

Leaping into the great beyond

Dancers' Career Development helps dancers retrain in another profession after their career ends, as **Kevin Berry** discovers

What happens to dancers when their careers are drawing to a close? Dance careers are short but given the intensity of life as a dancer there is a temptation to leave thoughts of retirement until the very last months.

As a consequence, valuable time is lost and dealing with life in the outside world becomes that much more difficult.

For 30 years now, Dancers' Career Development, based in London, has been helping dancers come to terms with the close of their careers and helping them to train for a new profession.

The organisation offers career counselling, advice on courses, access to grants and much needed emotional support.

"We help and advise anyone," says Linda Yates, DCD's executive director. "In fact, I've just been advising an Albanian folk dancer."

A recent questionnaire directed at dancers helped by DCD found that 92% of them were still in the same profession for which they were retrained. Financial assistance is available in most cases and 82% of the dancers questioned had made use of funding for course fees, start-up equipment costs or child care.

To qualify for financial support, dancers must have been working professionally for eight years and dancing in the UK for five years. Company dancers are financed through Arts Council grants to nine major dance companies. The finances for independent dancers are not so straightforward and not so plentiful.

The DCD people hold regular workshops in dance schools. Interview skills and CV writing are covered, as are learning and life skills. They also have regular seminars in dance companies and are currently targeting dancers who work in musical theatre.

At the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, the marketing officer is Richard Whistler, who was formerly a dancer with Scottish Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet. He took a foundation course in humanities with the Open University while still dancing. Next came a business course with the OU and then he took the plunge with a one-year masters course at Aston University.

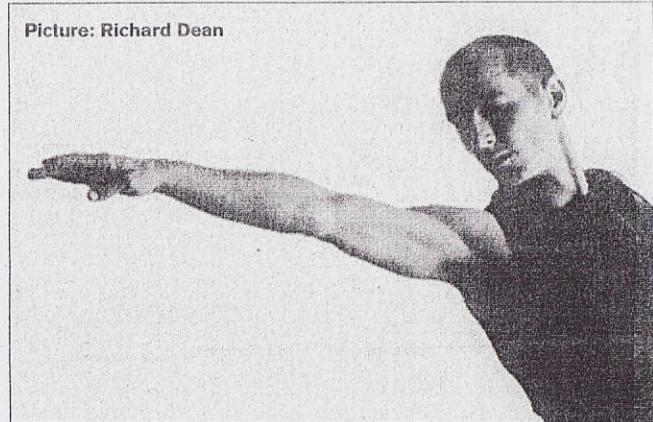
"The Open University gave me freedom and they are used to dealing with mature students," says Whistler. "It enabled me to take work on tour and to keep in touch with my tutor through

e-mail. We had presentations from DCD at Birmingham Royal. The first piece of advice they gave me was planning and preparation, researching things properly and not making last-minute hasty decisions."

Conor O'Brien, former principal dancer with Rambert Dance Company, is training to be a plumber and he is loving it. He spent his last holiday as a dancer on work experience with the plumber for whom he now works. "I had always done things around the house and wanted to train for a trade that would last me the rest of my life," says O'Brien.

Entry into the plumbing world was difficult. O'Brien tried many firms and British Gas but was told that they were too busy or couldn't afford to take him on. He did feel that because he was a dancer he was not being taken seriously by some of the people with whom he came into contact.

"Funding for an apprenticeship stops when you're 25," he explains. "I was 30 and just couldn't get fixed up with a firm. Then the accountant at Dancers' Career Development put me in touch with someone and they were willing to take me on."



Picture: Richard Dean

**Work on tap –
Conor O'Brien
retrained as a
plumber with the
help of DCD**

DCD helped with tuition fees, the purchase of a van and tools and maintenance costs throughout the transition period. "Financially, I couldn't have done it without them," O'Brien says. "They opened a door for me."

Retired dancers should retain their identity as a dancer, insists Yates. "Ordinary people can adapt to career changes but because of the dedication and training required, a dancer's identity is so strong. The transition stage is lengthy and should be taken in stages."

Future plans at DCD include a directory listing retired dancers and their new professions. It will be made available to ballet and contemporary dance audiences.

"You never know," says Yates. "You could have your garden landscaped by someone you last saw when he was dancing at Covent Garden, or your new bathroom installed, or your daughter's wedding cake made, or your tax sorted."

■ *Dancers' Career Development can be found at Rooms 222-227, Africa House, Kingsway, London WC2B 6BG. Tel: 020 7404 6141 or e-mail dancers.resettlement@virgin.net*