

FEATURE: DEAF MEN DANCING

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What happens if you put six deaf men, with six different dance backgrounds, together in a rehearsal studio? Hannah Wheeler discovered an exciting fusion of contemporary, classical and commercial dance, incorporating sign language, into a rich and diverse movement vocabulary when she went to see Deaf Men Dancing in rehearsal recently...



Mark Smith is one of the country's rising new choreographic talents and is the founder and Artistic Director of **Deaf Men Dancing**. Having been born deaf after his mother contracted German measles during pregnancy, Mark learnt to communicate using speech therapy, lip-reading and Sign Support English, a commonly used form of sign language. However, it was through dance that Mark felt he could communicate best. Without the needs for words, he found dance an important outlet for emotions and thoughts, and decided early on in his life, that dance would become his career. Mark graduated from **London Studio Centre** in 1991, and has spent the last six years teaching dance at a variety of colleges including **Millennium Performing Arts**, **Bodywork Studio** and **Urdang Academy**.

Earlier this year Mark contacted **Denny Haywood**, **Joseph Fletcher**, **Kevin Jewell**, **Jacob Casselden** and **Anthony Snowdon** to see how they would feel about working together. All profoundly deaf, and at different stages of their careers, Mark was excited by the opportunity to draw upon their varying dance styles, whilst working with the common thread of being deaf male dancers. Having never worked together before, the chance to form a company, and use their individual experiences to support and educate each other was no doubt appealing. All the dancers signed up, and spent two weeks in research and development at Millennium Performing Arts' studio generosity provided by **The Dancers' Development Fund** in Woolwich, London.

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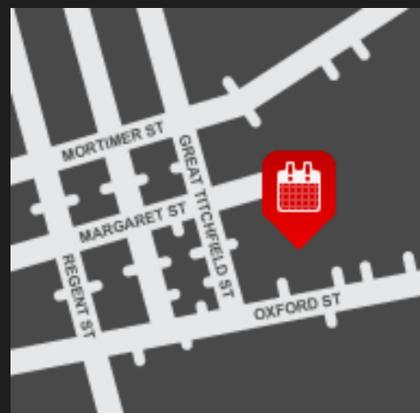
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Mark's own struggle in becoming a professional dance artist has meant that he has always felt a close affinity to other deaf performers, and he has a keen interest in deaf arts. Whilst there are many disabled dancers now working professionally, primarily in companies such as **Candoco** and **StopGap**, there has been less awareness of work being created by deaf artists. By using five deaf men, who are all strong technical dancers, Mark wants to show the public that they are no different to hearing dancers. He hopes that the variety of the choreography, the varying tempos and complex musicality, and the fact that sign language is incorporated into the essence of the movement, rather than acting as a commentary to the narrative, will challenge perceptions that deaf people can't dance.

Mark feels that if he had the opportunity to dance in a company like Deaf Men Dancing when he left college 19 years ago, it would have given him a great deal of confidence in his abilities. Whilst he has enjoyed success as a dance teacher and choreographer, performance opportunities for deaf dancers are hard to come by. ***“Networking is so difficult for deaf dancers”*** he says. ***“The opportunity to mix in dance circles and chat to the people you'd like to work with in the future is incredibly difficult, and it is this, rather than lack of talent, that is often an obstacle to deaf dancers progressing to become professional performers.”***

So for **Joseph Fletcher** and **Anthony Snowdon**, taking part in Deaf Men Dancing is likely to be a pivotal point in their careers. Having only just graduated from **SLP College** and **Performer's College**, this chance to share skills and learn from a range of dancers, all of whom can identify with the struggle faced by deaf performers, is a very welcome opportunity. Joseph always wanted to work with other deaf male dancers, but had never met any until Mark came to teach classes at Millennium College. Like the other company members he is understandably excited about his involvement.



Kevin Jewell, one of the more experienced members of the group worked previously with **Signdance Collective**, a company established in 1987, and lead by deaf and physically disabled artists, blending dance, theatre, live music, sign language and film. He says: ***“I hope that this research project will be able to give the time for deaf dancers to communicate and create work***

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that can be seen by others in the wider community. It will allow for the development of our ideas and styles in the creation of a truly accessible piece.”

