

Fergus Early, Artistic Director, Green Candle Dance

FERGUS EARLY OBE After an early career in ballet, contemporary dance and New Dance, Fergus founded the pioneering Green Candle Dance Company in 1987, working, for and with children, young people, and older adults. The company works extensively with people living with dementia in hospitals, care homes, day centres and, online, in their own homes. Fergus directs an accredited training course for leading dance with older people and his company also run specially designed short training courses for dancers and health workers. In 2009 he was awarded an OBE for services to dance. In 2011 he received an honorary Doctorate of Arts from De Montfort University, Leicester.

'An inspiration, not a burden!'

I founded Green Candle Dance Company around 34 years ago, with the underlying philosophy that everyone has the right to participate in and watch dance, but many don't have the opportunity to exercise that right. My colleagues and I set out to provide some opportunities, initially for children and young people, with and without learning difficulties, and then for older people, which has become an increasingly large part of our work over the years, and in last decade, particularly working with people with dementia. Back then when we started, the conjunction of 'older people' and 'dance', seemed almost a contradiction in terms: what was required of older people was that they should sit down and stay put. Moving was not on the agenda. To get older people dancing was a subversive act that threatened the systems that revolved around the convenience of carers and relatives, rather than the needs of older people themselves. Over the years it has become clearer and clearer that dance has enormous amount to offer older people, both in physical health, emotional wellbeing and as a preventative measure for many common incapacitating conditions such as dementia and Parkinson's disease.

Many of you will be aware of the extraordinary piece of research conducted by Joseph Verghese, *Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly* (2003), reported in the New England Journal of Medicine back in 2003. This, a 21-year experiment, showed a conclusive relationship between increased activity in groups of older people, and their lessened likely hood of developing dementia. The activities were of two sorts: physical, such as walking, swimming, horse riding and dancing, and cognitive, such as doing cross words, reading books and so on. Although almost none of the physical activities lessened the instance of developing dementia, those doing *frequent dancing* came out as the group who were by far least the likely to develop dementia.

Our experience with Green Candle echoes this in non-scientific ways. We have a group called Spinoff for people over 55; the average age range is 62-86. This group has been running continuously for 25 years and there are still one or two people who have been there from the start. It accommodates 12-17 people at anyone one time, and approximately 200 people over those 25 years. In all that time, I have only known three members of the group to have a positive diagnosis of dementia. Anecdotally it bears out the findings of the Verghese experiment. Without having a conclusive answer to the question, 'Why dance?' we can make a few conjectures. Is it because dance involves more of the self, the physical, emotional, and cognitive self, than any activity? Dance involves much brainpower – memory, obviously, but in its improvisational form, it involves creativity, taking decisions, negotiating with others, and complex skills, like, for example, calculating spatial relationships at speed. Emotionally, dance offers the opportunity to express yourself, and allow your feelings to emanate through your whole body. Also, it is significant that dance is, by and large, a social activity to be take in groups. We know that dance, like other physical activity, stimulates the body to produce feel good chemicals such endorphins, but perhaps the simplest thing is most important; dancing is *fun*.

Other research has shown that dance has an excellent record for retaining practitioners, compared to other gym activities which attract good initial attendance but intend to lose participants relatively soon. People attending dance classes tend to stick with them over weeks, months, and years. I am convinced that the deciding factor between physical activity and dance is that dance involves physical activity, clothed in imagination and creativity. Dance then is incredibly relevant to older people, offering a joyous route to health and wellbeing, possibly helping to prevent dementia, and slowing the symptoms of dementia. If people are widely and routinely offered the chance to dance in older age, I believe we could look forward to a time where older people are no longer habitually regarded as a burden, but rather, and better for us all, the truth, which they can be, and are, an inspiration.

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