

# Men in Dance Network

## ‘Digest of Interviews’

Interviews from Andy Raine with some of the *Men in Dance Network* group on Facebook for 2020

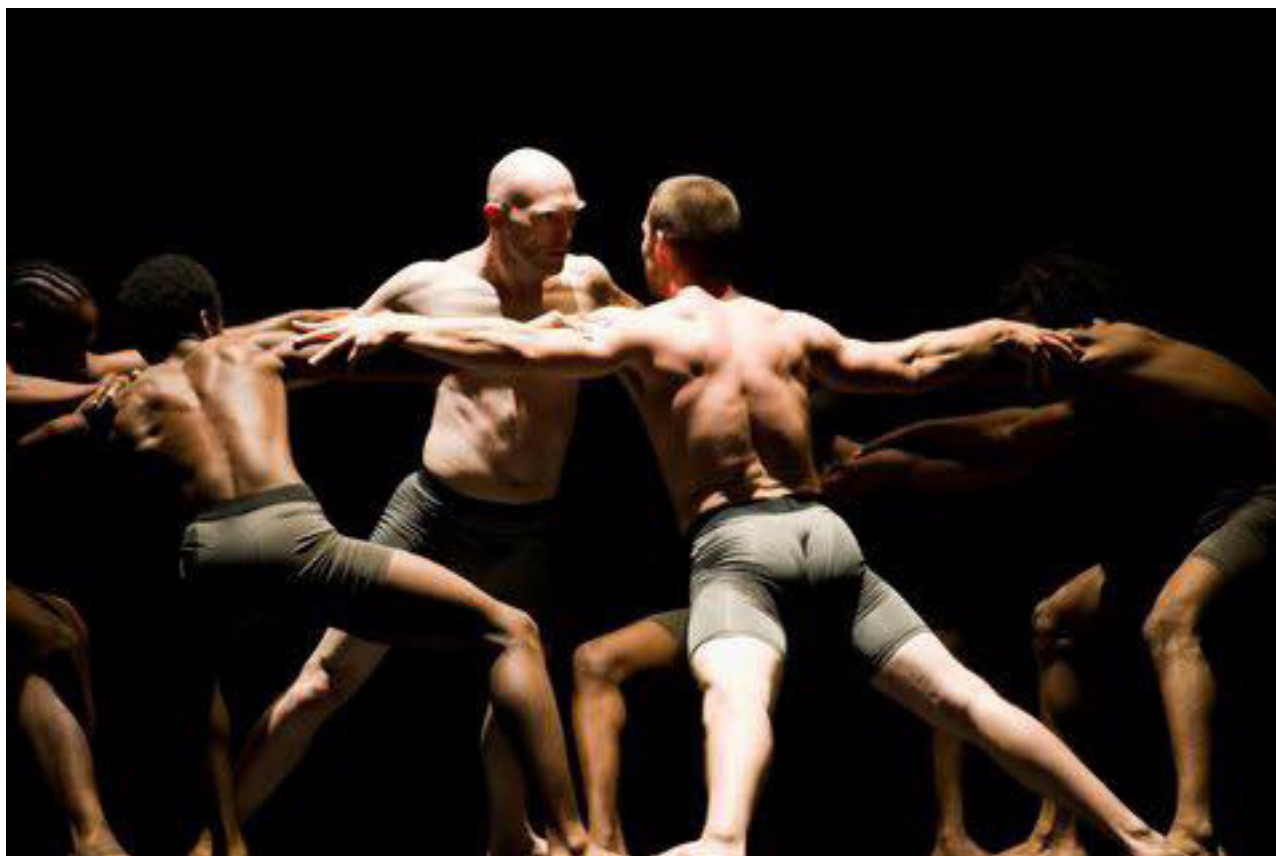


Photo: Inlet Dance Theatre

Andy Raine here from Holy Island, UK. I’m speaking on behalf of ‘Men in Dance Network’ which is a group hosted by Facebook

‘Men in Dance Network’ is for ALL men who identify themselves as dancers, exploring what men characteristically bring to the dance, what we enjoy, how we learn, and what can be achieved when men move together... in dance, in integrity of purpose and in friendship.

This group is open only to men, any men interested in dance, regardless of age, ability, nationality, interests or spirituality. We have professional dancers, dance-teachers and enthusiasts of all kinds from many countries, with very varied dance-experience and backgrounds. (We insist that courtesy is shown towards other men, and will remove anyone trying to push political or religious views or post irrelevant material.)

This digest has excerpts from recent interviews posted on our group’s page, and retained as a resource. It’s a longer read than usual as we’ve enjoyed twice as many interview opportunities this year. When a man enters a dance-class of any kind he usually looks to other guys in the class as his reference-point. This group offers a similar experience, and with all the limitations that Facebook and on-line interaction imposes, we’ve still found it worthwhile and encouraging.

**Facebook group: Men in Dance Network.**

## Bill Wade (USA)

### *Uncaging the Lion*

*Bill, you're the Founder and Executive/Artistic Director of Inlet Dance Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, but I believe you came to dance comparatively late?*

Yes, my serious training only started at 18. I went past a huge dance-studio packed with college-aged students, and there was African drumming in the corner, and the instructor was a very tall African American: Clyde Morgan. I just stopped in my tracks. I was going to school for animation..to make things move! Suddenly I recognised the medium in the Arts that I'd been intuitively searching for. I'd wanted to become an animator because my art must move! But I needed to be doing what I just saw down the hallway. It was a very powerful knowing, a recognition.

Some people are more naturally physically wired, but we're all born in a body that moves. Non-verbal communication can sneak past people's emotional or intellectual guard.

*You find yourself choreographing, though, and about things that really matter..*

Dancing as a performance gives us a setting and opportunity to address issues or topics that would be difficult to approach in a normal conversation.

*You've been able to survive as a creative artist by performing, and then choreographing.*

Cleveland, Ohio, where I work from, has the 2nd-largest performing arts centre in the U.S. This city has been kind to me- I met my wife here. I raised my son here. Someone said about me, You're so normal! I don't stand still long. I'm very physical.

