

DANCEballad

A summer school project that moves

Vicky Clausen

It is Monday, one very hot summer day in June and the first day of the summer school DANCEballad project. For the next five days children and youngsters from all over the country will be dancing, choreographing and performing their own dance coached by professional dancers and choreographers. The DANCEballad is running on its seventh season and it has been a great success with more than 600 participants involved each summer. The aim of the project is to create highly qualified dance experiences for children and youngsters aged 9-15 years, both boys and girls, during their summer holiday. Closely guided by professionals, the participants are provided with the opportunity of creating, performing and observing dance for one week. Another aim is to make dance become more visible throughout the regions by creating a base for development, continuity and interest for dance in the community in general.

The frame around the project

The DANCEballad project is developed by the Danish Dance Consultants and brought into action in collaboration with the local 'Children's art and culture administrator'. The dance project funding comes from one of the Danish Ministry of Culture's pools for culture. The DANCEballad takes place all over the country and represents up to 35 towns distributed on six regions. For each region the professional choreographers choose a common theme that all groups have to work with but must interpret in their own way.

Work in the studio

One by one the children and youngsters enter the studio, placing themselves by the wall looking around shyly. As I ask them to come closer to sit down they gather slowly. The nervous atmosphere in the studio might be caused by the participants' uncertainty of not knowing each other as well as not knowing what the day will bring. The starting point for the lesson is the participants' personal understanding and knowledge of movements and by giving them a short introduction of what and how they can create and develop their own movements and ideas into dance the participants are setting off incredibly fast, building up material with and in relation to each other. The assignment is simple and focuses on movements we make with our body every day; jumping, walking, stretching, turning and sometimes even falling. The children and youngsters locate many everyday movements and from these examples they have to explore other ways of e.g. jumping or turning. The atmosphere has changed; the nervousness at the beginning of class has disappeared as swiftly as it appeared. The participants are now investigating movements and as they are trying out different possibilities, they begin to talk about new ideas and methods of how to create their own dance material. While doing this, the studio is brimming with laughter and giggles. Throughout this process a beautiful landscape of dance identity begins to take its form as the children and youngsters find their own personal and physical expressions and it even seems that new friendships are being formed.

This year's theme is "the body" and returning from a little water break, we are discussing what the body consists of. I ask them what comes to mind when they think about the body: Feet, eyes, hair, fingers, blood, cells, heart, bones, muscles, joints, circulation systems, thoughts and the list goes on and on it is easy for the children and youngsters to relate to the theme as they all have an experience and opinion about what "the body" is. After reflecting on what the body consists of, I ask how they might translate their ideas and thoughts about the body into dance. The children and youngsters now get a new assignment: The 'body words'; the list of words from the above mentioned brainstorm, are divided into groups and the participants choose which group of body words

they would like to work with. During this phase I ask them to work solo to explore which kinds of movement the different body words might initiate. To help them understand how this could be done I ask questions such as: Think about how *your* eyes move, what does that movement look like? What is around the eye and does this affect the movement in the eye? The participants begin to explore movements in the studio. One child is dancing the directions of an eyeball that is looking around the room. The movement is fast and travelling and she dances up, down, around and to the sides. Another child moves like a wave that curves very softly, the whole body is in action - arms over the head, hands together waving forward and back. This movement represents the eyelashes as the eyelids are opening and closing. The participants are working very concentrated even though it is sometimes hard to keep producing and exploring. They are creating some very nice material with different movement qualities, expressions and it has the participants' personal touch. The next step within the lesson that day is to share the material with each other, to learn it and then to show and observe.

By this method the children and youngsters are building up movement sequences bit by bit, and as they get more and more material we start to choreograph the whole 'Body dance' - which by the way already has got a name; *Blob, blob, blob!*



Photo: Kairine Johnsen

Dancers from Frederiksberg at stage, all doing their solos at the same time. The girl with the back to the audience and hands above her head is dancing the movement of the eyelashes waving up and down as the eyelids are opening and closing. DANCEballad 2009

Waiting for the performance to begin

Friday morning arrives. It is the last day of the DANCEballad. The children and youngsters are very excited as we are on our way to the theatre hall where the final dance day takes place. As we reach our destination, we see that some of the other dance groups are practising their dance on the lawn outside the theatre. The youngsters are looking very curiously at the dancers and seem to think: What have they created? How is their dance? How good are they?

All the groups from the region are gathering in the theatre, and after a short welcome the warm up begins. Here the children and youngsters learn a short dance sequence which they will have to present at the end of the entire performance. Following the warm up, each group has to go on stage to set the light and go through the last corrections. There is a lot of waiting, but this does not seem to be a problem. The participants are playing outside on the lawn, some rope skipping, others playing ball, talking, eating lunch or practising parts of their dance. Finally the audience consisting of parents, friends, siblings etc. start showing up and suddenly it is time for the performance to begin. Some of the participants are a little nervous, some are restless, but all are very excited to go on stage.

