

25 September 2014 Last updated at 01:18

Vibrations from floor help deaf dance troupe keep time



By Emma Tracey
BBC News, Ouch

The autobiographical dance show which tells audiences of experiences unique to deaf people.

"I ran over to the piano and put my hand on it to feel the vibrations of the music," remembers Mark Smith. Diagnosed as deaf at four years old, his first encounter with rhythm and dance was at his sister's ballet class.

Smith couldn't hear the music but was able to establish a rhythm from what he could feel. He says: "I began to copy the movements and the teacher encouraged me to join." He went on to study dance at degree level and has worked as a choreographer for the past 20 years. Now Smith uses those early experiences to teach other deaf people how to dance.

In the absence of a piano, Smith encourages his students to place their hand on a speaker to experience the pulses from the audio. "The vibrations move through their arms and into their bodies," he says. And when the students move away from direct contact with the sound, they maintain contact with the rhythm via the vibrations in the wooden floor. "That's why we always dance barefoot," he adds.

In 2010, Smith formed an all-male ensemble which he calls Deaf Men Dancing. It is made up of four professional dancers with varying levels of hearing loss.

He says deaf people are constantly alert to visual cues throughout the day and so his dancers are naturally tuned to what the others are doing, rather than taking cues directly from the music. He believes that this ability makes deaf dancers better at communicating with each other on stage than hearing dancers.

Deaf Men Dancing's latest show Hear! Hear! looks at hidden or little-known aspects of deafness in a way that Smith hopes a hearing audience will be able to relate to.

He integrates British Sign Language, an artistic device he often uses in his shows. But instead of dancers making the shapes with their hands, the whole body plays a part. He says that deaf and hearing dancers interpret the movements differently.

Having more connections with the language, he observes that deaf dancers tend to perform his routines with lots of emotion whereas hearing dancers are strong at the more technical side.

The show also plunders Smith's childhood memories. His first hearing aid was a big box which attaches to the chest with a harness. Dancers wear these during the performance, which he says is a very visible badge of deafness and "gives them a bit of a superhero look".

The music in Hear! Hear! is encoded with sounds and patterns which aren't usually known to people with typical hearing. The first act includes noises that people with tinnitus commonly hear from Deafboy One, a singer and guitar player who is hard of hearing. The score for the second act, by Michael England, is a piece of electronic classical music based on Smith's own hearing test charts -

he struggles to hear high frequency sounds like birdsong, dripping taps and rustling leaves. The second time the melody is played the higher frequencies are taken away, giving the audience a sense of how he hears music.

Deaf Men Dancing perform Hear! Hear! at Sadler's Wells on Sunday 28 September as part of the [=dance series](#).

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