Growing up in a toxic environment, dance kind of saved my life. I'm very passionate about paying it forward. With my company members, I make sure they recognize that we're stewards of what we carry..

*You're passionate about what men's quality of movement, and ways of relating can offer.*

I'm a dude. I kind of attract other dudes. We have an entire collection of male pieces danced by men about themes to do with being guys. We call it our 'Dude Art Collection'. So we referenced Ted Shawn's stuff, and did a piece with 3 dancers called, 'This Could Hurt'. We literally throw each other around. I needed to show that rough and tumble done well should be hailed as a legitimate aesthetic. If we do something that is pretty or rarified and 'artistic', we alienate an entire demographic who could be our audience. Stop putting off-putting things in front of people!

Empathy and hope. When we're working on a new piece I always want to put on stage what could be, rather than only what is- to keep on pushing it out farther.

*How do you cope when you see a guy dance and it's alienating, offensive even? even if that's absorbed by accident, unintentional?*

We say, NOT HELPING! - we say it all the time. Male energy is not something to be ashamed of.

Some of these ballet-trained guys have not been given permission to be men. I find that there are certain expectations. I watch guys being held back from developing their own masculinity. It's within them, but their training and environment, and what is modelled, suppresses that. Even at Men in Dance Festival we sat down in leather jackets, sweat pants, hoodies, with boots up on the backs of the seat in front, just flopped down - and saw a theatre full of what looked to us like emasculated men. It was shocking.



## Bill Wade (USA) ... continued



My guys were surprised, viscerally surprised. They were not being clever or funny. I said, 'After the tech rehearsal we'll head to the pub, and talk there.' I told them, 'We are the Men in Dance. We are a minority here. We have to dude this up and give these other guys permission to man up.' What I'd seen is toxic and evil.

*But what you wanted was more RAW - I think you used that word - but how are you spelling it? R-A-W or R-O-A-R?*

Both!

*More ROAR speaks of physicality and fierceness. More RAW means vulnerable and naked.*

The word ROAR is interesting because someone spoke prophetically over the guys from Inlet, and the word given about us was LION.

My dudeness, my assurance of my own masculinity, was hard-won. And still I had to unravel the time-bomb I'd become. The process of becoming RAW is looking that dysfunction and co-dependency in the face, and also to recognize the temptation to self-medicate in different ways to hide from our own woundedness.

*But in dance we come face to face with our real struggles!*

The content of some of those dance-pieces in the Dude Collection is the stuff I had to grapple with. What's fascinating about being real and honest, vulnerable and authentic in those pieces is that it connects with men in the audience.

*Which men? the artists or the average guys?*

Both populations. What we did was challenging for the artsy boys, and recognizable for the guy on the street. There's content there that really resonates with them. And they're surprised that dance can do it.

*I find dance does it quicker than anything else.*

Yeah, there's no language barrier. It's raw, it's visceral. Guys off the street are surprised that this art-form can do that for them, can make that connection.

## Andrew Davison (UK/International)

### *how men are made*



*How was being part of that first production of 'Macho' for you as a dancer?*

How was it for me? Emotional. I think the state of vulnerability is something we all have struggled with at one point or another, whether it's the feeling itself or simply not wanting to allow ourselves to become vulnerable with others. The process we went through during 'Macho' was so enlightening. There was 4 of us, completely different men from 4 completely different backgrounds, and we came together and formed such a tight unit. We used each other's strengths and weaknesses to elevate the piece and make it as authentic as possible.

*And for you as a young man?*

I really discovered a lot about myself during that project and learnt how to embrace my emotions, how to lean into them rather than shut them out. I was lucky enough to be able to explore all these significant things by using my art form with some really great guys in such a safe environment, and I saw myself grow so much because of it. Being a part of that experience was so eye-opening. There is a lot of strength to be found in vulnerability.

*For full interview and show-reel go to: [www.andrew-davison.co.uk](http://www.andrew-davison.co.uk)*

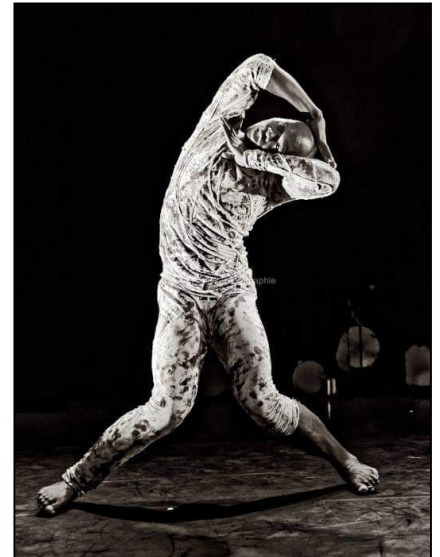


## Jude Kurankyi (Ghana)

### *‘I fall down, I get up’*

I am married now, and I still live in Accra, Ghana. I teach dance in an International school (from 2 years- to 13 years-old children). So yes, I am still dancing. I have had a number of opportunities, and I think they have made me a better person. I have much experience with children and their world of dance.

I intend to go back to performing and studying. I pray this Covid19 pandemic passes away so I can travel around and dance and learn at the same time.



## Max Revell (UK)

### *- stories strongly danced!*

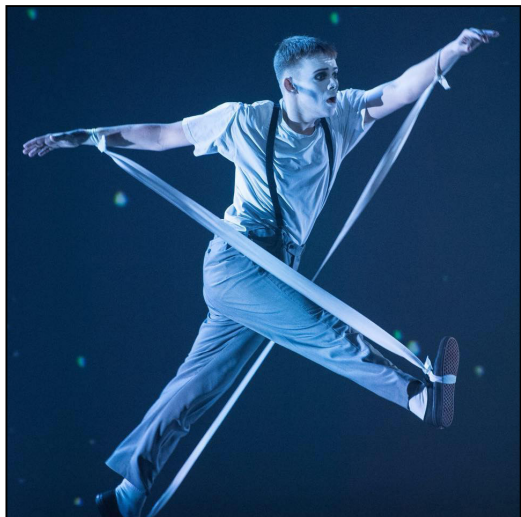
If you're on-stage, you're always some character, whether assigned by the choreographer or chosen by yourself. I focus on the character rather than the movement, so the movements come out of that character. From an audience's perspective it's more interesting to see a character than just clever movement. Even a tiny thing with the right character can be really impressive, but something huge like, for example, a back-flip can seem really meaningless if it doesn't make sense in the continuity for the character.

