that I’ve got to dance, it’s so uplifting and it actually makes you feel younger.”

Traditionally older people have danced as part of everyday celebrations and social events. In many cultural groups this is still the case. But it took Alan Yentob’s excellent 2009 Imagine programme Save the Last Dance for Me, featuring the Company of Elders to raise greater national awareness of dance for the older generation. This provided the catalyst that recently led to the establishment of more dance groups - Jackie’s CDSSD+ being one of them.

(See: www.sadlerswells.com/learning/learning-performing/company-of-elders)

Since then, dance for older people has really taken off. ‘Ballet Rambert’, always at the forefront of contemporary dance, moved last December into new South Bank premises on a site owned by Coin St. Community Builders, for a peppercorn rent - in return for one pair of ballet shoes a year! Oh, and the commitment that it provides a significant community dance programme. ‘Mercury Movers’, the company’s group for older dancers, was featured in the national press when it performed for The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh at the official inauguration ceremony.

Fergus Early’s well-established ‘Green Candle Dance Company’ in Tower Hamlets pushes the envelope further including, as one of its goals: to “explore through dance, some of the most challenging human issues we face as individuals, as communities and as a society.” ‘Green Candle’ also creates productions that include participatory workshops and organises in situ and professional development courses on leading dance with older people and early years - and for people with or without disabilities.

(See: www.greencandledance.com)

And so it goes on - not just in London but up and down the country. In the South East, for instance, the ‘Three Score Dance Company’ in Brighton, also inspired by the Company of Elders founded by Christine Thompson and Seasia Henz, under the guidance of Rehearsal Director Jason Keenan-Smith, sets out to commission work that “engages, entertains and captures the imagination and delivers performances” and challenges “hearts and minds through the art of contemporary dance.” (See: threescoredance.co.uk)

At the Exeter Arts Centre, dance facilitator Haley Starking also provides sessions for older people.

(See: www.exeterartscentre.co.uk/learning/classes/workshops)

NATIONAL SUPPORT

Underpinning the ‘dance for older people’ movement (pun intended) is the Leicester-based ‘Foundation for Community Dance’, which seeks to promote dance for “anyone involved in creating opportunities for people to experience and participate in dance” with a vision of “a world where dance is part of everyone’s life” and mission to “make engagement with dance important to individuals, communities and society.”

A professional organisation, FFD, works “with, and on behalf of, artists, organisations and teachers involved in leading, delivering or supporting community and participatory dance” has a membership of over 4,500 dance professionals worldwide - and boasts David Binley and Deborah Bull amongst its Directors.

(See: info@communitydance.org.uk)

ALL FOR ONE - AND ONE FOR ALL

In her new exercise video for ‘oldies’ - as she likes to call us - choreographer and dancer Dame Gillian Lynne, now eighty-eight, also shows that there is no age limit on having fun and keeping fit to music. Making creatively in any form is a terrific way of continuing to keep active.

I left Tottenham exhilarated. Creative Dance 80’s class had made me feel rejuvenated and light-of-foot, too, from watching the dancers, oblivious of their years and technical limitations, exploring new physical skills and bonding with others.

The session at the Bernie Grant Arts Centre had concluded with a prepared structured improvisation and creative dance entitled All for One, showing how a person can dance with others - yet alone.

Dance for All, though, would have seemed just as appropriate.