

CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED TRAINING

HAYLEY ARTHUR

DANCE4 PRODUCER:
LEARNING AND SKILLS

This year we celebrate 10 wonderful years of Dance4's Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) programme.

Over the last decade, it has been really exciting to see the growth of the scheme, supporting young dancers from across the East Midlands. Government investment, in the form of means tested grants, ensures we continue to offer many young people the access to dance experiences of the highest quality, propelling them into successful future careers. The scheme's alumni are already contributing to the cultural life of the UK and Europe as dancers, choreographers and community artists.

Since its pilot in 2009/10 Dance4's Centre for Advanced Training has had over 200 young people enrol onto the programme which has seen hours of training through intensives, performance opportunities and residencies. We have welcomed more than 300 of the most inspiring and diverse dance professionals to engage in our training, sharing their knowledge and experience with our students. We have worked alongside young people and their families to support them to explore their potential and make informed decisions about their future.

Dance4's Centre for Advanced Training is now firmly established as a leading training provision for gifted and talented young dancers. At the heart of the programme is our desire to nurture young people to become the future leaders in the dance field.

It has been a joy to be part of the journey of the Dance4 Centre for Advanced Training programme and to see so many individual and collective achievements during this time. We look forward to the future and how the scheme will continue to evolve and the many young people we are yet to meet.

This edition of 4WORDS offers some reflections on our Centre for Advanced Training programme. We have invited a range of voices to contribute and share their experience of the scheme in its 10 Years: Alumni, Visiting Artist and Parent.

Dance4's Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) is one of nine national centres across the UK.

The national CAT network delivers accessible, non-residential, professional training programmes for young people who demonstrate exceptional potential in dance. The National Dance CATs are supported through the Department for Education's Music and Dance Scheme. Each CAT operates from a host organisation that is recognised for their excellence and commitment to the arts.

To find out where your nearest CAT centre is and for further information visit: www.nationaldancecats.co.uk.

SARA

PARENT

I hope to write this from the perspective of a mum of a CAT student, though I feel I should state right from the get-go that I'm most definitely 'in the business'! I am a choreographer and I teach on the Dance Performance & Teaching course at the University of Central Lancashire, where we have had the considerable benefit of both auditioning and taking ex-CAT students on to our course. Within these reflections, I want to try to focus on the joys and challenges of committing to the CAT programme from a parent/carer and young person's perspective.

Commitment is a key word, for all concerned. To make the most out of this undoubtedly 'privileged' experience, in retrospect it feels like the whole family unit make a commitment. My daughter, Ella 'graduated' from CAT last summer (2019) and is now studying Dance at Trinity Laban, a conservatoire based in Greenwich, London. She began her time with CAT when she was 13, so we spent five years, whenever possible, prioritising Saturdays as CAT days. Like many other students we live nearly an hour away from the beautiful studios in Nottingham, and although she commuted for the last few years, we all still had to be up and at the train station for before 9am every Saturday. We were lucky, Ella was and is very driven, helped I'm sure in part by her time at CAT, so Saturday mornings were absolutely do-able though we all learnt to speak little on that journey in!

The Saturdays are long and tiring. As she became an older teenager she sacrificed every potential Friday night out with friends so that she was 'fit' to fully engage with the CAT schedule, and as GCSE's approached balancing revision and CAT was not easy, but she managed it really well. She would say she had a day less than most to revise, but that meant she worked harder in the week-day evenings. It's difficult to say how much of this determination, resilience and good time-management was just inherently Ella, but I'm sure the CAT programme also invites, builds and even celebrates such skills, and the payback is enormous.

CAT gave Ella the opportunity, above and beyond anything else, to develop her creativity. The range of visiting artists is not only impressive but challenging. (Neither of us will ever forget the balloon-based costumes used as part of a Summer-residency performance at Lakeside Arts!) CAT students need to learn to be open, to be inquisitive, to be willing to take risks (physically and mentally). All of these skills help nurture individuality and build self-confidence. Although performance opportunities are minimal, apart from the fantastic Summer Residencies, the balance between the creative and technical (ballet, contemporary and Pilates) is carefully constructed. Ella, like many young dancers, arrived into Pilates a little bemused, now it is one of her staple disciplines and something that I think she will always take with her whatever she chooses to do in the future.

Each CAT student is encouraged to also commit (there's that word again) to a mid-week satellite class. Ella joined the then very newly-formed Derbyshire Youth Dance Company (DYDC), and she LOVED it. She loves performing and DYDC gave her loads of opportunities to perform both nationally and regionally and she loved the way the leaders constructed the sessions and just the tone of these, perhaps a little more relaxed than the Saturday sessions and very sociable. And this is what I would like to end on, committing to the CAT programme is an intense experience and Ella has made friends for life. Friends that 'get' what striving to be 'in the profession' demands and friends that she just has a really great time with. Those years at CAT made Ella happy and gave her the opportunity to follow her love, whatever she decides to do post Conservatoire training, following a passion is a great thing for any parent to see their child do.



