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## Feature : Dancing Inside

**WRITER : VANESSA COOK**

**November 9th , 2004.** In April 2004, I found myself in prison for the first time! I wasn't there because of a sentence I'd received, but rather as part of a team that would teach dance in a male prison. Here's how I ended up teaching in prison and why it proved to be one of the most rewarding projects that I have ever been a part of.

Motionhouse Dance Theatre was allotted some funding from Arts Council England to carry out one of six pilot projects aimed at addressing social inclusion. The project was planned to last for 18 months and would take place in the Therapeutic Community (TC) unit of HMP Dovegate in Marchington, East Staffordshire, (an adult, category B prison).

True to its name, a TC is a unit that offers opportunities for residents to undergo formal therapy in small groups whilst living in more of a community than exists for the general population in prison. A culture of constant feedback is encouraged between residents (the TC's term for inmates). Residents volunteer and apply to do a term in a TC as part of a longer sentence. To be deemed suitable for a period in the TC and so that the experience can be beneficial, residents have to be of an average IQ and non-psychotic. In the same way that all the residents volunteer for a term in the TC, all of the men with whom we would work had also volunteered.

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Equally, none of the dancers working for Motionhouse were coerced into working in prison. Each dancer could choose to participate

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### GIMME SOME SIDEBAR

## Dovegate Prison



Prisons tend not to have websites so we gleaned this info from the Government about Dovegate prison written last year.

HMP Dovegate is an innovative prison, with good staff-prisoner relationships, but has weaknesses in some areas central to sustaining a healthy prison, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons

Anne Owers said today. Staff needed proper systems and support to deal with a challenging population. Publishing the report of a full-announced inspection of the Category B male training prison in Uttoxeter, which is financed and managed by Premier Group Limited, Anne Owers said Dovegate provided an example of both the potential strengths and



Equally, none of the dancers working for Motionhouse were coerced into working in prison. Each dancer could choose to participate or abstain from the project. We all had slightly different responses to this opportunity, which reflected our own experience and political stance. Motionhouse discussed any concerns we chose to air and every concern was given due consideration.

The issue of being a female dancer in a male prison was carefully discussed, especially as the main emphasis of teaching was to be contact work. Having never stepped foot in a prison before, I had no pre-conceived notions or ideas on which to base expectations. I chose to be part of the teaching team primarily because Motionhouse had previously taught contact in prison to the general population on a number of occasions. Watching on video, the success of some of the workshops they had previously taught 'inside', led me to trust their bank of experience and their method of teaching.

Another reason I chose to be involved was that I believed (and still believe) that contact is a form of dance that can be enjoyed by and be beneficial to participants of *all* physical abilities and social backgrounds. I have seen this repeatedly in workshops at all levels and I was intrigued to see whether it would be the case in prison where I anticipated meeting men of an even more diverse social backgrounds.

Our role in prison was to provide dance as an art-form through which the residents could express themselves. We would not have a therapeutic role. Roland Woodward (the director of therapy at Dovegate), invited dance and other art-forms into the TC with a view to establishing 'art culture' in prison. His reason for wanting to establish such a culture came from observing many of the residents' cultural backgrounds. For many of the residents, expression of emotion was through physicality, often of a violent nature. He viewed the provision of art workshops as a way of offering the men a different way to express emotions and engage with others, without having a direct therapeutic agenda.

From the onset, our approach was to recognise ourselves as leaders of a workshop in a way that we were familiar, skilled and qualified (being clear that we were not skilled or qualified therapists). Our goal was to help facilitate the participants' dance skills at an appropriate pace leading eventually to a level of competency where

both the potential strengths and weaknesses of privately run prisons.

Anne Owers said: "In some ways this inspection of HMP Dovegate - financed, designed, built and now managed by the private sector - illustrates both sides of the debate over private prisons. There was some welcome innovation, and good staff-prisoner relationships. But there was also a worrying lack of experience and confidence amongst a young, locally recruited staff, few of whom had any previous prison experience, and who were operating with low staffing levels and high staff turnover.

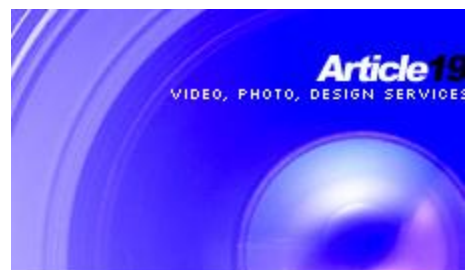
Extract quoted from: HM Prison Dovegate HM Inspector of Prisons 3rd September 2003.

## Vanessa Cook



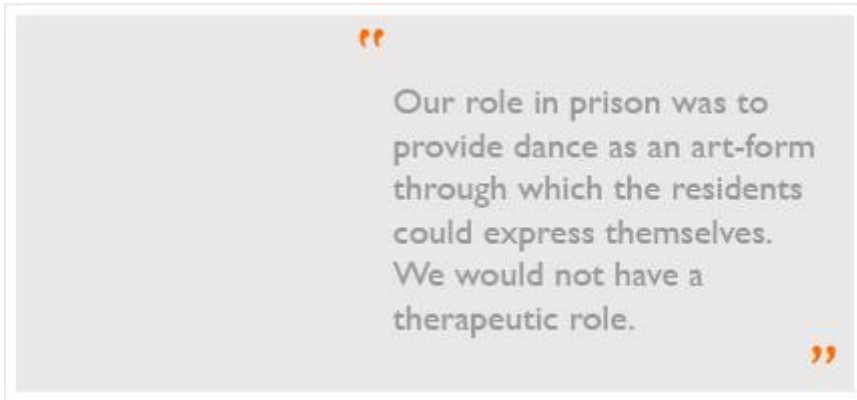
Vanessa is a professional dancer with Motionhouse Dance Theatre and has been since 2001. We interviewed Vanessa earlier this year so you can read more by clicking below.