But in a battle you just have to dance really good! In a battling context you're playing a character, but it's like a hyped-up version of yourself. I'm still 21, and want to keep competing also, at the highest level, to test my skills and ability. I feel battling is the best way to keep sharp.

BBC Young Dancer of the Year for 2019, when you've got a title like that, people seem suddenly to take you more seriously, and they're prepared to pay me. It's a bit unfair because I'm not any better than I was before.

(But it does bring opportunities, it does! For instance, I got to perform 'Unstrung' at Sadlers Wells because of it.)

I used to be someone who succumbed to pressure and was intimidated by it. But I've changed the way I related to pressure. Training for dance-battles gave my own competitive nature an opportunity to rise to the challenge. I'd realise that I'd trained, and I was ready. The pressure became something I could use. It didn't hold me back; it brought me forward.



When the BBC thing happened, I was used to pressure, and it was comparatively relaxed for me. I try to just lose myself and be the character on-stage. But everyone knows you're not that person, so it's like pretending as much as you can, and then deciding to just get on with it. It's not very complicated. I just get in character for perhaps 5 minutes beforehand. I try not to over-think it.

All the skills you've acquired along the way are transferable; they're all linked and help each other. . I was learning contemporary, and in my popping some elements of that just came out. And elements of the popping turned up in my contemporary! Miming came from clowning I'd done. I just move, and what comes out comes out. Losing the distinct genres, and blurring distinctions between different dance-styles and disciplines, it's definitely an exciting time to be a dancer. A good dancer absorbs technique rather than being trapped by it.

## Jeet Devnath (India)

### *'Dance is everything in my life ...'*

*You live in New Delhi, and describe yourself as a creative dance artist. How old are you now, and how long have you been dancing?*

I am 22 years old, and I've been dancing for the last 10 years. Firstly I started doing theatre, then I got the inspiration for dancing from my sister. I pursued dance because I thought I could make a career in this field. The most exciting opportunity of my dance career was to open my own dance studio (The Privick Dance Studio) We're open to everyone, and male, female, all ages are learning here. We teach children, teenagers, adults. I'm just so glad that all these things happen to me, and when they do I grab the opportunity. And then I choreograph to do something creative!



*So tell us what it's like to be you. What makes you want to get up out of bed, and go to work as a creative artist?*

I just want to bring more awareness into my country about dance. I don't have any dance heroes, but I get inspired by anybody who will dance!! We don't want to dance better than anyone else. We just want to dance better than our self.....

## Kevin Fear (UK)

### *Kevin the Dancer - one man (oh, and a chair!)*

*Kevin, it was last August, and you'd taken the step to come on a dance-team, not really knowing what it would involve, I'm laughing to think of it now, because you joined us on Thursday night and by Saturday you were performing in full costume in a public space, looking for all the world like you did this every day!*

On the Friday in the hall, again Lauren and Bailey took turns leading a warm-up, then you put out a chair and we had to listen to a Leonard Cohen piece, this time without music, and respond just to the words, about sitting on a chair and letting a dancer rise out of us.

*Each person brought something different, but you especially really connected with it well immediately. When you went home after those first days you sent us all an e-mail from your phone.*

*It's got to be one of the best letters ever! It was headed , CAN'T SLEEP.*

*Here's some of what you said:*

it is 5 in the morning and I cannot sleep...my soul seems to have dance pouring out of it like an endless stream into my mind. I feel so privileged to have spent time with you all over the last two days which I feel have changed me forever. Each one of you had an individual part in showing me what was waiting for me all the time. I expressed my fear to you all that I may go back into the box once I return to my normality; right now I realise that this will not be possible. I feel I have grown so much into a shape already prepared for me since the beginning of time that the old box is just far too small and insignificant, it lays dead and shrivelled, a shed skin at my feet. Right now, in the quiet of the morning, with the focus of my full

attention, my heart and soul are being filled with something like the memory of dances that I have yet to join.

I already have what seem like fully formed thoughts for taking and embodying dances you have shown me and taught me, and how I might engage others to begin to step out, in time....

With more love and gratitude than you could ever imagine, Kevin the Dancer (Sent from my iPhone)"

*In that e-mail message you said, 'the old box is just far too small'*

Sue, my wife, was not with me that first couple of days, and I realised that so much had changed in me so quickly, and I was frightened she might not be able to understand. She's known me from my teens, put up with my never setting foot on a dance-floor. Now I came back with the feeling that I HAVE TO dance, in order even to be complete.



## Randall Flinn (USA)

### *LEGACY: pathways made to leave as gifts for others*

I'm the artistic director of Ad Deum Dance Company. We are a professional contemporary dance company. We've been around for about 30 years. We're a touring company so we tour both nationally and internationally, but also we go into countries that have experienced a crisis, whether that is a natural disaster or an act of terrorism and we will volunteer our time and talents and treasures to be able to bring encouragement and inspiration through outdoor concerts, or going into hospitals or nursing homes or refugee camps or whatever it may be.

I want to help people encounter a beauty that's somehow able to wash over the soul. In the world we're living in there's so much difficulty, such uncertainties and calamities, we need a kind of beauty can actually help people be transformed, can engage them, impact them, and bring change. This potential art has is what makes me want to really invest in the legacy of the next generation of artists.



