

28



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RITA, SUE AND KATIE, TOO

Katie Ward **enthusies** about the possibilities of using dance to inform young people about sexual health and relationships

Andrea Dunbar's 1981 play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* is about two schoolgirls who consent, and take it in turns, to have sex with an older man in his car. The three main characters fall into a lust/need/love triangle in order to escape their ordinary lives. The play looks at the danger and consequences of their relationship, including an unplanned pregnancy. Dunbar was a teenager herself when she wrote it, but already she had extremely strong and critical views about life – specifically, life in Britain during the Thatcher era – and how one's socio-cultural background can influence behaviour.

As a choreographer and educator I want to create meaningful work with healthy social messages for people in many different communities. My vision of the Triangle dance project is to take ideas from *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* and craft them into a piece of dance theatre that can be



THESE ORGANISATIONS HAVE RECOGNISED THE ARTISTIC AND HEALTH BENEFITS POSSIBLE FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY YOUNG PEOPLE. THOSE FROM BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE A PERFORMING ARTS BACKGROUND CAN EXPERIENCE LIVE DANCE THAT EXPLORES SOCIAL EDUCATION ISSUES IN AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM

feel so long ago that I was a teenager facing similar issues. At sixteen I dated a man of twenty who owned a car. My attraction to him was because he had wheels. I enjoyed the status this relationship brought me, but it wasn't a positive relationship and lasted only about three months.

My dance practice began in early adolescence in Nottinghamshire. I took classes in ballet, modern and tap at a local dance school, but never felt completely happy there. Thirteen was a bit late to start lessons in these disciplines, plus I was a shy with a negative body image and no confidence. Yet I knew that I wanted to develop a career in dance. During my A-levels at college I participated in a contemporary dance workshop led by Wayne McGregor, an inspiring experience. Afterwards I studied at Bretton Hall, Leeds University, gaining a dance degree in July 2000.

Since then I've worked as a freelance dance artist within health and educational settings and with a variety of client groups – children, young people, those with learning disabilities, mental health patients and the elderly. Concurrently I've made pieces of choreography under the company name Wardrobe Dance Theatre. My work has a marked theatrical quality, integrating props, set and costumes with dance. Our House (based on Ibsen's A Doll's House) was performed during the 2001 Nottdance festival, Only Angels Obsess... Only Angels Have Wings (with themes of body image and self-harm) at Derby Dance's Ignite platform in 2002 and an initial, work-in-progress version of Triangle at Ignite 2003.

The latter project clearly required research and development. To accomplish this I wanted to work with a group of young people similar in age – mid-teens – to Rita, Sue and Dunbar the budding playwright. The aim of this research was to glean information from contemporary youths and integrate it into the content of Triangle.

I approached Kirkby College in Ashfield, Nottinghamshire. The school was understandably concerned about how the sex and relationships issues would be handled. In order to prove that Triangle was a worthwhile project, I wrote up a two-day dance workshop plan that featured topics for discussion. To ensure further safe working and professional practice I asked the sexual health

organisation SEXions, conveniently located next door to Kirkby College, to become a project partner. SEXions, which offers education outreach to school and youth centres throughout Ashfield, was very supportive. It agreed that Triangle had tremendous potential. Involvement in the project could also raise the profile of SEXions itself, making young people aware that they can access it for help and advice. Another benefit of the project, as pointed out by SEXions, was how it links in with the government's strategy to reduce teenage pregnancies by fifty per cent before 2010.

After meeting with Kirkby College dance teacher Val Tully and SEXions, we decided to work for two days with a group of young people in years 10 and 11 (fifteen to seventeen year-olds). Our activities would include discussions guided by the staff of SEXions and a dance workshop led by me but supported by dancers selected for the project.

Discussions and Discoveries

Rita, Sue and Bob Too is set on the Buttershaw council estate, a deprived area of Bradford. I chose Kirkby College because it is in a former coalfield area which is also classed as deprived. I don't think that Buttershaw and Kirkby can be deemed as exactly the same, especially nearly a quarter-century after Dunbar's play was written. Surely some things have changed. And yet statistically Kirkby has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the country.

Wardrobe and SEXions spent two days facilitating discussions and dance workshops around sexual health and relationship issues. On day one our talks focused on what influences a person to have, or not have, sex. Split into groups of five, the young people drew up tables of ideas and opinions. Factors that influenced them to have sex included peer pressure and exclusion, increased popularity, rebellion against the legal age of consent, pressure from a boyfriend or girlfriend (especially if older than you) and the media. Factors that influenced them not to have sex were concerns about the legal age, STIs (sexually transmitted infections), fear of pregnancy, education and advice provided by teachers and youth workers and the disapproval of parents and peers.

