

Dancing around the May, June and July pole

Gail Brown explains how team work, empathy, patience and understanding were brought within touching distance of parliamentarians by virtue of the arrival of Big Dance on a Westminster parade ground.

Every two years a project called Big Dance, which lasts up to 10 days in July sees the entire UK dancing, and I mean really dancing. The idea for Big Dance originated from the London mayor's office in 2006, gaining support from other funding partners, most significantly Arts Council England and now the 2012 Olympics Legacy Trust, which is giving Big Dance £3million over three years. This biannual event aims to raise awareness of dance opportunities available and get people of all ages and abilities dancing, and this year was no exception.

London boasts one of the most iconic sky lines in the world and on 8 July that view included a significant addition, the Big Dance Bus and its stage, which took over Horse Guards Parade. Intrigued passers-by were drawn in by the spectacle as the charismatic Big Dance party descended upon parliament. With them came the partners responsible for the event including English National Ballet, Dance UK and Westminster City Council. British Harlequin plc provided the dance floor which turned the traditional gravelled parade ground into a platform for performance and celebration. Talented dancers from across the city shone under a spectacular summer's day sun, bringing more than a ray of hope to dancers everywhere; the hope that MPs won't slash arts budgets any further and risk losing everything dance has achieved in recent years.

Dance is the second most popular physical activity for young people after football and Youth Dance England runs national programmes for just 58 pence of public investment for each school-aged young person. This compares with £38.21 per child for music and £79.47 for school sport. According to the recent Arts Council England review of their regularly funded organisations, dance is the fastest growing art form and has increased attendances by 103% over twelve months. This is not to be sniffed at and we can only hope that, as Ed Vaizey was in attendance at the Big Dance Bus, the arts and dance sector won't see further dips in investment. Vaizey is a firm supporter of dance and the sector hopes he can put his money where his mouth is when it comes to preserving and enabling the future of dance and art in the UK.

Big Dance and in particular Dancing on Parliament aimed to put dance at the forefront of the political agenda. Opening speeches were made by Big Dance director Jacqueline Rose, executive director of Arts Council England, Moira Sinclair, and Craig Hasall, managing director of English National Ballet. These sorts of events are about getting one step closer to more of Vaizey's parliamentary colleagues as well as supporting dance and art and understanding that, whether dance or cultural activities are something beautiful to watch, something to take part in or something to connect communities, they make a difference at lots of levels. Art and culture are inspirational and add value to every single government agenda, whether that's health, safer communities, bettering the economy or giving people something to do that makes them feel more confident.

Dancing on Parliament followed Dance UK's DanceVote 2010 campaign which put dance in front of the politicians on the lead up to this year's general election. Thirteen hundred people contacted their prospective parliamentary candidates and 85 of those who responded became MPs. Fifteen of them – including David Amess (Southend West), Norman Lamb (New Norfolk), Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) and Frank Doran (Aberdeen North), the secretary of the All Party Parliamentary Dance Group – arrived to enjoy the Big Dance Bus. Ben Bradshaw, culture secretary in the last government, spoke highly of the event and dance in general: "We are the top dance nation," he said. "We are ahead of the world. There has been a fantastic renaissance for dance in the last ten years. Dance is great for our fitness, health and creativity and often appeals to young people who might not enjoy all academic subjects. We need to keep investing."

In London over 1.2 million people got involved in dancing because of Big Dance, whether it was as part of a tea dance in Trafalgar Square, trying out a free class somewhere or accidentally witnessing a flash mob (nothing to be frightened of; this is a pop-up performance as shown in that advertisement for the mobile phone company in Liverpool Street Station). Elsewhere in the country people also turned out to dance. In the south east region a consortium of partners including Kent County Council, South East Dance, Woking Dance Festival and Hampshire Dance www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Ed Vaizey: guarding the interests of culture?

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all hosted a dance equivalent of passing the Olympic torch across the region. The appetite for this performing art is ferocious and it grows on a daily basis.

The dance sector can only hope that events such as Big Dance and Dancing on Parliament have made, and will continue to make, a difference. Nobody who saw or took part in any of the workshops, performances or surprises could fail to have been impressed. In these challenging and ever-changing economic times, the arts sector can only hope that all of the political parties can put down their polar opposite views and pick up a maypole. Maypole dancing is about traditional folk stories told through dance and these stories cannot be told by one individual; it takes team work, patience, empathy and above all understanding of one another's cultures. The UK must find its cultural identity, shared beliefs and sustainable arts provision. Imagine what dance could do with the same investment that goes into music and sport; the far-reaching positive consequences for the health and economic wealth of this nation would be enormous. So the dance sector requests of all political parties and coalition programmes that, en route to the what will be a far from enjoyable Big Picnic characterised by painful salami slicing of budgets, that the Big Society dance carries on in May, June, July and all year round; for the sake of everyone.

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