RUBEN BROWN

ARTIST AND CENTRE FOR ADVANCED TRAINING ALUMNI

Reflecting upon my time training on the Dance4 Centre for Advanced Training scheme, in relation to urgency, my first thought is remembering the urgency to progress. Like most young people, I was constantly looking ahead, eager to get to the next step on the journey to becoming a professional dancer. Looking back now, as a professional in the field, what was urgent to me then is what remains urgent to me now.

The fundamental creative core at the heart of Dance4's CAT scheme is what has always been crucial for me. The choreographic and creative workshops provided on the scheme established such valuable foundations in autonomy: independence, adaptability and receptiveness. Creative work is exposing and being given a safe space at a young age to be vulnerable and expressive was indispensable. I think it's one of the greatest gifts you can truly receive in preparation for the industry because it's how you learn to craft your own voice. Contemporary dance is dynamic and constantly questioning. Our role as dancers is to explore new approaches and possibilities. What can we achieve and offer?

From day one at CAT, it was made clear that our art form isn't uniform or codified. When the picture isn't so clear cut you open up the avenues for possibility, and learning this from Dance4 has been incredibly enabling. From learning this boundless availability, you come to appreciate the value of being part of the wider umbrella of arts and culture. A couple of years ago I worked for an architect and a visual artist. They had joined forces to create an interactive installation. They were exploring space in relation to physical sculpture. They had chosen dancers to help them in their research and test performances. This decision was due to the way dancers understand the body in space which provided them with more enriching content.

Experiences like this one have constantly shifted my personal perception of what it is to be a contemporary dance artist. In these moments there's always an echo of my training at Dance4. We were always learning how to encompass all our skills and apply them to any creative situation. There's also something to be said for how this collaborative exchange was an integral part of my training, working with artists from different fields such as film and sound engineering. It's something that has always remained important to me. We all have our reasons for dancing and from being on CAT I learned that sharing the creative space and process with others is what fuels my passion for this profession. I truly believe it has been because of these early lessons at Dance4 that I've, thus far, had a vibrant and joyful professional career.

THEO CLINKARD

DANCER/CHOREOGRAPHER

I often hear dance folk referencing a ‘transferable skill set’; the idea that, if a dance career isn’t the path we eventually find ourselves on, the training will have equipped us with sufficient skills to thrive in other fields of work. I totally agree, but it also makes me reflect on the wide range of approaches to training and making dances, each with its unique set of priorities, studio politics and demands. So which transferrable skills exactly? And what do they uphold elsewhere?

Some approaches to dance training would not be out of place in a sport or military context, with dancers expected to excel at reaching prescribed goals within a climate of fear. Alarmingly, this fairly uncreative approach starts at really a young age when the mind is elastic and carefully comprehending what is given value in that particular context, often setting dancers up for a lifetime of reproducing this exchange. Dancing within this value system makes the body a kind of battle ground, the demonstration of obedience as the ultimate prize, whilst claiming that those who can bear it all without contest will make it to the top! The transferable skill set here can be understood as applying a work ethic whereby an individual tenaciously endures situations and modes of production, systems and workspaces rather than questioning them or having agency to propose new ones.

I know from experience that many dancers find clear goalposts, demonstrable progress and its rewards to be deeply satisfying, it also suits many choreographers who enjoy this power dynamic. These methods are largely the result of (and provide for) the competitive dance market... but that’s perhaps for another day.

I wonder how as educators we can guide young dancers to strive for transformation, deepen their knowledge and expand their creativity on their own terms and with a genuine celebration of difference and the uniqueness of their bodies. How we can use dance as a way to create space for multiple subjective experiences, to respect each other’s perspectives and to give a particular focus on fostering the imagination through various creative approaches.

I know I present these ideas in a simplistic binary to make my point and that there are many existing methods, even some that are in direct contrast within training programmes, curated to prepare dancers for the widest range of work imaginable. As for myself, the conservatism in one area was directly responsible for kick starting a search for more a holistic way forward elsewhere.

Following ten years of ballet training, at aged fifteen, I sought alternative ways to study that would give value to my expression and creativity over my capacity to convincingly emulate an ideal to the detriment of my actual body. The effects of literally moulding my growing limbs are still felt today and I find myself in a continual process of unlearning. Thankfully, contemporary dance, and more recently improvisation, has enabled me to move from ‘who’ I am.