The following day we tried to define the term 'relationship' and determine what distinguishes a healthy from an unhealthy one. Although the students acknowledged >

presented to young people in formal and non-formal educational settings. I see it as a dance resource that is alternative to traditional classroom methods. With it I want to create a piece of work that is artistic and can also enhance various strands of the national curriculum.

From the start of the project I wondered if my dancers and I could extract the essential themes underpinning the play and render them in a way that's relevant to young people today. Can we construct and then deconstruct, within a dance context, ideas about what constitutes healthy life choices? Together we hope to promote higher levels of self-esteem in young people, empowering them to feel comfortable enough to say no to sex if they're not ready. Another important aim of ours is to advocate for a legal consensual age of sixteen years, whilst at the same time underlining the importance of the use of contraception.

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30

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that our lives contain hundreds of different types of relationships, the main question was the degree and quality of communication between at least two people. When focusing on positive relationships, they were asked to cite those they're close to - e.g., parents, friends - and then list things they most admire about these people and the interactions they have with them. Friendship, honesty, love and support were what mattered most. When discussing their perception of an unhealthy relationship, a lot of the points raised were about sex — being pressured into it, the lack of contraception, rape, and the links between taking drugs or drinking alcohol and having intercourse. Significantly, many of the young people didn't see sexual intimacy in a positive light.

Plainly the young people were very clued up about sex and relationships. When facilitating the dance workshops, I asked them to create trios based upon one person being pressured into engaging in an undesirable activity. Examples include not wanting to be in a certain space or to be touched, or else being pressured or tricked into touching someone, sitting on a chair or donning a jumper. Dancers Amy Tomson (since replaced by Tids Pickard), Dominic Martinovs, Katie Mutton and I performed two examples. In the warm-up I also introduced contact skills and notions of spatial relationships, which I suggested the students try and incorporate into their trios.

They were also invited to create a duet demonstrating an established relationship that undergoes change, e.g. one person becomes untrustworthy or unable to be supportive. One pair made a duet about reading someone's diary. Another charted a relationship that started off positive but broke down into violence. Conversely, others chose to begin their duet in a negative situation but resolve it in a positive aspect.

The quality of work produced was extremely high. Due to child protection regulations, however, we weren't allowed to take video recordings or photographs. This was a real shame as the material could've been adapted directly into the devising period of Triangle. Still, the dancers and I had little trouble remembering key exchanges. Because of uneven numbers one duet had to be a trio. This scenario for two males and a female stood out. Rivalry undermined the young

men's friendship. We later took a movement from this piece – the girl walking through any points of positive contact between the two boys - and integrated it into Triangle, but with the genders reversed.

If I ever decide to carry out similar research again, I will consider other ways of obtaining data. Mainly we relied on the discussions, some of the material from which can be used when Wardrobe delivers dance workshops to young people in schools and youth venues. Retrospectively, however, I think it would have been more beneficial to have had six young people with us throughout the initial rehearsal period, setting the same tasks for them and the dancers so that all would be directly involved in the devising process.

That Wardrobe's dancers were part of the Kirkby research was nevertheless instrumental in helping them understand the motives behind Triangle. They could immediately take on board the young people's verbal and kinetic ideas. This was especially valuable for the two women, who would be assuming the roles of teenage girls. As dancer Katie Mutton remarked to me about the students, 'They seem a lot older and more informed about sexual health and relationships than what I was at their age.'

Deeper into the Triangle

I liken the Triangle project to a rolling a snowball. The more the project has progressed and been networked, the more the original idea has grown. One section of the dance was made into a short film, partly because I wanted to see if I could extend my choreographic skills into another medium. The dancers and I were mentored by Uzma Choudhry, from Threshold Studios in Northampton, and Nottingham-based film editor Pantone Hall. The completed film has received excellent feedback. If funding requests are successful, it will be re-shot, re-edited and entered into festivals.

Triangle takes place inside, on top of and around a car, a fresh and challenging location from which to examine the different decisions, influences and pressures a young person may face. The dance was devised in the car maintenance department at West Nottinghamshire College. Whist students were undertaking their day to day work, we were off in a corner rehearsing as discreetly as possible



– although it's hard to be discreet when jumping all over a car. Curious about our work, the students and tutors offered valuable feedback about it.

