

Credit: Laura Dajao 2025 / Adaption Mike Sewell Leicester Mercury

DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY

Dance and the world of entrepreneurship often collide in the disability space; Carole Edrich talks to four women all about it to find out more.

An introduction...

Melanie Precious (MP) joined Candoco Dance Company as Executive Director from her previous role as CEO and Creative Director at Greenwich Dance. Laura Dajao (LD) is a UK-based, freelance inclusive dance artist. Louise Wildish (LW) left the position of Head of Inclusion for People Dancing, becoming project manager and consultant to the Barriers To Progression & Employment in Dance for Disabled People research study. Beth Bradley (BB) owns Dance Without Limits; inclusive family-friendly dance studios in Greenville and Simpsonville, South Carolina, USA.

On Being Disabled In The World Of Dance

LD: "How do I survive? Teetering on the balance in an open-ended vicious cycle of asking for assistance and either getting some, or being refused because I'm 'too able'. I don't think I'm asking for too much but because of my disability and conditions, I need to make money. When you're a freelance[r] you are always on the lookout for work, it's a constant battle, and unlike actors and musicians, dancers don't have agents."



MP: "So often responsibility to change the world is on the shoulders of those fighting the biggest fights, in terms of navigating a world that hasn't been built with them in mind. That's a huge burden. How do we not make that burden heavier?"



LW: "There are so many facets to deal with: public perception, barriers around money, opportunities, it's harder to get jobs, and then if you get them you're managing hospital and doctors appointments, it costs more because you need to pay for so much. Everybody's barriers and needs are different.





Credit: DanceWithoutLimits

> "For an inclusive organisation, it's absolutely vital to move from an expectation of 9-5 and understand the impact of how we give information."

Everybody comes from different spaces with and without supporting people. So embedding inclusion and leadership is difficult."

MP: " If you can build an inclusive place of work, everybody benefits. For an inclusive organisation, it's absolutely vital to move from an expectation of 9-5 and understand the impact of how we give information. We really threw the rule book away at Greenwich Dance. We said 'We know you'll do your work and it will be clear if you don't, so you decide how to make up your day.'"



Credit: DanceWithoutLimits

On Thinking Differently

LW: "[Disabled] entrepreneurs and leaders are seen as inspirational, which itself presents issues. We're not inspirational. We *just* do it".

MP: "I don't identify as disabled myself. Believing in the 'nothing about us without us' philosophy, I've been grappling internally with what that means, and how that manifests, and am beginning to think that I need to view myself as a facilitator."

On Health & Wellbeing

LD: "When I started freelancing I didn't have my disability in mind, so I wasn't looking after myself as I should. I don't think I would be where I am now if I had. You need to understand your trajectory and how you get there. Your health, still wanting and needing to do the things that you are good at, it's all related. Especially for artists. We want to do everything."

LW: "Older dancers were trained to push *harder*. That narrative is really harmful for so many people. I just think it has to change."



Credit: Hugo Glendinning

> "So often responsibility to change the world is on the shoulders of those fighting the biggest fights in terms of navigating a world that hasn't been built with them in mind."



Credit: Laura Dajao 2013 - Sadlers Wells Wild Card sweet sunrise

> “If venues chose to ignore 23 - 24% of people in the UK, they’re choosing not to invite a quarter of the market into their space.”

BB: “A dance teacher already modifies class [es] to meet the physical and mental needs of their students. Welcoming students of all abilities just stretches what we already do a little further. No child is the same, and all teachers are regularly modifying their lessons for any child in the classroom. For us, this is no different for dance students that may have different abilities.”



On Navigating Systemic Barriers To Entrepreneurship

LD: “It’s the understanding that I have with these people, these organisations that understand that my support or what I need to be able to be my best self for me to do the job well. There are things that need to be in place. And things like access riders are so integral to providing [support, whether] to organisations or people. Because of personal connections they understand [this] and we can have a conversation. And it all starts with a conversation, to be fair.”

MP: “Greenwich Dance couldn’t continue because it had no core funding. [It had] grants to pay for the activities, but nothing to keep the engine running. Coming into Candoco, a well-resourced NPO, I can’t take that for granted. Obviously, NPO money has bureaucracy around it. You’re accountable as you should be, which takes effort and timelines and frustration, but I’m just thankful that we have an arts council.”

“If venues chose to ignore 23 - 24% of people in the UK, they’re choosing not to invite a quarter of the market into their space. It’s not our job to make the venue inclusive, but what can we do together to strengthen what we have to offer, [and] the likelihood of our show being booked?”

On Supporting Personal Development Pathways

MP: “We are still on the process of saying to ourselves what might we need to do this well. Do we lose anything in prioritising people who identify as disabled [when so many disabled people do not?]. And how *do* we make sure we’re not forcing artists to disclose private information in order to [help us] do our support?”

On Plans For The Future

MP: “I’ve been thinking about distributed decision-making. We don’t have to hold inclusive dance alone. It’s a hang-up and not true anymore. So how do we work in collaboration, and share what that means?”

LW: “The work I’ve been doing with the barriers research will help us understand how better to support disabled people. It’s a large project with a number of participants and the results were published on April 30th”.

> “Your health, still wanting and needing to do the things that you are good at, it’s all related.”

LD: “I’ve got lots of ideas, but it’s just about where are they all going? And do they have legs? After all, I only have one and a half.” ■



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