Whilst I’m about 30 years too late, I’m thankful that young dancers today have places like Dance4 that are spearheading change by offering alternative dance forms and creative pathways with progressive thinking at the forefront of the organisation and the training programme they offer.

Since I teach for numerous CAT schemes, vocational schools, university courses and professional companies internationally, I have witnessed what happens when ‘doing it right’ and fitting an established mould has been upheld as the main goal in early dance development. I’ve met numerous professional dancers who consequently really struggle with being given creative agency, when they’re simply considered as an artistic collaborator in a process. With the exception of very few large company contracts, the requirements of a truly sustainable career are an imaginative, self-resourcing, proactive mind that can self-motivate, navigate the freelance scene without guidance and often generate their own work. Foregrounding creativity and expression at an early age isn’t just enjoyable, it is a lifeline, setting these individuals up to handle an uneasy professional terrain and hopefully challenging the status quo in the process!

I propose we do away with fixed images of the body framed as ideals to aspire to. Much like ballet, contemporary dance unconsciously upholds the thin white Western European non-disabled body as the norm, often serving to disempower or erase those that don’t fit this standard. These ideals are problematic, and the resulting damage experienced by young minds and bodies is often internalised, psychological and emotional when the learnt coded behaviour of a traditional studio setting doesn’t invite conversation or require those leading to provide context. Often the muted dancer is left to approximate the dancing they see happening on another body, over there, that rarely looks like theirs.

Across my work I’ve had the opportunity to create with and learn from dancers of different age groups, backgrounds and sexualities, dancers who are genderqueer or transgender, dancers of different ethnicities, disabled dancers, including dancers who are neurodivergent or who have a learning disability.

These physical dialogues have invited me to continue perceiving the edges of my personal experience, questioning the accessibility of my practice and expanding my creative thinking. As a result, I rarely centre my own moving body in the studio and when it has been necessary to do so, I seek ways that are inclusive and don’t devalue another person’s sense of self.

Far from being an easy ride, my own choreographic work is challenging and gives huge responsibility to the movers to show up, to own and embody ideas with rigour and presence, with ultimate value given to the dancer’s unique experience of their own moving body. Whilst this is a preferable creative process for me to facilitate, I also believe that nothing communicates as clearly and memorably to an audience as seeing a mover in their own skin, perceiving the world around them, unfettered by judgement.

For me personally, what feels important is to keep tethered to the ‘why’ of it all. Dance is a way to reflect the change in society I want to see, be it through the work I stage or the way I lead people in a studio. I think as dance artists we deal in hope, to move is to imagine ground and a place for yourself and others upon it. I don’t think it is too utopian to dream of cohorts of young dancers who are encouraged to self-empower, to take space with the body they have, to practice care, to speak up and propose ideas, to embody courage and vulnerability, to be comfortable to risk feeling a bit silly, to empathise with others and to enjoy all of these things in studios and on stages that are safe and generous in spirit. I think they will, in turn, be encouraged to lead spaces of this nature themselves.

These are the transferable skills that I think dancers can embody in the dance scene and in the wider world, be they empathetic carers, vocal activists, listening leaders or grounded policy makers. I feel incredibly fortunate that Dance4 shares and gives a home for these values, enabling the young CAT dancers to fly around their building and play out these ideas with me and other invited artists. The skills we all value right now are deep in their impressionable bones, shaping the future of dance and the landscape beyond it.

Tide Waits for No Man choreographed by Theo Clinkard with Dance4 Centre for Advanced Training at U.Dance National Festival 2014.
Photographer Brian Slater.

Being a part of the CAT programme opened my eyes to so many more opportunities within the dance sector.

The space we have to develop our own movement vocabulary, the space we have to grow as young creatives, the space we have to actually learn without the pressure of exams is so, so liberating and empowering.

Zoe, Centre for Advanced Training Alumni

CAT really helped me develop myself and my confidence as a person and as an artist.

Being open to things that artist want to explore, it's really helped me find what I want to devote myself to.

Luke, Centre for Advanced Training Student

I love the variety in a CAT day: either ballet or Pilates in the morning, a creative class (exploring choreography and improvisation), and a technique class in the afternoon; I think the variation really helps me as a dancer as I get to experience so much.

Jamaica, Centre for Advanced Training Student

I love going to CAT because it's different every week, having new creative teachers leads to unique sessions every time I go where we all learn something different, and that's what I like so much.

But alongside that, I also love having the same technique teacher every week who sees us develop through the term, letting us have a chance to work on set phrases to improve week by week.

Charlotte, Centre for Advanced Training Student

CAT has given me so many new opportunities. It's opened my view of dance.

Edie, Centre for Advanced Training Student

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