



First person singular: democratic dance

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A Government inquiry into dance? Don't snigger, says Ismene Brown

It was a giveaway sound, a snigger hastily reined in, a sort of suppressed, disbelieving sneeze.

I made this incredulous sound when I heard that a committee of MPs intended to hold an inquiry into dance. I did it again when I read Wayne Sleep's protest in a speech this month that "They don't do dance at Harrow or Eton."

And when I rang Eton and Harrow and asked whether dance appeared in their arts and sports-mad curriculum, that slightly hilarious noise came twice more, before they politely confirmed, no, dance hadn't really come up.

Dance, a serious subject for MPs? Or for top boys' public schools? Of course not.

We may all be eating our words. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee held their inquiry, took almost 100 submissions from dance companies, choreographers, schools, arts agencies, councils and individuals (including me), and this month produced a 225-page report.

From the faintly sniggering way it was summarised in the press, the conclusions appeared a pie in the sky, nanny-state mishmash. They said dance should be a school subject, it should solve health and social problems, and more people should go and look at it. Ah, so. But, once I read in detail, I realised that these MPs had covered a great deal of ground.

For instance, they exposed the arts minister, Estelle Morris, in an unhappy pirouette facing in two directions: yes, she said, the Government did have a dance policy (excellence, access and healthy living), but no, "the Government does not as such have a written policy on dance." Moreover, it didn't plan to change (er... whether or not it had a policy).

MPs homed in like wasps to a beer can: so the Arts Council had had a large increase of money to £365 million, yet the Government could offer no policy, evidence or interest in dance's potential public benefit?

Then they listened to Morris's vague assurance that dance is a "compulsory" element of PE in the primary school curriculum – but they listened more to the teachers' and practitioners' protests that sometimes the token dance lesson doesn't get taught at all, and if it is, it may be so badly done that children are left with an ingrained hatred of it, particularly boys.

Many professionals at the "art" end (such as me) had insisted that no good would come from connecting dance to sport. But I think I'm thinking again. The MPs heard that dance was a great way to keep non-sporty kids out of fat clubs and pensioners in independent lives, but they also wanted to hear the claims of benefits to social confidence, self-discipline and imaginative creativity.

Labour MP Derek Wyatt reported that in San Francisco, projects had shown that dance and music were the only tools that affected unschoolable kids – could social projects in Britain show similar evidence? If so, the Health and Education departments might be persuaded to contribute to dance funding and a more coherent, high-profile approach.

Moreover, they were inquisitive about the art itself. They heard about the funding ceiling encountered by mature choreographers, the difficulty in moving up from small to larger-scale productions that British and foreign theatres want to see. They concluded that the Arts Council's woolly and obscure processes were at fault, that the Council should focus on excellence and leave social agendas to Government departments.

They listened sensitively to the evidence on dancers' pay, peaking at under £18,000 a year outside the salaried companies, the high numbers living on benefits – and they joined up the dots rather well.

If better salaries were paid, they saw, dance could afford larger-scale work, which would be more artistically and commercially interesting, and better marketing talents

could be recruited – all of which would attract more sponsorship, and encourage expansion without increasing reliance on public funds.

All in all, the Commons inquiry took dance seriously for what it is now, and looked clearly ahead, too. It was democracy working for civilisation. Imagine – on October 1, Estelle Morris is supposed to reveal the Government's strategy for dance. Even Eton and Harrow may have to take notice.

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