

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 the company around 34 years ago, with the underlying philosophy that everyone has the right to participate 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 or without learning difficulties, and then for older people, which has become increasing large part of 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, which seemed almost a contradiction in terms, what was required is 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 revolve 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 with 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 amongst whom were by far who were least likely to develop dementia.

Our experience with Green Candle echoes this in non-scientific way. 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, there are still one or two people who have been there from the start. It accommodates 12-17 people at anyone one time, and 200 people over those 25 years. In all that time, I have only known three members of the groups 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, more than any activity? Dance involves much brain power, memory obviously, but in its improvisational form, it involves creativity, taking decisions, negotiating with others, and 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 an endorphin, 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 that they tend to lose 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 routinely regarded as a burden, but rather, and better for us all, the truth, which they can be, and are, an inspiration.

Contact: fergus.early@greencandle.com