*From your journey as a dancer, would you say part of the 'legacy' is being able to lead with your vulnerability, instead of in spite of it?*

Our relationship with vulnerability is not just as an artist, but as a human being. We can either run and hide, to disguise even physical vulnerabilities, or we can be very authentic about it, and surrender. Not being unwilling to progress, but surrendering to what is realistic, and appreciating new lessons. So I've made a lot of new discoveries through facing my own vulnerabilities, my own fragilities of life. As I open my heart to be just authentic I'm not presenting myself as a superhero, nor just creating things for the commercialised markets of consumerism, but instead I'm creating from conviction. I'm opening up my heart to reveal my own life's journey, and that has credibility because it's authentic. It's my story - and it connects to the stories of other people. So then I believe people

can receive on a deeper level. It goes beyond just commercial entertainment to become something that truly penetrates the heart

*Is there anything specifically you've yet to achieve creatively?*

As long as the world around needs us to offer hope, I'll keep pursuing that. But that doesn't mean I can just recycle what I've done before: I have to be willing to go on a new journey, to face a new adventure. Those adventures discover us more than we discover them No one expected this particular pandemic to come upon the earth like it did; but it has, and now we have a new normal and new anxieties and new fears. Well, what can I speak into that as an artist? Life may have much brokenness, yet beauty can be found in the brokenness. We can be passionate about being really present and bringing our dance from that deep inner place.

*Any regrets?*

Each day brings a new opportunity to get up from places of despair, and to shine! I think if an artist is anything at all, then that artist learns to persevere. I think the strongest artists are the ones who have persevered the most.. I could have been more kind and compassionate. I want to find a heart-change as an artist -and as a human being as well!

*You draw others on and further into their dance. Speak more about legacy?*

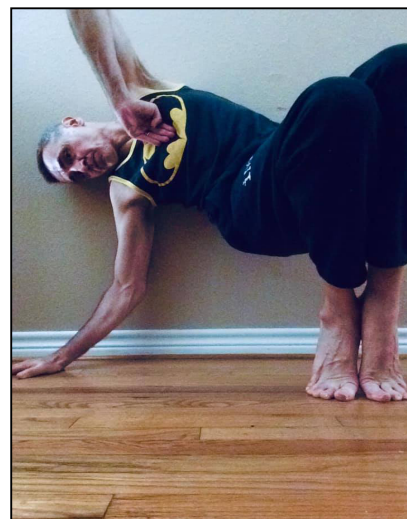
I know I want to leave my dancers with the things that have formed my life.. I want to do that through more than just counting "5..6..7..8.." or throwing a leg up in the air or doing a series of turns. I want to urge them to discover even the most bitter journeys in their life can have purpose, and there's an impartation they can make.. These are the works of art that need to be produced and shared.



## Randall Flinn (USA) ... continued

*What do you want to say to the guys earlier on this journey?*

I want to say to the young artist, Fear is the greatest enemy of creativity, and as artists we are freedom fighters. We fight for our own freedom and we fight for the freedom of others. Let that pain become part of the richness of who you are. Don't be afraid to be known by your scars, because perhaps they can bring comfort to another individual. Be willing to be uncomfortable. I find if I'm willing to work from that most uncomfortable place, that's when the most beautiful things emerge.



## Stephen Jones (UK)

*'Rhythm is a dancer.'*

*So, I want to ask you about the Northern Soul scene, and I'm particularly interested because it seems that the dance that broke out and emerged featured lots of men, especially, dancing solo in their own space in a way that totally upstaged the women (even with them spinning in their wide skirts!)*

Yes, and the idea was to upstage each of the other men, and be the best. You would see someone drawing his energy up to give it his all, putting his hands together like he was praying, with eyes shut, but one eye slightly open to check what every other bloke was doing, all their gymnastics, to know when to begin to really BREAK out, kick higher, spin faster, slide more, to suddenly get the attention of everyone. They'd say, 'THAT's the best dancer.'

*Stephen, just a year ago I was at my mother-in-law's 80th birthday party, and making conversation with another guest at my table I said to him, 'Tell me something interesting about YOU...' and he paused, then his eyes lit up, and he said, 'I'm a dancer.' It turned out that it was Northern Soul he remembered, and in his heart that was what defined him... I'll never forget that look on his face.*

It's not just a look. You feel it in your body. If you hear the music, a track from that era, your body remembers. When I used to dance I felt in control of myself. I was good at it - it confirmed my status. It helped me deal with my temper, my propensity to create violence. It gave a different outlet for my energy.

*Is there something you'd like to say to younger guys today who live and breathe their dance as you did then?*

The answer is: Don't be sidetracked by other issues. It's the dance that's important. And I'd tell them that drugs are not the answer. ( I stopped dancing in 1973 or '74, because with drugs in the picture for a while it all became a different scene. But it's not the case now. All these Northern Soul events have become about the music and the dancing again - the nostalgia, the energy and skill.) I didn't know it then, but the dance was a form of meditation. It balanced my mood swings, and made me a more level person. Funnily enough, I was more acceptable in society, because the dancing helped me cope. Just after I finished with the dancing I got married. By then I was steady enough for someone to put their trust in me and rely on me. That's what happened over that period, and because I had the dance as a focus I learnt about control. Mind, I was still FAIRLY wild... The rhythm can change, but it leads where the beat is going to go. Me, I can sense the resonance of that beat in music - and in life. That's what gave me the edge as a dancer.

*Steve, thankyou for telling us some of your story, and reminding us how dance can touch all the raw places and gather them into something PHYSICAL!*

## Michael Heatley (UK)

### *Michael Heatley hits the ground ... running!*

*Michael Heatley, you're founder and creative director of Hit the Ground Running Dance Theatre Company, and were preparing to launch and tour a new show, 'Suitcases', when suddenly everything was put on hold for these strange days of Corona lockdown.*

*Michael, tell us, when did you become involved in dance?*

'Pilgrim' was a show based on the story-book 'Pilgrim's Progress' and Sue Little choreographed that and did a solo in it, at the Arts Centre, in Darlington. I got off my seat and I sat on the steps glued to the spot, mesmerised. It was the turning point. I was just a six-year old lad from Darlington and Harrogate Hill, but I joined a contemporary class with English Dance Theatre. I'm 44 now so that's 38 years ago. 1981 or '82, that's when I first became obsessed.

