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Study explores benefits of dance for people with Parkinson's

English National Ballet and Roehampton University announce breakthrough research into the benefits of dance for people with Parkinson's...

Photographs by Belinda Lawley/English National Ballet



English National Ballet has been working with people with Parkinson's since October 2010, and is the first major dance company in the UK to do this. Alongside this work English National Ballet commissioned Roehampton University to carry out research; this research is the first of its kind in the UK.

English National Ballet's dance classes for people with Parkinson's led by the Company's Department of Learning, was inspired by Mark Morris Dance Group who are pioneers of Dance

for Parkinson's in the USA. English National Ballet has re-interpreted their approach, making its work unique to the Company, reflecting the resources of an internationally acclaimed classical ballet company. English National Ballet is part of a network of teachers of Dance for Parkinson's across the UK, supported by Dance Umbrella.

Dance for Parkinson's, led by English National Ballet's Danielle Jones together with Joanne Duff and Anna Gillespie, freelance artists, was a 12-week project, funded by City of Westminster, which attracted 24 people with Parkinson's and their family members and carers. Each week the group met for a dance class inspired by Rudolph Nureyev's *Romeo & Juliet*.

Participants had the opportunity to learn exercises based on the principles of grace and expression that are fundamental to ballet. Participants also had the opportunity to embody the characters of *Romeo & Juliet* and learn sequences from the famous *Dance of the Knights*. A trip to see the ballet at the London Coliseum added value to the participants' experience.



Roehampton's Dr. Sara Houston and Ashley McGill MSc were commissioned to conduct research into the results of the project by examining the benefits of dance in its artistic form. The researchers reviewed the social and psychological benefits to participants as well as physical changes in posture, stability and mobility over the 12 week period.

The results are ground-breaking, and suggest that dance temporarily relieves some symptoms of Parkinson's and aids short term mobility, as well as contributing to social inclusion and artistic expression.

The study examined the experience of dancing with Parkinson's from both qualitative and quantitative angles. Both angles suggest that dancing is an important tool to increase well-being, to aid daily life and to give people a sociable, creative outlet that is not disease-focused.

"One of the most noticeable aspects of the project was how it supported participants' confidence, as well as improving their bodily awareness," Houston noted. "The project's inclusivity and encouragement coupled with social interaction were key to achieving this."

Conclusions

The research study concluded that dancing, as seen within English National Ballet's project:

- Aids people with Parkinson's physically, mentally and socially
- Does not help with physical development in a uniform or linear fashion, but can help with mobility in the short term, particularly when there is musical accompaniment
- Gives participants the tools to increase body awareness and to increase confidence in order to use the mobility they have, but may not have had the courage to use
- Provides tools to help with activities in everyday life
- Gives participants the opportunity to experience different qualities and ways of moving
- Can loosen up the spinal area and help with stability and posture
- Can encourage a greater reach, focus and projection
- Provides a vehicle for social interaction
- Precipitates feelings of well-being, determination and achievement
- Provides opportunities to create movement and stimulate the imagination
- Provides an event for people with Parkinson's that is about art, rather than about disease



- Provides opportunities to learn about ballet
- Provides an enjoyable way for participants to exercise as a group in a structured environment
- Allows participants to enjoy the excitement of being a part of the goings-on of a professional ballet company

For more information:

English National Ballet

<http://www.ballet.org.uk/current-projects/dance-for-health.html>

Roehampton University

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/>