



NORTHERN BALLET: WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

Sam Moore, Senior Learning Project Manager at Northern Ballet is well-used to the preconceptions that young people might have of dance. Which is why when Northern Ballet and American Ballet Theatre (ABT) came together to create an anytime, anywhere 'kit', they were adamant that it would give the young people who use it an opportunity visualise themselves and their lives within a framework of dance – and their place within a dance company.

Under normal circumstances, the Northern Ballet Learning Team would be delivering face-to-face learning experiences with young people using a programme based around their current production. They focus on 'bolder' roles, characters with big personalities, that are closer to the students' comfort zones. "We don't design the work that we do on a project like Burberry Inspire to stand everyone in line, in first position," explains Dance Education Officer, Philippa Ranger. "Often we choose boisterous parts because we know that the idea of being graceful in a ballet context can be so overwhelming." But these are far from normal times, and while there are no performances – and, indeed, no classrooms for prolonged periods – Northern Ballet and ABT took a different approach.

Northern Ballet's first collaboration with ABT was a series of four short films* based on student's choreographic ideas. Their format – a minute and a half long and some filmed on smart phones – was familiar and unthreatening. It felt appropriate to use these as the basis of a kit that would help young people to explore their own worlds through observation and movement. In watching dance and noticing the context around the choreography, they could then apply the same level of examination to the world around them. "We [Northern Ballet & ABT] wanted to try and get them thinking about what they would do if they were to dance," says Philippa. "And then to take the step from watching dance quite passively to watching real people."

“AS SOON AS SOMEONE SAYS 'BALLET' IN SCHOOLS, THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE IS, 'OH, THAT'S NOT FOR ME!'”

“WE HAD NO IDEA IF THE KIDS WOULD BE IN SCHOOL. ORWHETHER WE'D DELIVER IT OURSELVES, OR IF IT WOULD BE DELIVERED BY A DANCE TEACHER – OR A GEOGRAPHY TEACHER!”

“TOGETHER, WE WANTED TO GIVE A REALLY GOOD IDEA OF THE WIDER ECOLOGY OF A DANCE COMPANY.”



The short films, 'Roots', 'Trapped', 'Blended' and 'A Lonely Summer's Day' were inspired by the work of students from Airedale and Castleford Academies during the previous year of the Burberry Inspire programme.

Producing a format that could be delivered and received in multiple ways was a creative challenge in and of itself. Northern Ballet and their contemporaries at ABT had to consider the inner and outer limits of how it would be used. The structure needed to champion the Northern Ballet ethos of being child-led, which is clearly not easy when educators, Artist in Residence and students are all in separate locations. And out of classroom access was a priority. "It was our first experience of creating a resource for young people who might not have access to the internet," admits Sam. "All the information had to be deliverable on paper, as entire kits, which was a real challenge." Still images from the films were printed onto postcards, with links provided, so they could act as prompts for explorative thought where there was an absence of multimedia. Sam believes that this was a really beneficial exercise for all – not only in terms of the Learning Team pushing their boundaries beyond their usual practise, but because these 'Creativity Kits' have no shelf-life. As resources they can be applied to anyone, anywhere, working alone or in a classroom setting, long into the future.

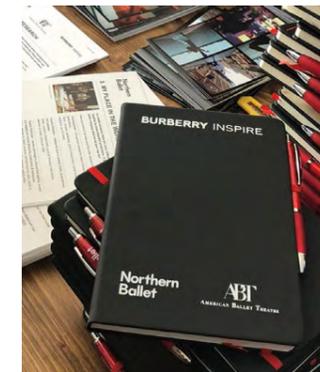
Through this, the schools had the freedom to work within the constraints of what was given but could – and did – adapt them to suit their circumstances. Through notes, directions, tips and an FAQ for teachers, staff at Ruth Gorse Academy were able to use the Creativity Kits completely independently when Covid restrictions meant that they could not open for visits from Northern Ballet. Co-op Academy Leeds, however, used the resources within dance lessons and their teachers enjoyed one-to-one Continued Professional Development sessions with the Northern Ballet Learning Team. During one such session, Philippa learned that the teacher was struggling. "She was teaching a group of lower ability students and reported that they were really disengaged. Because we had that communication, we could say 'no worries, we're happy to create an alternative task for them'. We can still be bespoke and make sure they're engaged."

It was a happy surprise for Philippa to learn that Co-op Academy Leeds had further adapted their observation task, screening a scene of an airport for the students to use as a starting point when they were unable to mingle freely in the playground. They set up indoor circuits to represent queues and check-ins, creating an alternative view of the world in which the students could let

their imaginations run free and share their interpretations of movement within the space.

However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that for many young people, feeling confident in their own skin is not just difficult, but near impossible. In this respect, the ability to experiment with art privately is not just liberating, but an important part of exploring ideas and the space they occupy in a judgement-free space. So, while the Northern Ballet team felt a certain loss in not being able to be with the students, the potential for them to be able to simply take a moment in their own space and time to consider the questions posed felt incredibly positive.

It's clear that working in collaboration with American Ballet Theatre was a highlight and a welcome learning curve for the team. In the same way that no two schools are the same, dance companies also have their different approaches. So, in working together on their Creativity Kits, Philippa and Sam found themselves really enjoying the fresh voices ABT brought. "They



bring the vocabulary and techniques of classical ballet into their practice, and we've learnt that this actually works well for us with really engaged and high ability groups," says Sam, who plans to keep this within their practice going forward. Equally, ABT have enjoyed the departure from purely classical and found it to be a really positive experience. Their shared absence of performances

gave them the time and common ground from which to springboard their ideas.

Both companies felt that it was important to stress that dance companies are a microenvironment, and that around the dancers are a mass of functions that enable them to perform and connect with their audiences. To achieve this, Northern Ballet created a third pillar to their resources, a continuation from the students' observation and movement research, entitled 'My place in the world'. It asks the students to consider how they would fit into a dance company and the kind of role their skills and personality would suit. "Our offer isn't just about dancing and taking part in dance," says Sam. "We also try to bring the backstage roles to life. We look at set design and costume design, and work with film to create a rounder package. It's essential that students learn about how they might take these careers forward as a pathway too."