*Michael, you don't perform yourself any more, do you ?*

No, it's my vision. I like to be behind the scenes creating it all, and leaving it to the younger ones. It's a creative collaboration, working intensely with the dancers in the studio with a trained dramaturge. The ideas come from me.

The name of my company is 'Hit the Ground Running'. I woke up in the night and had those words. I sat up in bed and googled it. It means to 'get off to a brisk and successful start.' I thought, That'll do me!

**'macho'**

*Our guys are interested in material dealing with being themselves as men, and explored through dance - what's not to like? Tell us more about 'Macho'.*

For 'Macho' we had guys with 4 contrasting styles of dance. We had breakdance, martial arts, contemporary and ballet. Ash was the guy with the martial arts. But because we needed moves that men can relate to, we also had a mixed martial arts specialist come in and did a workshop for all 4 of them, and we used that especially for one section of the choreography.

When I did the casting of 'Macho' I wanted dancers an audience of all ages could relate to. They were different. There was amazing dancers came for the auditions, but I wanted relatable guys who Joe Public would say, 'I could be like him.' Dance isn't about entertaining people, but about showing that everyone is capable of doing something. It's a great medium for helping people believe in themselves. Getting men to talk is difficult, but expressing themselves through movement steps things forward in a right direction. Some things are easier to talk about than others. They don't find it easy to talk to other men about their personal struggles - it's a pride thing. "Man up!" we are told.

*In 'Macho' are the guys dancing to the spoken voice? that can be such a powerful thing to explore...*

'Macho' is a piece with the spoken word in there, and music throughout. We went to the Waddington Centre in Durham, (a mental health resource centre in Durham) and one of the groups that meets there is the 'CREE' group. The word 'cree' means a pigeon shed, so the name came from that as a traditional meeting point for men, where they might talk. I went down and proposed the idea to them. I said, 'We'd like to hear your stories, confidentially. Both good and bad experiences.' Each dancer based his case-study, his particular character, on one of those men. The dancers were pulling stuff out of their own journey, but with the case-study as a springboard. 30 of the men from the CREE group came to the premiere - it was quite an emotional night. There were tears and conversations. We opened that evening with performances from 2 all-boy dance-groups. Then the performance of 'Macho' begins with home-movies of our dancers when they were little to represent the innocence of childhood, before we take the audience on a narrative journey exploring the darker subject that is mental health.





## Michael Heatley ... continued

### *The initial 4 guys you worked with on 'Macho'?*

They were all in their 20s, young professional dancers. I'd really wanted 4 working-class north-east lads. 2 of them weren't exactly that, but they had qualities that I wanted. There was a rapport...

The studio is an open place where you can 'lay everything on the table'. People who've had no dance wouldn't realise how open you have to be. A lot of performers are very insecure people. But my work is very thought-provoking, so I need performers who are willing to go to that place. It's not about technique. 'Macho' is not about dancers looking pretty on-stage at all! Well, mental health isn't a pretty topic, is it?

'Macho' was originally done with four guys, but recently we've been trying it with just two. It was more economical. I am wanting to take it to the States.

### **'suitcases'**

*Michael, before lockdown you were busy with your forthcoming show 'Suitcases' ( the 2nd part of the trilogy you spoke of)*

We did indoor and outdoor performances to promote 'Suitcases' and were doing workshops. But it's been quite a journey ... *and the research and emotional preparation involved a physical journey, too.*

I am collaborating with a photographer called Jon Crispin from Massachusetts, taking inspiration from his Willard Suitcases exhibition. So I travelled to America, and met up with him, and was filmed as part of a documentary on his project. We went together to Willard Asylum. 60 buildings there were used as a mental asylum. Some now are derelict, some buildings are gone, and part of what remains is now a prison focused on treatment for drug-addicted convicts. In its days as an asylum, people were put in there for ridiculous reasons: they were immigrants or accused of homosexuality, some were women who'd been traumatised by losing a child at birth. They were sent to this place. One was a nurse from Edinburgh. Jon Crispin has spent the last 7 years photographing all of the actual Willard suitcases discovered in 1995 in a Willard attic, the cases people arrived with. The cast of performers for 'Suitcases' has been hand-chosen for being raw, fearless - then there's no sugar-coating.



### **father and son**

*You are known for teaching boys and young men. How did that work come about, and develop?*

There was a Boyz Only class at Dance City I taught for 10 years. It had 34 lads at its height, and every Saturday I noticed the dads dropping them off. And so I asked them to get involved. All of them said, Yes. So I had Dads and Lads with 16 dads and their sons on stage. It was back in 2005, I think. And then I had another group with 4 dads and sons who performed at the Junior Great North Run.

I specialised in going into all kinds of schools in the region, delivering workshops for boys. There is an energy that men bring to dance, a rawness that I can incorporate as a choreographer. They have no fear on-stage. Young men from low-culture backgrounds, working class. They have no fear.

In October 2019 Gill Finch from Northumberland County Council had a project in mind, with inspirational male practitioners brought in to do workshops with young boys. So many lads are missing male role models. Sometimes, the dad is now with a second family and all caught up with them, so that he's more or less missing from the first set of kids. They would pilot this project in primary schools, and came to me because of 'Macho' to ask about doing dance.

It's to be continued yet, hopefully as a three year project with all boys in Northumberland schools, leading up to a performance at The Maltings, in a "celebrating all-male arts in Northumberland" festival.