"It was really fun to perform on the big stage and to see the other dancers and to have a whole day doing performances. I looked a lot at the other dancers and saw new dance steps and I think the others were very good, but so were we!" (Sara Sejrschild, 10 years old, Dancer at the 2009 DANCEballad, Frederiksberg).

This is a snapshot of what happens during a DANCEballad week, but there is certainly more to it. First there is training, training and training and then a break, then training again, break, training, and then of course fun,



Photo: Katrine Johnsen

Frederiksberg dancers at stage dancing the bone and joint part in the choreography DANCEballad 2009

food and water. The participants dance five hours a day and there are a lot of preparations and corrections before the final performance takes place.

"It was fun to dance a whole day, I mean the whole day every day. It was like going to school as if you had dance classes every day in all of your lessons. You get to sweat a lot, but that is what you are supposed to do! It was also fun during the breaks where we were playing ball and talking to each other ... " (Sara Sejrschild, Frederiksberg).

Reflections

By building the lesson around the participants' individual movement experiences, an opportunity is provided for them to feel secure as they are all working from a common base. Being confident they can easily relate to and cooperate with each other. The participants are not asked to replicate my movements as a teacher in some kind of imitative approach. Instead I present the participants with the opportunity to investigate movement exercises and experimentations with the purpose of creating a space for them to explore their own creative movement ideas. The insecurity they showed at the beginning of the class appears to be transformed into a curious investigation



Dancers from Frederiksberg at DANCEballad 2009, taking a break before the performance.

of their own expressions and shaping these into choreography. By choreographing the whole dance, the participants furthermore begin to generate their own stories within the dance. Their imagination, ideas and relation to each other are growing and as new expressions develop so does their sense of ownership about the dance. The name *Blob, blob, blob!* is a result of such ownership. This title comes from the participants' reflections on the theme, reflections which have been transformed into the story of one cell travelling around the body inherent to the choreography.

"The DANCEballad was really, really fun. I got a lot of new friends that I didn't know beforehand and it was really fun to dance with each other. . . . It was also good that we had to make the choreography ourselves. Previously I've been training some other kind of dance where the teacher made up the dance and then we had to copy it. Here at the DANCEballad it is fun to make one's own choreography and stuff like that . . ." (Sara Sejrschild, Frederiksberg).

Being a teacher at DANCEballad I enjoy watching the development the children and youngsters go through in the process of the week. From being shy and uncertain of what is going to happen and how they will manage, they transfer into beautiful dancers with amazing ideas, being able to create complicated movement material. But most importantly, they have gained a new experience about dance by exploring personal movements and expressions and finally displaying all their new skills in the performance with each other. Hereby the DANCEballad has provided the summer school children and youngsters with the opportunity of creating, performing and observing dance of a high quality – but there is more to it; they have enjoyed themselves and some even formed new friendships.

A 'moving' conclusion

But one question still comes up – does the project make any difference in the long run or is it just an experience lasting as long as a midsummer night's fly? In the interview with Sara she has only been speaking very positively about the project and at some point I have to ask her if there was anything that could or should be



Photo: Katrine Johnsen

Dancers before going on stage Sara is number two in the line, DANCEballad 2009

better, or even if there was something bad about the project? She turns quiet for a moment before answering: “No, I think it was perfect! And I hope that I can join in next year as well, it was really fun.”

What more can you wish for as a teacher than a happy dance student who would like to learn more! – I must claim that the DANCEballad is a summer school project that really moves!

A very special thanks to Sara, Katrine and Egill. The costumes that the dancers are wearing were developed from their own wish of what to wear on stage and made by some of the parents.

For further information and video documentary about the DANCEballad go to: www.dansensbus.dk

BIOGRAFI

Vicky Clausen: Dancer, Choreographer and Dance Educator. Works as a freelance artist in various educational institutions both private and public. Teaching dance to children in public schools in cooperation with “Ung Dansescene” and Dance Education at ‘School of Modern Dance in Denmark’. Board member at DIU (Dance in Education, Denmark), co-entrepreneur of a volunteer association called “Stands&Dans” which provides dance for amateurs, both children and adults, in spare-time settings.

Stud.cand. in Theoretical Pedagogic and Dance Education, Copenhagen and Auckland University. Contemporary Dancer, Choreographer and Dance Distributor, School of Modern Dance in Denmark (1999 & 2008).



*Vicky Clausen
Denmark*

vixen@ofir.dk