





# ACCESS ALL AREAS

A new research project helps ballet teachers open their classes to students with disabilities. **Anna Winter** hears about the challenges and rewards.



More questions... Jürg Koch teaches a travelling exercise and (opposite) Emilia Kenworthy and Amber Rose Halfman-Smith Photos: Neil Smith

Gloucester ballet teacher Linda Virgoe didn't hesitate when Chloe, a little girl with cerebral palsy, wanted to join her classes. 'Over the years I've had students with various disabilities, whether it's a learning disability, Down's syndrome or CP, and I never thought anything of it,' she says. 'I just taught them like I would any other child. I'm here to teach them a love of dance. But apparently this was a little bit unusual. A lot of schools were turning them away.'

In fact, Chloe's mum had already phoned five local dance studios, all of which had refused to let Chloe take classes. She wasn't the only parent in the area struggling to get a disabled child into dance lessons. Several had been in touch with Cath Wilkins, then the head of inclusivity-focused dance agency GDance. Although the latter wound down in 2017, Wilkins is now at the helm of Dance Unstuck, a research company dedicated to widening access to dance education. It has ballet firmly in its sights.

Serendipity played its part. A GDance project at Ballet Cymru (one of Dance Unstuck's partner organisations, along with Paradance and the RAD) led Wilkins to Jürg Koch, a contemporary-trained dancer and academic also pursuing issues of diversity in dance training. Koch uses the principles of Universal Design for Instruction, an educational theory that seeks to identify and

remove barriers to accessibility across a range of subjects, while still providing equal rigour.

In terms of dance, it's about individualising movement to best suit the different possibilities of each different body in the class. 'Together with Jürg, we were really interested to see how the UDI approach could be applied to a really codified form like ballet, which is the most common entry point for young children into dance. We thought, let's start with the most difficult!' laughs Wilkins.

Undeterred, she and Koch headed to Linda Virgoe's studio to look at aspects of the Grade 2 RAD syllabus in detail, eventually compiling a series of online video resources. Lizz Fort, of the RAD's Faculty of Education, who uses principles of Universal Design as a teacher educator, went to Gloucester for these early stages of research.

Fort explains that 'every student has a different body whether they have a disability or not. We take a step back from the steps, rather than focus on students replicating what the teacher does. You might have a student who isn't standing, has a walking frame, or uses a prosthetic. We think about the movement concepts before setting the exercise, stripping it back to its components of form and function. For example, with a plié exercise – a bend of the legs – it's essentially used to cushion a landing, or for a take-off or transfer of weight. So we might look at

how other parts of the body can fold, bend or extend, exploring that principle of transferring weight. With the port de bras, we'd look at the soft, curved quality of the arms and how curves and softness might be interpreted by different bodies in the space, how they could translate that onto their bodies. The aim is to help every student to find their best tendu, plié, arabesque, or pirouette.'

As Dance Unstuck's RAD consultant, Fort admits 'I have to ask the hard questions that I know will be asked by my colleagues in other departments of the RAD. In Gloucester we had a really challenging discussion around whether what we'd seen was actually ballet, and whether it was RAD ballet and the challenges of teaching it. Could it even be considered for an exam that assesses what's seen rather than the intention behind the movement? We left with more questions than answers.'

Linda Virgoe knows first-hand the difficulties of balancing progressive theory with the emotional and practical realities of being a busy ballet teacher. 'Sometimes my ballet head pulls one way and I get torn. It can be overwhelming!'

One issue is that 'the goalposts are moving all the time with these children as they have operations, injections and changes of equipment. At times I've felt very guilty because I want to give more time to Chloe

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- LINDA VIRGOE

but in class I can't do that. That's why we're going to have some private tuition.' She's honest about the trepidation that surrounds inclusive teaching, no matter how willing a teacher might be to plunge in. 'You're worried that they're fragile and you're going to hurt them. In the early days I'd check with Chloe's mum. I will always challenge Chloe, because she's strong-minded and she wants to be challenged, but I want to make sure I'm doing it safely. It'd be great to have a physio, for example, who could check that these ideas don't do any damage.'

Lizz Fort is familiar with the fears around inclusive classes. 'The other day one of my students said, "I just wouldn't know where to start if a disabled person wanted to join my class."' The advice I gave her was: change the conversation in your head. She assumed she had to do all the thinking and

adapting, but you can figure it out together. Ask questions about how their body moves and their motivations for coming to class. That person knows their mind and body better than anybody else, and if they're under 18 discuss it with a parent. It's about seeing a human being who wants to take a class and providing a climate in which they can.'

While acknowledging the challenges, Cath Wilkins keenly echoes the can-do sentiment. 'It's easy to say, it's not possible, but if we thought like that we'd never move forwards,' she says. 'Often dancers who are working professionally have an acquired disability, but we need to open things up for young dancers who are born with a disability. We need to bring through role models with a highly-trained level of excellence to hold up to artistic directors and show what's possible.'

In order to develop disabled dancers, the complex task of making exams accessible is integral to Dance Unstuck's mission. 'It's the big question,' Wilkins says. 'It isn't about putting the RAD in a difficult position or being disrespectful, but encouraging a healthy dialogue around assessment.' The company is also working towards providing more training, CPD resources and mentoring, including remote mentoring.

So, the conversation continues. Although the answers haven't yet emerged, Fort remains buoyant about possibilities and progress. 'I'd like to reassure RAD teachers that they don't have to have all the answers, they don't need to be scared or worried, they just need to think about the accessibility of their teaching. Hopefully we can get to a point where parents won't make five calls with a "no" at the end. It will take a while, but that's the dream.'