## Michael Heatley ... continued

### inspiration and choreography

We're here to create thought-provoking emotive work that engages people not normally involved in dance. As practitioners we get to learn from them. People are our inspiration – that's how we get ideas to create more works. My work is all about people. . (And we all sort of watch each other, though most of us don't think about it too much.) I'm definitely a people-watcher – when I see a film, when I'm on the bus or on the train. It's not consciously, but we as human beings are being choreography on a daily basis.

*These interviews tell our guys that their dance can matter, be authentic, but also push at boundaries - and have a larger impact.*

<http://www.hittheground.dance/home.html>

*It is brilliant work you're doing, and I love these trailer videos:*

'Macho' trailer - 2016 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrDkjgo\\_uuc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrDkjgo_uuc)

'Macho' trailer - 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aUsDFbQDMU>

## Kinder Kalsi (UK)

### *the light-bulb man, connecting through Bhangra*

So my dance background is in Bhangra. That is the up-beat dance-style used for weddings, for any social gathering or big occasion. Bhangra is Punjabi in origin. With Partition half of the Punjabi area became Pakistan, and the other half Indian in North India. I use this dance form to fundraise by bringing communities together to have a social evening around food, dressing up and the teaching of Bhangra.

*Years ago I visited Sheffield with a dance-team and came to your youth group. I'll never forget you taught us some basic bhangra moves that could be used on the dance-floor. Each move had a practical action we could think of to memorise it. You had us twisting a wrist above our head as if we were changing a light-bulb - or pushing our hands ahead like we were steering a shopping trolley at the supermarket, then reaching for things from high or low shelves to the side and putting them in the imaginary trolley. I wish I remembered more...*

But, Andy, I reckon it was in 2004 that you brought a team to Deepcar, Sheffield. That changed lots of things for me, by showing me what could be achieved through dance. You got me taking risks. You taught dances to our team,



then you and your team came with us, and had us dancing out in the city even at night. Getting us performing immediately in front of people as part of the experience... We took a tent out onto one of the housing estates and taught dance with the local kids there. You touched our hands and bare feet with oil before we went out, and that raised our awareness that we were using the dance to bring peace to the places we visited or an infectious joy to those we met.

*What sort of groups do you usually work with, Kinder?*

In a primary school we could have the whole school together with 200 kids up dancing. In secondary schools I'll have classes of 20 or 30 at a time, and we talk about culture, and answer questions, as well as getting them dancing. I can be present at some other event and when people turn to greet each other if they see me and recognise me they'll hold their hand in the air and twist it, like changing a light-bulb!

*What gives you the most joy in all this?*

For me, what I love is watching people who say, "I can't dance... I don't want to... I'm not interested... I'd just be embarrassed". But they've come to an event anyway, and the Bhangra music gets to them, and their shoulders start to move!

## **Andy Paton (Northern Ireland)** *availABILITY - (with Luminous Soul)*

*What have you learnt from working as part of a very diverse group of dancers?*

I've learnt that everyone can dance. There's no-one that cannot dance. It's a state of mind. If I was to choreograph a sequence, and there were people in the room who couldn't do exactly what I'd done we would make up a version for them that's possible and equivalent, and use all those versions together.

We're all 'restricted' in different ways, by our self-image or inexperience...

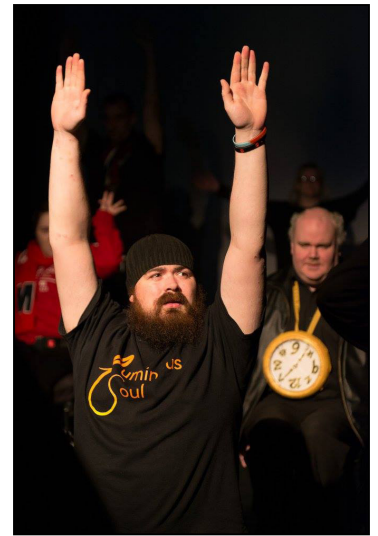
... the fear of being ridiculed

... or the prison of our own set patterns and ways of doing things!

*What was your first exposure to dance?*

With Royston Maldoom. I grew up in quite a rough area, the largest Loyalist housing estate in Northern Ireland: Rathcoole. So it wasn't the done thing to be a male dancer. It would be more expected of me to get a job as a welder or something. After some persuasion, Royston said, 'If you want to come into the class and do it, that's OK, but if you're in the room you'll have to do the work, not distract or discourage other people.'

So eventually I was asked back to assist with future workshops so that people could see this wasn't a girlie thing, and so guys could see from what I was modelling how powerful their dance could be.



*Are you aware of physical touch in a different way because of these experiences?*

You have to respect everyone that's in the room. Sometimes people are reluctant to touch, or unhappy about people casually or randomly touching them. Once you start working with them a while, especially with 'contact improvisation', they become easier with it. The trust is built up slowly and steadily. Those experiences carry through for all of us in some way in our normal interactions in life outside the dance-space. Half the battle is getting someone in the room for the first time.

## **Matt Caulfield (UK)** *Relax and enjoy, it flows more easily (Scottish Country Dancing)*

*Matt, how long have you been dancing? And how did you get started?*



About 14 years. Me and my wife Margaret, heard there was a class in the village teaching Scottish Country Dancing. For my wife and I it mattered that this dancing was something we could do together. There's local dances in the area about once a month in different places, usually with live bands. There's classes all over the place, so some folk from further afield will travel to come to each other's dances. It's a good social event, and keeps us fit at the same time!

*Do you have particular favourites amongst the choreographies?*

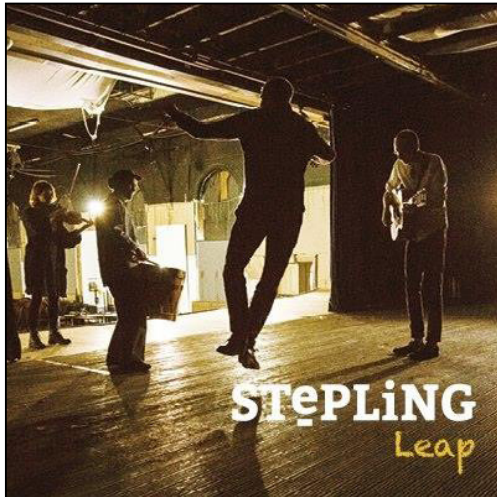
I like 5-couple dances, because in those everyone is usually moving at all times, but doing different parts of the sequence. Once you learn

most of the movements you can relax. If I'm going to a dance I go on to YouTube and watch each dance being done to refresh my memory.



