

Just the job

Dancers retire well before pension age, but they can get help with changing careers, says **Kate Crockett**

WHAT do dancers do when they no longer dance? Retiring at about 35, former professional dancers aren't eligible to pick up their pensions, and, contrary to popular belief, they don't all go on to teach dance or Pilates.

The majority retrain in a new profession and are assisted by Dancers' Career Development (DCD), a charity with more than 25 years' experience of supporting retiring professionals through career coaching, counselling and retraining and business start-up grants.

DCD's work is funded by nine UK dance companies whose dancers it assists, including the English National Ballet, Northern Theatre Dance, Rambert Dance Company and Royal Ballet. They contribute five per cent of their dancers' salaries each year. The charity also provides support for independent professional dancers, which is paid for by other voluntary contributions.

Former dancers have gone on to make successful careers in everything from architecture to floristry. DCD executive director Linda Yates says: "They are motivated and very goal-orientated, and they transfer those skills into new ventures."

Russian-born Asya Verzhbinsky, 33, was a soloist with the Birmingham Royal Ballet for nine years before retiring in January 2001. DCD helped her launch a career as a photographer.

"Dancers retire for many reasons," she says. "Mine was that I had grown out of it. I wanted to expand myself."

She had been interested in photography since childhood, so it seemed a natural path. "As a dancer you look at yourself in the mirror all day, every day and attempt to perfect your own body. So I don't think it's unusual to go into something else visual."

A grant from DCD enabled Verzhbinsky to buy equipment and attend courses to kick-start her career. "They helped me enormously," she says. "For dancers it can be difficult going into something else because you have to redefine



Photo: Andrew Burnner



Photos: Nick Curria and Dag Conway

And the beat goes on

yourself. DCD really helps you focus on what your interests are and what you could go into."

Verzhbinsky now works as a freelance theatrical photographer and says determination, patience and discipline are the essential skills she transferred from dance into her new role. "I don't miss dancing because I feel I have been fulfilled," she says. "When I left, I was very satisfied and I felt it was time to move on."

After 14 years with the Royal Ballet, Anthony Bourne, 37, retired to begin a new career as a carpenter and builder. A grant from DCD provided him with the tools and a van to set up in business, and, six years on, he has his own firm called The Three Amigos, specialising in carpentry, building and period refurbishments.

"I always wanted to leave dance when I was young

enough to do something completely different and dedicate myself to another career," says Bourne. He retired in December 1997 and says: "Age was catching up with me and I had a back injury."

He was already a seasoned carpenter when he finished dancing, having taught himself and helped numerous colleagues fit bathrooms and kitchens. "When I left, I had work for only about four weeks. It was scary. To start with I really missed the camaraderie. I went from being in a company of 120 people I was really friendly with, to working by myself."

Bourne says the most important skill he brought into his new career from his life as a professional dancer was dedication. He says there's a lot of "hard graft" involved and dedication is essential. Content with his

new role and a blossoming business, Bourne enjoys spending evenings with his two-year-old son. He adds: "Being my own boss is the best thing in the world."

Anita Griffin, 45, was a professional contemporary dancer for 20 years, appearing primarily with the London Contemporary Dance Theatre, before she retired. "I didn't make a conscious decision to stop dancing, but made a decision not to be in a company full-time," she says. "I had been in the LCDT for almost 10 years and I wanted to have a family. Juggling dancing with children is difficult."

After retiring, Griffin worked as a freelance rehearsal director and assistant choreographer as her children grew up (she has two teenage sons) before deciding to retrain as a make-up artist. "I had always been interested in doing it,

life after dance: Anthony Bourne, left, became a carpenter, and Anita Griffin moved on to be a make-up artist with the help of DCD funding

but it is a difficult career to take on when you have young children, because the hours are long. So, when the boys got a bit older I went along to the Greasepaint studios in Ealing to talk to the tutors." Griffin decided a three-month course in screen make-up was right for her and DCD agreed to pay her fees and a maintenance allowance. "That was fantastic because there is no way I would have been able to pay for it myself," she says.

Since completing her training, Griffin has worked on two short television films, a Channel 4 crime series and has spent this summer on location in east London and Spain for a new Sky drama called Mile High.

She is happy in her new role but adds: "I do miss the excitement of performance. You can't get that anywhere else."

● www.thedcd.org.uk