

Dance for Seniors – Anna Arnold, CDFB



My journey into dance for older people really started in 2015 when I was asked if I would be interested in choreographing some movement for a short film for the Pavilion Dance South West Joie de Vivre film competition. The theme of the competition was “dance for older people”. Up until this point I hadn’t given much thought to the specific idea of dance for older people but since I had just turned 50 myself, I decided to embrace my new golden age and be part of this project. The finished film, Rise & Shine, (<https://3rdstagedance.com/screendance/>) did very well in the competition and was eventually screened at Sadler’s Wells in London alongside a performance from the wonderful Company of Elders (<https://www.sadlerswells.com/learning/learning-performing/company-of-elders/>). I had seen this company perform once before and was impressed by their theatrical vitality and quality of storytelling.

As a Christian dancer, teacher and choreographer I was used to groups of mixed ages and accepted without thought or question that there would be people in their senior years attending workshops and dancing for the Lord. When we dance in praise and worship it is our spirit which governs our movement, we are not separated or measured by age or ability. This is not the case in the secular dance world, where sadly age and ability all too often restrict opportunities for older people to dance and perform. Professional dancers are deemed to be past their prime at 40 and community dancers are often left to migrate towards the back of the studio so they don’t get in the way of the younger, more energetic dancers. In the Company of Elders however I saw a group of dancers who embraced and championed their ages and this led me to consider what opportunities there were in my own city for older dancers.

Through 2016 God had been calling me to serve him through Isaiah 61:1-9 with the gifts he had given me. Using dance to serve in this way had not entered my head as I focussed on the more traditional gifts but by the end of the year I found myself asking my employers if I could reduce the hours of my full-time management job to release me to dance and teach more. (That journey is a

whole separate testimony!) I felt I could use dance to serve the community with simple dance and exercise classes where people who could not afford to go to the gym or keep fit class could come for free, spend an hour or so having fun and then chat over a cup of coffee afterwards.

Running in parallel to the vision of these “Dancercise” classes, was a personal desire to develop dance for older people. With part time hours secured at work, I began, in partnership with the company I had worked with on the film project, to explore dance for older people in earnest, attending training and workshop days and gaining accreditation in teaching Dance for Parkinson’s. Armed with years of dance experience and this fresh insight into dance for older people I soon discovered that having the desire and the skills to run classes is one thing but finding venues, availability, funding and advertising to actually launch a new class is much harder especially if that class is aimed at older people.

No matter how fit and supple we try and keep ourselves the reality is that our bodies change as we get older and we have to be aware of the body’s increasing limitations and how we treat it. This is no different for dancers, whether professionals or taking up dance for the first time. It is vitally important therefore as dance facilitators that we take these considerations into account when planning.

The first obstacle I came up against in the planning period was finding suitable venues. Over the years I’ve taken class in some pretty grotty studios. Suffering hard floors, no barres, cold toilets (if any), changing in corridors and traipsing up rickety narrow staircases is a scenario all too familiar to a dancer but these conditions are not ones the older person can or should be asked to cope with. When looking for suitable venues I found I needed to compile a must have and a desired list. This, in my opinion was essential for the well-being of my future participants but it also helped to serve when writing funding applications. The “must have” list included a non-concrete floor, studio on ground floor or with a lift, decent toilets, chairs to use for changing shoes, and, so that I could attract enough participants, be near a main bus route. The “desired” list included a sprung floor, a proper ballet barre, disabled access and toilets (thus making the class accessible to those with disabilities), mirrors and a general standard of cleanliness and attractiveness that would make the participants feel comfortable. This last desire may seem fanciful but I believe that dance for older people is as much about how we as teachers help participants to feel as it is about what we can teach them technically; having an attractive hall or studio goes a long way to helping participants to feel like dancers.

The must have and desired list will vary depending on the type of class being taught but the fundamental ideas of safety, accessibility and comfort are universal.

Other things I needed to consider at planning stage were times of classes - having canvassed many older people I discovered that daytimes were preferred as often elderly people do not like to venture out after dark. Daytime however does not mean a 10am class as this was found to be too early a start for many as it sometimes took a while to get going in the day. Running over lunchtimes was not popular either. Location – as mentioned above close to a good bus route is important as many participants use public transport. Also, older people feel less vulnerable walking in a known public area than perhaps a quiet back street or industrial estate. Cost – unless you have secured funding the cost of the venue may play a part in the deciding factor. There are many activities available for older people so you may be competing for participants. Most activities organised

specifically for the older person have a price ceiling per session so you may need to keep your class cost competitive. Advertising – if you are going to attract a good number then advertising, especially for secular classes is a consideration that needs to be made in conjunction with the above considerations. Classes for all sorts activities for the older person can be found on specialist “older person” website and are promoted by age related organisations. Many of these will have common criteria for inclusion in advertising such as accessibility, facilities and cost.