The version of Triangle originally seen at Ignite was presented in both a live and film context. The film is based upon a car sex scene taken from the play. I didn't want it to resemble a Carry On film, let alone anything even vaguely pornographic. Rather, my idea was to interpret real-life images of sexuality metaphorically through dance. As we tried out the sound design to this scene, a few of our car maintenance observers commented that the music didn't go with the intention behind it. Our original choice was of a distorted brass band. We were advised to find something seedier and more obvious, like Je t'aime. This we tried, but it wasn't quite right. Sound artist David Brace then suggested Bob Dylan's Just Like a Woman – a perfect fit!

Triangle's soundtrack, however, consists principally of 1980s' music, a reflection of the era in which Rita, Sue and Bob Too was written. Although I was a bit unsure if young people today would be able to identify with it, their comments indicate that it works well with the choreography.

As a choreographer I could see that some of the images and movement found during the work-in-progress period of Triangle could be taken further. A more



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Relationships Education) lesson plans based around issues of friendship and trust, STIs, pregnancy planned and unplanned, consensual versus coercive sex and so on. Research from our Kirkby College experience will be used, and some of the plans will be split into gender groups. I'm also writing six dance workshop/lesson plans, as well as others based upon choreographic processes derived from the piece itself. The aim of the pack is to enable teachers and youth workers to explore ideas engendered by Triangle once the project has been received. Ideally it will enrich the PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education), SRE, citizenship and performing arts curriculums.

Making and developing Triangle has been a huge learning curve, from fundraising to dealing with schools to the practicalities of managing a project, including the administration work, by myself. Derby Dance supported me through free consultations and rehearsal space. I submitted funding bids to the Arts Council of England and local district councils, all of which were all successful.

These organisations have recognised the artistic and health benefits possible for everyone involved, and most importantly young people. Those from both within and outside a performing arts background can experience live dance that explores social education issues in an alternative medium. Additionally they have a chance to participate in dance workshops with professional artists and learn about the choreographic process. Some may be from low-income families and have multiple social problems, and are therefore at risk of social exclusion. Wardrobe aims to encourage self-esteem and confidence in all youths through its activities and core themes.

Furthermore, Triangle allows teachers and sex education workers to deal creatively with a challenging subject matter as it heightens the public relations profile of the schools, colleges and youth services that employ them. Finally, for my dancers and me, this is a dance project that crosses over into the health sector. We're bound to learn an enormous amount from it.

Anyone interested in hosting Triangle should contact Katie Ward on 07916 351973 or email wardrobedance@msn.com

finished version was subsequently shown in October 2004 to students and staff from Kirkby and West Nottinghamshire Colleges, as well as representatives from SEXions, Derby Dance and other invited dance, art officers and youth workers. The piece received positive and constructive feedback, which I intend to use to develop the choreography even more. Happily, Wardrobe has received sufficient funding to rework and rehearse Triangle for three additional weeks.

One valid point made was that obviously contraception isn't practiced by our characters, as one of the schoolgirls falls pregnant at the end. On mainstream television and in films reference is rarely made to contraception and STIs. (James Bond, for example, seems never to have impregnated a sexual conquest nor caught an STI.) These matters could be addressed in Triangle in a clearer and stronger manner, especially as it is my view that if young people decide they're ready for sex then they must take care of themselves. As the choreographer I have to decide if, and how, the subject is to be integrated into the piece, or if it will be pointed out in post-performance talks.

A practicality that concerned education officers was the restrictions Triangle may face because of its car setting. I considered chopping a vehicle in half and re-assembling it in each venue, but the

cost would be as prohibitive as finding a designer might prove difficult. Instead I've decided to run the project in summer and autumn, with performances held outdoors in a direct challenge to traditional theatre-in-education events occurring in a school hall. If it rains, an extra workshop or video/DVD of the performance will be offered. Another challenge has been managing the budget. I have £400 to find a new car - preferably a Toyota Corolla with an MOT, or something similar with reclining seats operated by a lever. As this is proving difficult to acquire, it may be necessary to rethink some of the choreography.

Triangle's target audience is young people in the fourteen to nineteen age bracket. The piece has also been deemed suitable for an audience which has never experienced contemporary dance before. Wardrobe will tour it in June 2005 to schools and youth centres in Ashfield, Derby and Lincoln. If more funding is received a further tour will take place in August and September. Alongside the performance a dance workshop and discussion forum will be offered, the latter involving either SEXions (in the Ashfield area) or a school nurse or sexual health worker.

A key ingredient of the project is the educational resource pack SEXions and I are writing. It will include SRE (Sex and