[Interview >>](#)



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appropriate pace leading eventually to a level of competency where they could create their own work and comfortably perform in front of other residents. Knowledge of the kind of criminal backgrounds the participants had was unimportant in the same way that disclosure of social or economic background is irrelevant in any workshop. Some participants chose to disclose this kind of information but it was not a requirement before we began.



We anticipated leading workshops in the same way we would approach any group to meet their specific needs. What we [the dancers] anticipated would be different in this setting was the *type* of group we would encounter. Primarily it would be an all male adult community group. I have often taught open community classes but the groups are never exclusively male and most men who participate tend to have some movement experience or an artistic inclination. It is exceptional to meet male participants without these backgrounds. Our prison group would be exclusively male and universally without dance experience making it a very different experience. We also anticipated there being certain dominating factors that are often present in all-male groupings.

Armed with training and security briefing, the actual experience of being in prison was different from what I had anticipated. It wasn't that my expectations or the company's preparatory discussions were inaccurate, more that some experiences cannot be fully or accurately imagined prior to the event, experience itself is everything. As the project slowly unravelled, perhaps its most surprising feature was how enjoyable it proved to be.

I'm not sure which group was more apprehensive in the first workshop, us or the residents. They met us filled with the fear of the unknown. They had only their own ideas about dance on which to base their expectations of what we may ask them to do. I imagine their worst fears included all the things men fear most about dancing; feeling embarrassed, stupid, effeminate or risking the loss

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**Feature: Let's Take a Survey**  
Making fun of Londondance.com just got a whole lot easier with the release of their survey about their users, their website and dance in general. We run our own survey with some surprising results.



**Editorial: The Big Idea** Our recent news story concerning an undecipherable new programme from Arts Council England (ACE) to advocate arts leadership, we think, has led Article19 to believe that what dance lacks, among many other things, is a big idea.



**Editorial: What Future for Dance** We take a close look at the short comings in communications within the dance profession and suggest some possible new ways of thinking.



**Interview: Fleur Darkin**  
Article19 has a video chat with the director of the Darkin Ensemble and we also bring you extensive footage from 'Hotel' the company's current touring work.

Top 10 Videos For August		
Pos	Title	Share %
1	Perfect	9.4
2	Bare Bones 4 Children	9.3
3	IBM 401	7.3
4	Lullaby	7.2
5	Punchdrunk	5.1
6	Ignite	4.8
7	Gold	4.7
8	Planted Seeds	3.5
9	Give up the Ghost	3.44
10	Volatile	3.41

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of 'face'. After the first session, a number of the group expressed their relief that these fears had not been reinforced.

A group of five dancers made up the teaching team; myself, a female colleague and three male dancers. My female colleague and I partnered each other for the first couple of days. Some residents preferred initially to stay with the same partner. This changed however as the group dynamic changed and as familiarity replaced unfamiliarity.

As the only females in the group we were conscious of our body language. Eye-contact was functional, communication was primarily through teaching and we wore baggy comfortable clothing. The early sessions had a heavy bias towards physical training and all physical contact was initially functional in that it always had a purpose.

For example, when press-ups and sit-ups were done, physical contact was introduced by using another person's body weight to add resistance. Because some of our workshop time replaced residents' gym or football sessions, it was important for the residents to work physically hard in our sessions. It was also just as important for us to work hard to dispel any suspicion that our work was 'soft' or effeminate.

Sessions were long and intense but a concentrated air existed. As a familiar working relationship developed, the sessions became very productive and enjoyable and as a measure of how quickly the group worked, by day four, contact improvisations were taking place.

It is in the individuals' responses, conversations, facial expressions and willingness to work that much of the pleasure of their achievements reside. To begin to recount these would take too long (although I have a personal record of these in a diary that Arts Council asked us to keep after each session). What I will try to express however, is the high level of physical skills that I observed amongst the residents.

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The men were very keen to 'fly'. Flying moves required the men to hurl themselves into the air and then displace their falling weight into the floor in a safe way.

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The men were very keen to 'fly'. Flying moves required the men to hurl themselves into the air and then displace their falling weight into the floor in a safe way. They became accomplished at catching or absorbing the weight of another flying person, enabling the flyer to make a slower, more controlled descent than can be done alone. The men became accomplished at lifting and taking someone else's full weight using the moving person's momentum in order to momentarily sustain their partner's position in the air. To read about these techniques is one thing but to watch a man who weighs 18 stone fly through the air and to see his partner accurately execute the technique so as not to get crushed is a fantastic sight!

After a couple of sessions, complex combinations of the above skills were accomplished. The group readily executed dance moves that required guts, stamina, co-operation, athleticism, fine-timing and trust between dancers. It was exciting to see the whole groups' willingness to dance in such a physically taxing way. I have never observed such willingness in any other community group. Early in our visits we verbalised our excitement in observing their enthusiasm.

One of the residents responded by posing this question; "Why do you think this group is so up for risky, physical movement?" We deflected the question back at him; what was *his* explanation? "Maybe because that's how we've lived our lives, taking risks and living off adrenaline." Whether or not his analysis is accurate for all the residents, I'm not fully sure. But his answer gives the first of five reasons why *I* think the men achieved such a high level of skill.

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