Denny Haywood is a successful commercial dancer who has performed in productions including **ZooNation’s *Into the Hoods***, with **Kate Prince**. Denny is particularly keen to see how sign language can be incorporated into hip hop dance. Jacob Casselden is an actor and dancer, and has appeared in stage and television productions including the BBC’s **Pride and Prejudice, Casualty** and **Soundproof**. This mix of talent and skills gives the company a fascinating creative edge.

Interest in Deaf Men Dancing is growing rapidly, as people realise that something fresh and exciting is being created. The essence of the company practice is to use sign language as an inherent part of the creative process and integrate it into the movement vocabulary, rather than use it as an additional element of the performance. The process for the dancers begins with signing the lyrics of the music to one another, yet this is where the direct interpretation finishes. From there elements of the signing they have used are teased out and drawn into something uniquely beautiful. Small hand gestures become motifs within the choreography that emphasise the emotion and lyrical quality of the accompanying music. Working with this level of detail means that no movements are taken for granted, they aren’t fillers between key phrases, but are incredibly detailed explorations of the musical score.

Watching the company in rehearsals it is clear that the emotional connection to the dance, generated by the use of sign language, creates an honest and personal quality to the work. A simple hand gesture becomes absorbed into the body, and is then exaggerated into something much bolder, whilst retaining the subtleties and specifics of the original movement.

Deaf Men Dancing has become a platform highlighting the talents of each of its’ members. Whilst Mark is the mastermind behind this creation, its development is a true collaboration between the dancers, with each inputting their own elements and styles into the choreography. This collaborative process has led to a unique fusion of styles. Mark says: ***“During the first week of rehearsals we each took it in turns to lead the warm-ups. This is a chance for us to get to know each other better and to communicate with each other physically, rather than verbally.”***



The strong relationship between the dancers is evident as they rely on each other for visual clues, rather than being able to use musical cues. Perhaps it is this level of attention and cooperation that creates the sense of unity amongst the company, that might only normally be found with dancers that have worked together for many years.

Of course, the ability of deaf dancers to adapt to the limitations presented to them by their hearing impairments, and to master their own interpretations of the musical accompaniment that they cannot hear is not a new phenomenon. **Moshe Efrati** is an Israeli choreographer, and founder and artistic director of the **Kol**

Demama Dance Company, based in Tel Aviv. A former member of **Batasheva Dance Company** and a student of **Martha Graham**, Efrati devised a method to train deaf dancers to work with other dancers, and formed a company integrating 10 dancers with hearing impairments, and 10 without. Efrati cued the dancers by pounding on a board on the floor, or used one of the dancers to stomp cues on the floor, creating a vibration that could be picked up by the dancers feet.

Nijinsky is also said to have used this method to give his dancers their musical cues during their performances of **Stravinsky's Rite of Spring**, as the rhythms were too complex for the performers to follow. Deaf dancers are able to follow musical patterns and keep in time with each other using a variety of methods such as eye contact, physical contact, peripheral awareness of each others' movements, lighting cues and feeling the vibration of strong bass notes in music.

Deaf Men Dancing uses these methods of musical exploration superbly, and Mark has had an enthusiastic response from guests at the company's first public viewing. Since their presentation showcase, at **Graeae Theatre Company's award-winning venue**, **Deaf Men Dancing has been invited to perform at *DanceEast's 1st Anniversary Gala**, on 25 September. The company is also looking for opportunities to perform their full-length show and hope to deliver a range of educational workshops for deaf and hearing young people, at schools and colleges around the South East.

Meanwhile Mark has been busy working on the new dance revue ***Shoes***, which premiered recently at **Sadler's Wells** and will move to the Peacock Theatre in the West End next February. Composed by **Richard Thomas** and directed by **Stephen Mear**, Mark was invited to create a shoe-inspired piece, for this toe-tappingly energetic production, along with other leading choreographers **Aletta Collins, Kate Prince** and **Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui**.

Deaf Men Dancing photos by Rog Palmer.

*See Deaf Men Dancing's [youtube channel](#)

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