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Mark Smith, choreographer

By [Miriam Zendle](#) 31/01/11

Choreographer Mark Smith didn't let being deaf get in the way of his career: his signature style of signdance can currently be seen in Richard Thomas and Stephen Mear's [Shoes](#), and in *Iolanthe*, which transfers to [Wilton's Music Hall](#) in April. He talks about feeling the music and setting up his own company...

I was born deaf and diagnosed as profoundly so when I was four.

Mum used to take my sister to dance school and I'd be dragged along. I watched the kids dancing and felt the vibration of the music at the same time. I used to copy them, dancing at the back of the class – my mother noticed and let me join properly. I was accepted into the [Royal Ballet](#)'s Junior Associates when I was 10, and when I left school I went to London Studio Centre and trained for three years.

I didn't have any deaf artists to look up to and be inspired by when I was young. I grew up to believe that I could go for it and nothing could stop me; it was down to my mother, who encouraged me to follow my dream and never let my deafness hold me back.

Since then, I've worked with dance companies like Firefly and La Ribot and as a teacher and signdance tutor at Urdang Academy, Green Candle Deaf Dance Summer School at Sadler's Wells and Millennium Performing Arts.

I use sign language in my [choreography](#) as a connection with my deafness. It's my signature. As choreographer for *Iolanthe*, I gave the fairies their own language, to show the difference between theirs and the mortal world. The fairies are [ballerinas](#), so I incorporated ballet mime. It was very challenging for the cast, but they worked really hard and I encouraged and supported them until they got it.

I hear through vibration – on a speaker, on the floor – my hearing aid amplifies the sound. With *Iolanthe*, which has a very difficult score, I sat with MD Chris Mundy at the piano, felt the vibration, lip-read what the guys were singing, and followed the words. *Iolanthe* was the most challenging thing I've ever done, and I am proud I achieved it. I felt privileged to be given the opportunity.

I started my company [Deaf Men Dancing](#) (DMD) in August 2010. People often asked whether I was the only deaf dancer in the UK, so I brought together Joseph Fletcher, Denny Haywood, Kevin Jewell, Jacob Casselden, and recent graduate Anthony Snowdon. None of them knew each other but they clicked straightaway. Matthew Bourne came to watch our showcase, and said he'd give his backing and support to us, which is really lovely of him.



DMD later performed alongside the Royal Ballet at Dance East's first anniversary gala in Ipswich. It's a great start and I've since been commissioned by DaDa-South and Without Walls. We communicate through a mix of sign language and lip-reading – Denny found being with other deaf dancers completely new and really interesting. It was really lovely and special to see.

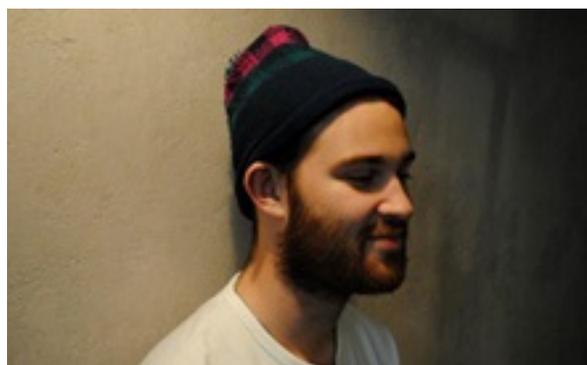
With Shoes [pictured above], choreographer Stephen Mear was looking for diverse styles and felt the music would work with my work. For me as a deaf choreographer, it's something very different, and I think it's the first time that Sadler's Wells has had deaf choreography within their productions. I want to change people's perception of deaf dance – so I'm thrilled about it.

Mark Smith was talking to [Miriam Zendle](#).

Shoes is at the Peacock Theatre from 8 February to 3 April. [Buy tickets now](#).

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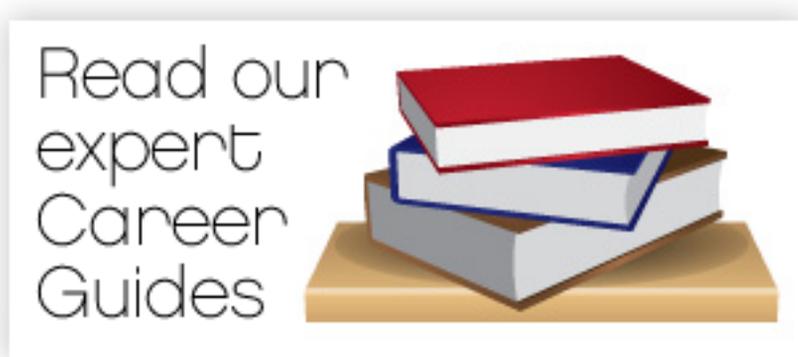
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