



Hear! Hear!

Deaf Men Dancing

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How did you come to establish Deaf Men Dancing (DMD)?

The idea for [Deaf Men Dancing \(/artists/profiles/deaf-men-dancing/\)](#) (DMD) came to me in late 2009. I was often asked if I was the only deaf dancer, but I knew other dancers out there who were, like me, passionate about dance and also deaf. I often wondered what would happen if I put them all together in a room. I was also inspired by the idea of an all-male dance company / production like Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake, Lea Anderson's The Featherstonehaughs and Ballet Boyz. What would it be like if they all wore hearing aids? So that's how I got the idea for Deaf Men Dancing.

I wrote to Anthony Snowden, Denny Haywood, Jacob Casselden, Joseph Fletcher and Kevin Jewell to suggest working together. I was interested to see what we could develop especially with the very different dance backgrounds and training that we have. I wanted to blend our different styles together and incorporate sign language into the choreography. Their response was positive and they were keen to be involved.

Our first step together was a two-week research and development workshop at Millenium Performing Arts who donated studio space as part of the Dancers' Development Fund. The guys got on so well – on the first day it was as if we had known each other for years! This connection is the basis for our collaboration and the unique work we produce; it's a very supportive vibe.

It was important for us to get feedback to see if the work could go further. We invited an audience of professionals to a first presentation of our work at [Graeae \(/artists/profiles/graeae-theatre-company/\)](#)'s Bradbury Studios – including people from Sadler's Wells, East London Dance, Brighton Dome & Festival, Candoco, Fuel, South East Dance, Arts Depot, RSC and Matthew Bourne. We were so nervous but we wanted to blow them away. We got very positive and encouraging feedback which gave us the confidence to push forward and start making our dream happen. That's when Deaf Men Dancing was born.

Since then we've been invited to open Act2 at DanceEast's 1st Anniversary Gala (the Royal Ballet and the Danish Royal Ballet also performed there) and we've shown work at The Place, New Wolsey Theatre's Pulse Fringe Festival, City Lit's Deaf Day, Cloud Dance Festival and Clin d'Oeil Deaf Art International Festival in France, amongst others.

We were honoured to be invited to perform at Candoco's 20th Anniversary Cabaret. I have a lot of respect for [Candoco Dance Company \(/artists/profiles/candoco-dance-company/\)](#) because they broke down the barrier and changed people's perspective of disabled dancers. I received a commission from WithoutWalls to direct and choreograph an outdoor production called *Alive!* which was a collaboration with visual artist [Rachel Gadsden \(/artists/profiles/rachel-gadsden/\)](#), produced by Greenwich + Dockland International Festival. We were invited to perform *Alive!* at Canterbury Cathedral to mark the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities and DMD's involvement with the Cultural Olympiad.

Anthony Snowden and I enjoyed participating in [Unlimited Access \(/collaborations/2014/unlimited-access/\)](#) at [Zagreb Dance Week \(http://www.danceweekfestival.com/en/\)](#) in May because I was keen to promote myself as an artist and Deaf Men Dancing in a European context. It was an opportunity to meet other artists and companies working with dance and disability in Europe. I was interested to hear about their experiences and compare it to mine and that of DMD in the UK. I really enjoyed taking part in the workshop led by Stine Nielsen, co-artistic director from Candoco. Because I also work as a workshop leader and teacher, I learnt a lot through how she led the workshop with different participants who had diverse needs and abilities, and how she shared her knowledge and experience with the participants. We still have a long way to go but I feel we've achieved a lot with deaf and disabled dance in the UK.

How would you describe the work of Deaf Men Dancing?

I'd say our work is a blend of different styles of dance with sign-language incorporated into the choreography, which creates work that is unique, interesting and original. Because between us we have a variety of dance backgrounds, we create a fusion of contemporary, classical and commercial dance, incorporating sign language into a rich and diverse movement vocabulary.

