

Save the last dance for FE

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What happens to a dancer when it is time to stop dancing? Obviously, the rent has to be paid and the dancer has to train for another career. Simple so far. But ending a dancing career can be devastating. The dancer has been immersed in the dance world from an early age. The commitment is intense. The working day is long and there are few opportunities to get to know people outside the company.

A dancer facing a career change is going to need more help than most. Since 1974, dancers have been able to call on Dancers' Career Development, a London-based organisation. More than 1,000 dancers have used its services. Often seen as a safety net, DCD offers career coaching, emotional counselling, grants for retraining, start-up business grants and lots of ongoing support throughout the transition period.

"We have two divisions," says Linda Yates, DCD's executive director. "There is the company division, and there are nine

major dance companies contributing financially into that division. We visit the companies once a year. We hold meetings. We have CV-writing workshops and so forth.

"Then there is the independent division, for dancers on short contracts. We contact the theatres to reach them. The independent dancers need to know more about us and that is why we have recently appointed a development officer."

Dancers' Career Development currently has 160 dancers registered for retraining and there are around a dozen enquiries each week. Many of the dancers spend up to four years retraining and the majority of them stick with their new profession.

"Many dancers are in a process of bereavement rather than change," says Ms Yates. "And because of that our career counselling is geared towards them becoming more aware of themselves and what they need before we go on to making career choices..

"The dancer's identity is so strong and it

can take a very long time to come to terms with a change of identity and a new goal. When they do they surprise themselves because they have such fantastic transferable skills. They have such commitment and focus. They are goal-orientated and they are precise in what they do."

Richard Whistler started an Open University humanities foundation course when he was with Birmingham Royal Ballet. He is now the marketing officer at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds.

"That humanities course was me trying to get back into studying. Then I did a one-year OU business course. I was still dancing and I was supported by DCD. That business course decided me. It enabled me to get on to a one-year intensive master's course at Aston University. The two years with the OU gave me the confidence to move into the outside world. I wanted to stop dancing while I was still young and capable. I didn't want to wait until I was decrepit and being pushed out the door."

Studying food and hygiene at an FE college in London was an eye-opener for Franziska Hooson-Merky, a former Birmingham and Royal Ballet dancer. She has a flourishing wedding-cake business.

"The kids at the back were throwing paper aeroplanes and obviously couldn't have cared less. Luckily, my assessor was impressed with my work and he encouraged me to enrol at Dunstable College, where he was from. There aren't many colleges offering cake decoration at an advanced level. I studied patisserie and chocolate-making for two years."

Luke Heydon was a character principal dancer with the Royal Ballet. Now he works as a gardener and garden designer on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. His business is established and he is also developing a pottery concern for the winter months. Luke is still in a state of transition. Though he rarely dances now, he can be seen in *The Wind in the Willows* at the Royal Opera House over the Christmas period.

"Dancers' Career Development has

always been a presence at the Opera House," says Luke. "They gave me advice and started me off. I put a proper plan together and they gave me all the financial support I could have wished for. Without them I wouldn't have been able to do what I've done and I wouldn't have had the freedom to try something risky and feel so fulfilled.

"In my last months with the company, I started a correspondence course with the Royal Horticultural Society. That was to get a comprehensive understanding. When I came up here I did a landscape and design course at Otley College, which is just outside Ipswich."

Linda Yates has some final thoughts on how the ex-dancers see themselves. "I'm seeing some dancers at the moment who really feel they are still dancers. And in a way they are. You will always be a professional dancer. You trained from the age of ten and now you're 30. But you will be a professional dancer who is also a cabinet-maker, an accountant, a florist - that helps with their identity."