## Toby Bennett (UK)

### *Stepping out - in yer clogs!*



*Toby, is dance how you manage to make a living?*

Yes, I have been a professional dancer and a dance educator for many years working in Belgium as a dancer and on the faculty at the University of Roehampton Dance Department.

*In some traditional dancing there are some figures or styles of dance that are only done by men. Is that the case in the forms of dance you specialise in?*

Well, I wouldn't say that step dancing is particularly gendered: there are no gendered roles that I'm aware of, and both men and women dance the same steps.. I sometimes get into more freestyle "dance offs", though, and one of my favourite dancers to do this with is Simon Harmer, an amazing step dancer who mainly dances in shoes in a very improvisational style. That kind of dance off can feel quite competitive,

almost like a series of challenges, but I think we tend to dance in a more playful way together. I also love dancing solo with one musician, as a duet really. One of my favourite musicians to work with is Scott Hartley, a great traditional fiddle player. In performance, we feel there's a certain sense of intimacy in the way we work together. It's really important to me that when working with one musician we can see each other, not that we necessarily look at each other all the time - the communication that being able to see each other allows is really important.

*Most dancers rarely contribute sound in a significant way during a performance, but tap dancers, clog dancers and flamenco dancers all do. You're about to tour with Stepling who've just released an album called 'Leap'. How is it to collaborate with other musicians by contributing your dancing as the percussion?*

That's an interesting question. As a percussive dancer I have become highly aware of the intersection between music and dance, often a false dichotomy but particularly so in percussive dance. Working as a member of a band really highlights this and has made me focus a lot on working as a musician rather than a dancer. I find that it changes according to which piece we are playing in Stepling, sometimes I'm working in a much more conventional "stage dancing" mode with the visual component of the dance really highlighted, in other pieces I'll be focussing much more on how the sound is integrating with the rest of the ensemble and less focussed on the visual variety. This means that sometimes I will be centre stage but at other times more integrated in the group so we can have much more of a musical interaction. Stepling is interesting as we have a percussionist (Jo May) as well as a foot percussionist (me) and I have learnt a lot working with her, including on a duet between the two of us. We're also beginning to think more about how the whole band interacts and moves about in a more choreographic way, so I suppose we're taking the dance into the music as well as vice versa.



Some dancers become discouraged when they have to wait forever for opportunities, and feel rejected. Don't wait around like that. Let your dance grow and become stronger. Don't be hemmed in by someone else's lack of vision. That is too small a world for us to inhabit. Grow your gift, and if someday they come looking for you, you'll have a world of experience to draw on. - Andy Raine

## **Dennis Junior Wachepa (UK)** *being a Dancing Man*

*You started dancing, influenced by movies and YouTube videos.*

I didn't realise I was getting good. It was just the love of it, of the dance and of the music. It was helping me process big changes that were happening in my life. Other people started to recognise how good I was getting. I was just enjoying it. Then a friend who was in a dance-crew invited me to a competition. Not knowing the result, but just wanting to enjoy the day, I ended up winning the whole competition.

*What's that thing inside which connects to dance or which is unlocked by dance...*

I love vibrations, and the way things feel. My mind and my body automatically wants to respond to that feeling. But it's been a journey to understand what that feeling is, because at first when I learnt to dance it was all on my own.



*So is there a danger you lose that initial impulse as other people interact with your dance?*

The biggest danger is that you lose yourself in trying to please other people.

*What do you do to keep yourself authentic and vulnerable?*

You show yourself to people slowly. Something I've been learning for a while is this: you can see vulnerability in a person when you see how they move.

## **Royston Maldoom (Germany)** *Learning to dance with unfamiliar others*

*Royston, you work through dance in many countries, with all kinds of disparate groups.*

Cultural differences are rarely a challenge for me: I see our common humanity, and work with that. I believe too much emphasis on difference only leads to conflict in our societies.

In a school, participants usually don't have a choice. The resistant ones are usually boys, but not always. They have that chance to be obstructive at first, as their way of feeling authentic - then it's my job to win them over and convince them! I actually prefer that challenge, and very rarely have drop-outs. The most resistant participants often end up being the most enthusiastic, maybe because they took the biggest journey to a new self-discovery.

Sometimes the group can be women or men in prison, caught up in the criminal justice system - or people living in conflict zones. I've worked in about 30 countries, many during times of social upheaval. I made a performance to Górecki's 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs' music composed for those who lost loved ones in the Holocaust, which we dedicated to the displaced Croatian women of Vukovar who I met, and Muslim widows of Srebrenica who lost all their men in a massacre by the Serbs. You see, I met women who'd lost their men. In Peru 3 years ago, I made a piece, for the Ballet San Marcos, a company I have worked with since 1974, entitled 'Desaparacidos' (The Disappeared) for International Women's Day, dedicated to women, especially in Latin America, whose men were kidnapped under Fascist regimes and whose fate and whereabouts are still not known or explained to this day.



## Royston Maldoom ... continued

*You respond to whatever's going on, and bring what you've got, who you are...*

Nearly every project in Europe involves people in exile, usually as a matter of policy - or sometimes because they happen to be there and make up a large proportion of the available people. As with all my projects, everyone is welcome. My most recent projects were:

\* 'Taken' about Palestinian children in Israeli prisons, for the opening of the Bethlehem International Performing Arts festival,

\* 'Men At War', and 'Identity' for a theatre Company in Gaza.

