

A DANCE A DAY

We look at the continuing resurgence of interest in matters terpsichorean

Whether propelled by the annual distraction of *Strictly Come Dancing* or not, there's no doubting the surge in popularity of dance classes aimed at the over-50s. Although many organisations have been running work related to older people's dance for years, in 2012 there was a reported 70 per cent rise in the numbers of new dancers and the number is thought to have increased significantly since, prompting the Royal Academy of Dance to begin training teachers to deliver what it has termed 'silver swan' classes to seniors.

And there's no shortage of interest in Dorset where more and more older people are returning to dance or taking it up as absolute beginners.

Margie Barbour is 66 and attends the weekly A Dance A Day class in Charmouth, Wednesday morning ballet sessions at the Bull Hotel in Bridport and is a Monday Evening regular at Salway Ash – that is if she's not at Ballet Rambert in London: 'I'm nowhere near good enough, I just happen to be in London quite often on a Monday so I enrolled, stand at the back and try to keep up.'

Margie's interest in dance was rekindled by Alan Yentob's 2009 film for the BBC *Save the Last Dance For Me*, which focused on the Company of Elders, the resident

over-60s group at Sadler's Wells, but practitioners from the world of contemporary dance have been working with older people in community projects for more than 20 years.

'I did ballet as a young child,' says Margie, 'but had to give it up when my parents had more children and could no longer afford the classes. My mother was this wonderfully energetic woman who used to dance around the kitchen while she cooked and we children just followed suit – it was all very *Salad Days*, 'Oh, Look At Me, I'm Dancing'.

'In the 1970s I worked in production at the BBC and went to Dancercise, but getting to meetings was difficult with the hours we worked. Then in the 1980s came aerobics and there was a lot of jumping around to music, but not much that could be called dancing. I moved to Dorset and was artistic director at the Marine Theatre in Lyme Regis, then programmed Bridport Arts Centre, which is when I got involved with A Dance A Day having seen the Yentob film, which was such an inspiration.'

The Charmouth group – there's another A Dance A Day group in Wareham – is led by dance artist Anna Golding who works with up to 20 dancers a session as they go through their paces, stretching, warming-up with some

Justin Smith and PDSW (Pavilion Dance South West)



Dancers at Pavilion Dance South West (PDSW), in Bournemouth



▶ Margie Barbour in action

formal plié work, free-dancing to music and developing their own choreography as well as dancing routines she has created for them.

'We wear loose tops and tights, some dance barefoot others with shoes and there are no mirrors, which is great,' explains Margie. 'So the only images we have of ourselves are the ones in our heads.'

The summer before last Margie was delighted to be asked to dance with Landance, a professional company, in an open-air performance in the Valley of Stones as part of the Inside Out Dorset festival of outdoor arts.

'That was a wonderful opportunity although realising I would need to be quite fit I did the [NHS Choices] Couch to 5K running plan and was jolly glad I did because after warming up the director said we were to run down a hill ahead of the audience. Well, he sprinted off, the company sprinted off, the 10-year-old boy who was appearing alongside me sprinted off – and so did I.'

Perhaps surprisingly, performance is not always a primary motivation for senior dancers – at least not in Margie's experience.

'No, in fact I'd say I was pretty much unique in wanting to do more. When I was at Bridport Arts Centre I used to get choreographers from dance shows we booked to do workshops for the group and we would create curtain

raisers to perform before the main event, but after that I found there wasn't a great appetite among the group to work towards performance.

'There's a great deal of friendship and warmth in the groups, a lot of going for coffee afterwards; and dance is very good for fitness and strengthening muscles so your core strength improves. In the ballet class we get up on our toes and into first, second, third and fourth positions, so that's very good for balance, which is absolutely key at this age.'

The health benefits of dance for older people have long been recognised and a wealth of scientific and social studies provide the evidence that dance is particularly good at warding off dementia as well as providing obvious physical health benefits and improving general and mental health well being.

'These types of classes have a very strong creative element so they exercise both sides of the brain, extending brain function and capacity and encouraging expression,' explains dance producer Rosalind Conlon of Activate Performing Arts, the dynamic arts agency based in Dorchester.

'There's a danger older people become invisible to society, but they have emotions, feelings and vast experience to share, so although not every group is geared



› Older dancers enjoy a lesson on the terrace at PDSW, Bournemouth

towards performance there is a move to increase the visibility of older people in community dance and older people being creative generally.

'Within the performance companies there's also a real consideration of the aesthetic of the mature moving body – it's a beautiful thing to see in pieces that embody that lived experience.'

And although male dancers can be in short supply, Dance for Parkinson's groups tend to attract more men simply because twice as many men as women are diagnosed with the disease.

'Dance is producing very positive outcomes with Parkinson's groups and the cost benefit of the arts in treating health conditions is clear – artistic activity makes people feel better and artists are much less expensive than medics,' adds Rosalind.

Perhaps more than anything the dance groups engender a sense of community, of belonging. Dancers typically come to the groups for their own reasons but before long they are contributing to those groups as a whole and feel part of something, making the most of a space in which they can be themselves.

As Margie explains: 'From time to time we get a replacement teacher for a session and they will always ask to go round the group to find out what aches and pains we have so they are aware. We tell them there just isn't enough time to do that – it's not so much that we leave our aches and pains at the door, more that we take care of them ourselves.' ▶

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Dance groups

› **A Dance A Day**

Thursdays, 11.00 – 12.30 *Charmouth Village Hall*

› **A Dance A Day**

Wednesdays, 10.00 – 11.00 *Corn Exchange, Wareham*

Contact: 01305 260954,

rosalind@activateperformingarts.org.uk

› **Movers and Shakers: creative contemporary dance classes for the active over 55s**

Tuesdays, 10.30 – noon *Winfrith Village Hall*

Wednesdays, 1.30 – 3.00 *Dorchester Ballet & Dance*

Contact: 01305 263489 lynepainez@aol.com

› **My Ballet: classes for adults**

Wednesdays, 11.00 – 12.15 *The Bull Hotel, Bridport*

Contact: *Carla Sheills, carla@my-ballet.uk*

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