I had already chosen to offer ballet as the core technique for these classes, so once the planning stage was complete I turned my mind to the format of the class. As I said previously, dance for older people is as much about emotion, feeling and well being as it is about technique. For me it was important to develop a class program that would reflect this ideal and enrich the participants dance experience. I decided to plan each 6-week session of classes around a specific ballet with the purpose of giving participants a flavour of music, style and choreography of the chosen ballet. Each class would follow the pattern of seated warm up, barre and centre work and culminate in learning a little repertoire from the ballet which I would adapt to their abilities whilst enabling the participant to experience the “feel” of the character and choreography. I planned to enhance the class experience by arranging visits to the theatre (funded where possible) and creating an e-mail group where I could write synopsis and a little back ground of the ballet we were going to be looking at and the repertoire we would learn. Youtube is a wonderful aide in that I can send my dancers links to clips of ballets, different artists and the repertoire we are covering. This part of the class experience has led to participants them selves posting things to our group and arranging cinema trips to live screenings.

After planning the format of the class, I turned my attention to the detail and what, from ballet technique, I would actually try and teach. The physicality of any dance class should be directed by the ability, safety and desired outcome of the participants. We are careful not to introduce pointe work to students before feet and legs are strong enough, or batterie before clean strong petit allegro has been achieved. The same applies to older dancers. Knowing what to include in a class for older people and how to teach it is also tempered by the experience of participants and this is where our skill and understanding as teachers comes to the fore. In ballet for example, participants who have spent many years dancing and who are professionally trained will come to the class with a built-in understanding of what their body is capable of whereas a new dancer may never have experienced the sensation of turn out. Teaching a six-year-old to turn out from the hip is one thing, requiring that of a seventy-year-old who may have had a hip replacement, or suffers from arthritis or dodgy knees is quite different! As we age, our range and steadiness of mobility decreases but dance can help maintain or improve our mobility and general strength. Agility of mind is also important so including an element of physical tongue twister, perhaps using the unexpected arm or using a tricky rhythm is useful. With all this in mind I developed a range of exercises to include each week, along with some exercises I intentionally avoid. Although not set in stone, after all we want our students to develop whatever age they are, I use these parameters as a guide line when planning new classes.

The basics of these parameters could apply to any dance technique being taught. In general, I try to avoid anything that could cause injury, falls or dizziness. We start the class seated in a circle. Being seated enables participants to fully engage in the warm up process without fear of falls or tiredness too early in the class. It also provides a lovely focal point. Before commencing I always check for any new niggles, injuries or ailments so I’m aware of any potential problems and can adapt exercises for

individuals where required. At the barre I try to ensure I have barres at different heights. This is a luxury I know but if you have more than one barre try to provide height variations so participants are as balanced as they can be.

We then work through barre work building strength in feet, legs and core. I will include exercises involving transfer of weight, change of leg, change of tempo and intensity to help participants with body awareness and balance. I include balance in rise on two feet and on flat on one foot. I try and add full body port de bra, although slowly to avoid dizziness and not to the back as this may cause spine and neck injury. Most weeks I will include a rise and plie exercise to strengthen feet and ankles. Many participants find this hard and I'm very strict with them about pulling up and rising on a straight leg but I have found this exercise to be particularly beneficial to all.

Moving to the centre I concentrate more on the aesthetics of dance and encourage flow and emotion in movement. Physicality still plays an important part in the centre work and moving without the barre gives opportunities to increase work on posture and balance. Something as simple as walking slowly from one corner of the room to the other pausing in an arabesque a terre can present balance difficulties for some, so introducing the options of standing on two feet apart or keeping the back foot on demi pointe can be useful here. Using the arms and head freely and with emotion from a steady base gives the participants that wonderful feeling and freedom of dance whilst keeping them safe. Turning can also be disorientating so when changing direction it's important to be aware of potential problems and avoid falls and dizziness. Often I will chose to use a turn on two feet such as a sutenu, perhaps only half a turn or make a wider turn. In some cases, walking backwards presents problems too. With safety, brittle bones and aging ankles in mind I generally avoid jumping although I try to include some light impact work. When teaching repertoire, I adapt any allegro to create a similar feeling in the upper body and movement across the floor with little runs or glissade. Similarly, with turns I may use a non-turning pique instead of a series of pose turns or chaines.

Awareness of safety and suppleness continue right to the end of the class as I finish with a gentle stretch and cool down. Again, I avoid anything too demanding, no shouldering legs or splits but I am careful to ensure muscles are stretched appropriately and breathing and composure are restored to rest level.

With both the Ballet Seniors class and the Dancercise class (where some of the participants are in this older category), I aim to create exercises that will help improve physicality, mobility and balance whilst keeping the above parameters in mind. As I teach I try to explain what each part of the body should be doing and feeling and what areas we are trying to strengthen or stretch. The extent of the approach outlined here will of course depend on the ability and mobility of individual participants.

Whilst it is important to keep everyone safe, we should not underestimate what can be achieved with good teaching and encouragement. Older dancers want to be challenged just as much as their younger counterparts and will enjoy the opportunity to try new things. As participants have continued with these classes I have witnessed an improvement in balance, posture, strength and grace. I love to see these older people grow and blossom in their dance and it has given me great joy to watch their progress. You may even have seen one of my dancers in a short film that went viral last year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkMMv7LuI7g> As you can see we have a lot of fun too!

By the grace of God and his immense love and kindness towards me I have found that through this venture he has given me my hearts desire to both dance and serve Him. What a loving Father we have.



Photo of Anna Arnold taken by Malcolm Rae