\* 'Exile' in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank, with 100+ kids, Muslim and Christian, from villages, towns and refugee camps

I see my work as dealing with conflict and resolution, and 'Exile' is typical of my work. I have presented it also in Germany, Austria and Luxembourg, all places learning to deal with a rapidly changing demographic. If we can dance together, we can live together.

During the month following Nelson Mandela's election, I was in Durban Kwazulu, and tasked with creating a piece for children and teenagers from the various townships together with white kids. I chose to recreate an earlier work, 'Carmina Burana' by Carl Orff, involving for them an unfamiliar dance-style, unfamiliar music, unfamiliar history. But I believe the themes of oppression, resistance, love, and of fate versus individual decisions, are universal. The first member of the audience to approach me in the foyer after the performance said, "How did you understand so well the situation we black people face here in South Africa?"

When you make a piece of work you have to make it what you want to make. If you are passionate enough about it, then your dancers will respond to that passion, and will relate to you and your ideas.. You must be yourself, passionate and knowledgeable. These things inspire confidence, especially in young people. Don't make it easy, don't patronise, - CHALLENGE them!. Kids may resist at first (that's what kids are supposed to do) But if they feel you are authentic, you will gain their trust.



I've learned not to assume that I understand where people are coming from. I try not to know too much before I start a project. Sometimes I make a choice - with men in prison or with street-kids - that I don't want to get to know their individual histories, unless they choose to share them with me. They are not to be categorised, but treated as

unique individuals. There's great value in letting participants take off the rucksack of past experiences, and just be themselves, re-present themselves.

I did workshops with a group of new arrivals in Berlin last year. They had joined a theatre group created to tell their stories, but all their presentations were concerned with 'being a refugee'. People didn't understand what they had been through, but also tended to see them only through their 'refugee' status, so they couldn't get past that label. They said working with me was the first time they felt they were not part of someone else's social experiment, but allowed to be themselves as individuals, who happened to also be in Exile.

I try not to know too much before I start a project. By being in the moment, in a room for the first time with 30, 50, 100 or 200 individuals, I just focus on the choreographic performance-making process. Just working together, we get a sense of each other, and develop a relationship based in the reality of the moment.. My work gets lots of raised eyebrows from the Arts, education and social work community, but I never stop working, so I must be getting something right!.

*You've done some exciting work with men.*

Yes, and some of the men I work with are pretty TOUGH. I need to put them at their ease, and then go where they're at. I do very physical stuff with them so they feel safe - for the first half hour - using strength. Then I bring them to where I want them to be: strong, but sensitive. In a young offenders institute, or in Croatia, or with



## Royston Maldoom ... continued

long-term unemployed, I have worked with Górecki's music, 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs', on a choreography entitled 'Men at War'. They're excited at the title, but then slowly they discover those 'men at war' are men who are lonely, missing their mother, frightened, often traumatised. So in a room with only other men present, we start exploring how far a man can go with another man to receive comfort: rolling, holding, touching.

*How did you find your way into this kind of dance-work, initially?*

I'd gone from school to an apprenticeship in Watford's Town Planning department, then into farming as a cowman in a remote part of Wales. So these days when people ask me, How do you manoeuvre all those dancers around the stage? I say, You obviously don't know what my previous experience was. Have you ever tried getting 50 cows into a milking parlour?

At 22 years of age, I saw a film 'An Evening with the Royal Ballet', featuring Rudolf Nureyev. I came out from watching that film, and said, 'I'm going to be a dancer.' I was already 22 years old when I started training and I was in a rush: I just kept moving on.

I slipped into Community Dance by accident in Scotland. Although I have always been a political person, as a professional choreographer my politics had only extended to my choreographic themes: what I did, not where and with whom I did it. I was asked to lead a small group of local adult dance enthusiasts for their once-a-week creative session. At first, I was not too happy at having to work with 'amateurs', but soon I really started to enjoy it. I'd work as the choreographer on maybe 4 or 5 pieces at a time. My work gets lots of raised eyebrows from the Arts, education and social work community, but I never stop working, so I must be getting something right!.

*There was one project that was filmed..*

After 20 years, suddenly, everything changed, at break-neck speed.. Sir Simon Rattle took up the directorship of Berlin's Philharmonic Orchestra. He said, 'I'd love to start with 250 kids, and The Rites of Spring, in an old bus station with a full orchestra, but I need a choreographer.' Richard McNichol, who I'd worked with before in Britain, said, 'I know someone who could do that.' 'Get him over here immediately,' said Simon. They'd said, 'We'll make a TV film about the project.'

*The film, 'RHYTHM IS IT' is great! and it was a sudden media sensation!*

I thought the film would be an unnoticed thing, but it went out in the cinema, in the German-speaking countries. At the international Berlinale Film Festival it won the 'Lola Award' for best documentary. Overnight I was inundated - the 'STAR CHOREOGRAPHER' was wanted by press, TV and radio. And the cameras were there, wherever I was. The fuss was crazy. My life turned upside-down, with little time to adjust. But it gave me a voice, and that gave community dance a voice in the German-speaking world, then in other countries. It was very strange to adapt to, and very intrusive. Yet suddenly I was asked to give lectures to educators and psychologists, neurologists, sponsoring organisations and charities. They all wanted to hear about the 'new thing' called COMMUNITY DANCE.

I'd always wanted to live in Berlin, even on my first visit, in the mid-80s when the Wall was still up. Now I had the opportunity, so in 2006 I moved here. It is a great city. There were other benefits: a decent income, good work. I'd have laughed to think that at 77 years of age I'd be still travelling and working, often with back-to-back projects around the world.

*Royston, you're in the enforced quiet of this Covid crisis...*

Now, during this pandemic, after 20 years of working non-stop with projects, and with hundreds of people of all ages, abilities, and economic, ethnic and faith backgrounds, I have time to reflect... I'm loving self-isolation. I have a balcony, a spacious apartment, and for now, I am content to rest.

*And any parting words?*

Something I said to the kids in the film 'Rhythm Is It':

Don't think we are just doing dance....you can change your life in a dance class!