The essence of my work is to use sign language as an inherent part of the creative process and integrate it into the movement vocabulary, rather than use it 'simply' as a commentary of the performance. Small hand gestures become motifs within the choreography that emphasise the emotion and lyrical quality of the accompanying music or spoken words. 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. 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.

What was your experience in terms of accessibility to training or a dance education?

I was late diagnosed as deaf when I was four. The only word I spoke was 'Mum'. Through speech therapy at primary school and my mother's encouragement, my speech improved and I developed lots of new words. That's when I started wearing hearing aids. I began dancing when I was four years old - I used to stand at the back of my older sister's dance class and copy what they were doing. I was fascinated by how the students danced in time with music and I wanted to join in, it's how I became hooked on dance. When I got my hearing aids, it was the first time I discovered music - I would feel the vibration from the piano or touch the speakers playing recorded music and I could feel the rhythm travelling through my arms or feet, but I also then developed a sense of timing and beat to keep the music flowing through my body whilst I'm dancing. My hearing aids helped to amplify the music or sound.

I hear best on low to middle frequency. I follow very well on heavy beat and low deep sounds. I learned to cope in dance classes by following the teacher's demonstration, copying her movements. I developed my own sense of timing and relied a lot on counting to keep in time with others. I watched carefully to pick up cues, following other dancers in time and also building an awareness of my spacing and position. I developed a good sense of rhythm through tap dance, learning to feel the clarity and beats from my feet travelling into my body.

I studied at various dance schools and then I auditioned and was accepted to be junior associate at the Royal Ballet School. I learned so much there. It taught me discipline and gave me good solid training in ballet that helped improve my technique. I was asked if I would like to go to White Lodge but I was unable to go because they couldn't provide access support like one to one lessons and communicators. You've got to remember that this was in early 1980. Nowadays, by law they have to provide access support for deaf students.

When I left school, I trained for three years at Bridget Espinosa's London Studio Centre to become a professional dancer. I studied all forms of dance at the college which helped to stretch me as a dancer and develop more techniques, it also increased the chance of me getting work. I didn't have specific access support but I coped very well on my own, the staff was supportive and aware of my hearing impairment and needs. I loved my three years at LSC. It changed my life and I have very fond memories of my time there.

How do you find audiences respond to your work?

It's always been a very positive response. Audiences enjoy watching DMD performing and the dancers' individuality. Each dancer has a strong personality, a strong individual look and different dance background yet they performed very well in unity – that's been an element of the feedback we have had, that perhaps marks us out from other companies. I think that's what makes us interesting to watch. We've created a special bond. We have a lot in common: we are all professional highly trained dancers who are all deaf and have worked in many professional jobs. We are all passionate about dance. We understand each other and know how we work during rehearsals/performances, we don't have to explain. We just get on with it and work hard! We always support each other and give encouragement, it's very collaborative. We inspire each other with great ideas. Most importantly, we always have fun together and we make each other laugh. We've created our own unique DMD world!

What advice would you give to young disabled artists starting out?

Work hard on your vision/dream, never give up and believe in yourself. Don't listen to other people's negative view or comments about you and your work. My motto is 'Work Hard and Be Nice To People.'

And finally, what's coming up next for Deaf Men Dancing?

Our next project is **Hear! Hear!** at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on Sunday 28th September as part of [=DANCE](http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2014/equalsdance-dmd/) (<http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2014/equalsdance-dmd/>), a year-round programme of work by deaf and disabled artists and companies. Hear! Hear! will be performed at Lilian Baylis Studio.

It's a piece that explores very personal and intimate ideas about being deaf, expressed through the dancers' personal experiences and aims to convey something of that to the audience. For the first time we worked with two new collaborators on this piece: Caroline Parker MBE, a deaf actress and sign-song performer whose unique style of signing we have incorporating into our choreography, and Deafboyone, a deaf songwriter who also has tinnitus, and who created the music for Hear Hear! We wanted to push boundaries and change people's perspective of deaf-dance.

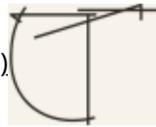


Mark Smith in the studio

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