

# Always Remembering to Dance

## By Fergus Early



I often feel I have had several careers in dance: early years as a ballet dancer; then studying and teaching at the London School of Contemporary Dance in its early days; then forming the X6 Collective and plunging into new dance practices like contact improvisation and release technique; then founding Chisenhale Dance Space with another collective and meanwhile working regularly as a solo performer, freelance choreographer and Associate Director (Movement) for the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester; and finally, in 1987, setting up Green Candle Dance Company. This last has been by far the longest span so far – now approaching 30 years. When I try to discern the common factor to all these careers, I come up with something a bit vague, like ‘humanity’ or perhaps ‘humanness’. I think I have always been interested in connecting with people and how dance and theatre can do this. I came across an old review of a piece of work I made and performed nearly 40 years ago which says *‘... he has to some extent come to represent a highly defined stance about... the advantages of demystification through simplifying dance presentation, the rewards of keeping contact with the audience without pandering too much to their expectations.’*

Later the reviewer says *‘Early has made the decision to invite people to get to know him through his dancing...’* I don’t find it too hard to reconcile that distant attitude to performing to the work I might do today, teaching, for example, older people in a dance workshop.



Fergus leading a dance session in St Peter's Residential Home, Lambeth London, C Tim Sutton

The story of Green Candle’s involvement with older people begins in 1988. The company had started the year before and we had created two shows, one for children of primary school age and one for early years. Our declared philosophy was (and is) that everyone has the right to experience and enjoy dance, whether by doing or watching it, but that many are denied that right. Pursuing the logic of this, we observed that one major group of people frequently denied the chance to dance was older people. Indeed, in many ways there often seemed to be a conspiracy to restrict older people’s movement to the absolute minimum: ‘Sit there, deep in your wing-back chair and wait for the short walk to your next meal, or to the queue for

medication where you'll get the drugs to keep you quiet till your next dose...' might have characterised a not uncommon attitude. So, determined to promote a radically different approach, we embarked on a new field of work that now, thirty years on, is our largest preoccupation.

At first we were very much on our own. Hardly anyone was seriously working with older people and dance. In London we found the late Stanley Hamilton, who was doing lovely work with older people in care homes, and we asked him to lead us in a couple of workshops. Then we set off on our own. Our first show was called *Your Prayer is Doubled when You Sing* – a direct quote from one of the two women, one Polish and the other Jamaican, on whose lives the show was based – and it showed their extraordinary journeys from their countries of origin to a keep fit group in Hackney where we met them. Then, as now, we accompanied every show with a workshop in which audience members could participate.



Members of the Remember to Dance group demonstrating work at Waltham Forest's celebration of Dementia Awareness c. Fiona Whitty

As time went on, we did somewhat less touring and more participatory work in care homes, sheltered housing and day care centres and in 1995 we formed what is now called the Green Candle Senior Dancers, a performance group for people aged 60 and over. In all this time, we often worked with people living with dementia in mixed groups of older people, with and without dementia. In the last 4 or 5 years, we have become increasingly involved with working with groups all of whose members are living with some degree or variety of dementia. For some years we worked in the nursing home ward of our local hospital and we also ran extended projects in collaboration with Age Exchange and Arts4Dementia. I was keen to set up our own project, which I also saw as an opportunity to conduct a research study. So in the autumn of 2013, with generous support from the Headley Trust, and in partnership with East London NHS Foundation Trust and Tower Hamlets Alzheimer's Society, we launched *Remember to Dance* (R2D).

R2D had 2 strands: one was working weekly for 2 years with people with early- to mid-stage dementia, still living in the community, which we called *Remember to Dance in the Community* (R2DC) and the other was working twice weekly for one year in the Dementia Assessment Unit of Mile End Hospital - *Remember to Dance in Hospital* (R2DH). Both strands were evaluated by Trish Vella-Burrows and Lian Wilson of the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health at Christ Church University, Canterbury, for their impact on the well-being and quality of life of the participants.

The research's conclusions are clear that the dance sessions contributed to enhanced feelings of wellbeing among participants; other factors observed were: increased verbal communication, embodiment, better social interaction, confidence and liveliness. Perhaps more surprisingly, the mean *cognitive* assessment scores for the group members who completed standard ACEII assessments rose significantly from base to endpoint, (and this with a group of people living with dementia over two years), a finding which concurs with other research which suggests a link between dance and maintained cognitive function. The report also recommends the commissioning of a national spread of dance programmes for people affected by

dementia. The full report can be read at [www.greencandle.com/participation/reports](http://www.greencandle.com/participation/reports) and is called *Remember to Dance 2013-15: Evaluating the impact of dance activities for people in different stages of dementia*.

Happily, we secured further funding for the community part of Remember to Dance, so the project is now nearing the end of its third year, with another 2 years assured.

A few things we have observed and absorbed about working with people living with dementia:

- People with all sorts of dementia can continue to learn new things – our R2D group’s skills have grown enormously, in their physical capability, their creativity and their ability to engage with and embody movement ideas over the past 3 years, when you might expect a steady deterioration.
- Live music is a very important component in the success of sessions – so much so that we have made it a company policy that we will only work with people with dementia with live music. For this work, musicians need to have a wide-ranging repertory that embraces different cultural musics, the ability to respond or adapt in an instant and a sense of adventure. It is also very advantageous if they are comfortable with singing and have a wide range of song as this can be a valuable extra element in the make-up of a session.
- While all sessions will include elements of dance practice that improve posture, balance, strength, stamina, flexibility and so on, the most critical element is that the participants are enjoying themselves, having fun and making connections with others in the group. Indeed, I sometimes think that what we aspire to most in a good session is creating something akin to a very good party!

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