

Mark Smith,  
Deaf Men Dancing

# Sign Language

Deafness needn't be a barrier to dance, discovers  
**Marianka Swain**

**D**ance is part of who I am," observes Mark Smith, founder and artistic director of Deaf Men Dancing (DMD). He was diagnosed as deaf aged four, and shortly after being fitted with his first hearing aids, he attended his sister's ballet class. "I could suddenly hear the piano, and it dawned on me they were moving to music. It was like a whole world opening up."

Mark joined the class and found ways round his deafness. "I stood at the front when the teacher demonstrated and focused on every detail. Now, as a choreographer, I'm incredibly picky!" It paid off: at ten, he became a Royal Ballet Junior School Associate. His teachers accepted him wholeheartedly, but he couldn't progress to White Lodge, as there was no special educational support in the 1980s. "Now, they offer help like one-to-one tutorials. The industry's slowly changing.

"It's a shame it's taken this long, as dance is actually very accessible: it's physical and visual, and deaf dancers really internalise music rather than just listening. It's also communication, which can be a lifeline for those feeling frustrated or limited – you can express your feelings and experiences in a way everyone can understand. I'd love my work to help bridge the gap between the hearing and deaf communities."

**T**hat's also a long-term aim of Ray Batchelor, tango dancer and lecturer at Buckinghamshire New University, where he and colleague Melanie Parris ran the

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"D/deaf CAN dance!" project. "Melanie's profoundly deaf, but we tried dancing together and found I could give sufficient indication for musical walking. That made us wonder if tango was a way for deaf people to access music, not just through vibrations, but through the body of their partner."

Last February, they ran three workshops, with deaf students aided by facilitators. "It was an education for me too," admits Ray. "I normally have students in a circle around me while talking and demonstrating simultaneously, but they couldn't watch my body and lips at the same time, or lipread the back of my head!"

Ray made some adjustments, but found it was otherwise similar to instructing hearing students. "Deaf facilitator Terry Meinrath noted, 'There isn't much difference between teaching people who can't hear the music and teaching people who don't.'

"We played music at different tempos and colouring, and I was hugely impressed with how they matched the mood. Deaf dancers formed partnerships, picking up on different registers depending on their type and level of deafness. It throws down the gauntlet to the dance community, as it shows there are different ways of accessing musicality."

Mark has similar experiences with DMD, formed in 2010. "I wondered what it would be like dancing with other deaf artists, so I arranged a two-week workshop with Anthony Snowden, Denny Haywood, Jacob Casselden, Joseph Fletcher and Kevin Jewell."

The group has a range of backgrounds, including ballet, hip hop and musical theatre, and different hearing levels, explains Mark. "I hear the low to medium range really well, while others are better at the high range, or vibrations, so we interpret music in individual ways. That makes it exciting – dance should be about understanding other points of view."

Ray was impressed with his deaf students' attentiveness to their partners. One participant loved the tango variations, because it meant maintaining intense connection, while another noted deaf people can't rely on speech and so are adept at looking for clues, making them skilled at picking up on a partner's subtle movements.

The audience at DMD's debut showcase likewise noted "how in sync and aware we were," recalls Mark. "People wonder if we can even dance in time, so it challenges assumptions of what

## SIGN LANGUAGE

deaf dancers can accomplish.” The positive response led to the creation of a company and numerous performances, including this month’s *Hear! Hear!* at Sadler’s Wells, part of its =dance season.

The piece features music from Deaf Boy One and creative signing from deaf performer Caroline Parker, and aims to “immerse people in our world”, explains Mark. “We modulate the music, so you can experience hearing part of it, and draw on childhood memories of wearing a constrictive harness hearing aid box. But there’s lots of humour too; we make serious points in an entertaining way.”

DMD’s choreography grows out of sign language translations of lyrics, “so I choose music that tells a meaningful story,” says Mark. “Deaf audiences love seeing sign language – they feel invited in.” He’s taught this style of choreography to hearing dancers, “who embrace learning something new. I’m hoping to do more with hearing performers and companies in future.”

Mark also wants to develop DMD’s outreach programme. “I left college with no idea where



Dawn (left) is deaf and learning to follow experienced hearing dancer Margaret (right)

to go or how to find information, so I want to educate other deaf creatives about the professional environment – auditions, interviews, networking – and teach choreography, costume design, music, everything. It would be fantastic to create more opportunities through DMD, like making Sadler’s Wells an annual performance – seeing deaf dancers on that stage tells people you can achieve anything.”

Ray concluded his project with a successful milonga, and

he’d love to take deaf dancers to a mainstream one. “The tango social rituals are visual, and it would be a great way to integrate further, but it might need more awareness from others. I’ve applied for funding and hope to do an intensive workshop on consecutive days, so perhaps we can build up to it.”

One participant was concerned others might not want “to learn to be tolerant of deaf people,” but another shared their “special joy” when they were able to let go and just be in the moment: “That’s a special release for me. It’s like I can take off all the heavy armour.” That, surely, is a sentiment worth hearing. ●



*Sense of Freedom,*  
Deaf Men Dancing

*Hear! Hear!* is at Sadler’s Wells on September 28, and you can learn DMD’s style of dance at their 2pm workshop. Deaf Men Dancing: [www.marksmithproduction.com](http://www.marksmithproduction.com)