

2 February 2015

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Mark Smith: choreographer

By: Georgia Snow

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Mark Smith. Photo: Roy Tan

Fed up with people thinking he was the only deaf man to be a dancer, Mark Smith founded Deaf Man Dancing in 2010. The company fuses dance with sign-language to create a unique form of choreography, and will perform their latest work, Hear! Hear! at Sadler's Wells this month

When did you start dancing?

I was diagnosed as deaf late – I was four. Shortly after being fitted with my first hearing aids, my mother started to take my older sister to dancing classes and I went along with them. I was fascinated and in awe watching the ballet class. Through my new hearing aids, I could suddenly hear the piano as well as feeling the vibration from the floor. It was like a whole world opening up. When I was 10, I got accepted to become junior associate at the Royal Ballet School. When I left senior school, I decided that I wanted to learn all forms of dance, and successfully auditioned for Bridget Espinosa's London Studio Centre where I studied a wide range of dance styles. Since graduating I've performed with dance companies including Firefly, La Ribot and Aaron Williamson Dance Company and have performed and toured in the UK and Europe.

How did DMD come about as a company?

I was often asked, "Are you the only deaf dancer?". It gave me the idea to put together a group of highly trained, experienced, deaf dancers and show people that we're no different to hearing dancers. We work in different way in rehearsals but we perform the same as hearing dancers. I contacted five deaf dancers and asked if they would be interested to do a two-week workshop with me to experiment and develop new work. The workshop was successful and exciting because we

Published
10:00pm
Friday, September 26, 2014

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developed a unique piece of work that became a fusion of different styles of dance with sign-language incorporated into the choreography.

Tell me a bit more about your new show?

Hear! Hear! explores personal and intimate ideas about being deaf, using the company of Deaf Men Dancing's personal experiences. There's lots of humour too and we make serious points in an entertaining way. The music has been modulated, so the audience can experience what it is like to be deaf.

Do you think arts and culture have become more accessible for deaf and hearing-impaired people?

We've still got a long way to go to make dance accessible for deaf and disabled people, but I feel that it's getting better and has improved since 10 years ago. Sadler's Wells' year-long series, =dance, is a wonderful opportunity for deaf and disabled artists and companies to showcase their work to an audience interested in, but not familiar with, deaf and disabled dance. The same applies to deaf and disabled audiences who are not familiar with dance but want to learn more about it.

Hear! Hear! runs at the Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, as part of =dance on September 28.

CV: Mark Smith

Training: Royal Ballet School (1983-86), London Studio Centre (1989-91)

First professional job: D'Arts, Channel 4 (1991)

Agent: Mark Ward, Belfield and Ward

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