

Joanna Shaw, director of One Youth Dance, teaching



## A Shaw thing

Carole Edrich speaks to Joanna Shaw of One Youth Dance

Joanna Shaw started One Youth Dance (OYD) at an age most kids start a Saturday job. She explains: "I joined a theatre project in a really poor area in London when I was 16. I had just left home. It was the only consistency in my life. My rock. I met a huge variety of incredible people from very different backgrounds.

"All 35 of us were the same age but would never have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. I literally called them my family. We did three shows a year and the two people who taught us believed in us and loved us and helped me become who I am. It closed when I was 17, which was a surprise to us all. Months later, remembering how much I had

loved the company, I decided to make a version that other kids could join without ever having to worry about it not being there."

Joanna only wants to talk to me about OYD and its members; her own considerable experience isn't significant to her, so I asked Rita, her mother, to tell me more. "Joanna started ballet classes aged two and a half," she says. "She was absolutely desperate to start. I vividly remember calling every school I could, to find one that took children so young. It wasn't that easy!

"Even as a tiny tot, dancing along to S Club 7, she showed great rhythm. At 12, Joanna started tap, which she really enjoyed and at which she soon excelled, moving up the grades,

always with top marks. She restarted ballet at 13, which she totally adored. As with all dance, she practised hard, showed great dedication and discipline, never missed a class and achieved top grades in exams, which she took very seriously. She received the Key Stage 4 Award for dance at school. Then during her vocational training at college it became clear that, although she was achieving outstanding results in singing and acting too, it was dance that was her passion."

Joanna borrowed money from her mother for leaflets for OYD's first performance in 2011 and the 12 dancers gave a half-hour performance comprising two 15-minute acts. For Jo it was a life-changing experience. The

troupe's delight in the opportunity, reinforced by messages thanking her for allowing them to be part of the OYD family, made her realise that she no longer wanted to be a dancer. She decided to create similar experiences for others instead.

It wasn't (and still isn't) all plain sailing. Because the company isn't funded, Jo has to charge a small amount for the dance classes, which she'd much rather not do. Known at school as "the ditzzy one", she didn't share her experiences there at all, saying she would not have been believed by her friends.

Two years on, at the end of the company's Christmas show, Joanna's sense of vocation was confirmed when one of the troupe spoke out. With tears streaming down her face, she announced to all that One Youth Dance had changed her life completely, and: "If it weren't for Jo, and God as well, I wouldn't be who I am today." Having never imagined that anyone would give her such a compliment Joanna went home to cry tears of joy and was on a high for a week.

From a weekly class and one annual performance, One Youth Dance has grown to perform in 26 individual projects in the last two years. They've performed for the Queen in front of an audience of 30,000 (and seven million on TV), once did 22 hours of rehearsals in one weekend school and last year's seven graduates had 27 offers of professional training.

As OYD has grown, Joanna, now 22, has grown too. She now knows what to look for in

fellow choreographers and what is involved in running an active, inclusive and sophisticated company. I estimate that she has been responsible for around 90 people, was a founder member of Fi.ELD (Future Innovators of East London Dance), an intern with Dance UK and last year completed the administrative and financial endurance trek to turn One Youth Dance into a charity.

Fellow choreographer Anne-Lise Marie Hearn said: "After the auditions, Jo and I always go for a meal together to discuss how they went and to prepare for the upcoming term. I love this: we get a chance to properly sit down and chat – something we rarely get the chance to do in the busy term.

"We didn't know each other before I began working with OYD, and our friendship and mutual respect have grown immensely. I am so proud of everything she has accomplished, and support her every step of the way. Working with Jo has completely changed my view and fills me with so much inspiration and joy. Every session I teach leaves me with something new. I truly believe that everyone involved has great things ahead!" Others share Anne-Lise's confidence too: as we went to press, OYD was announced as one of just eight companies chosen to perform at UDance 2014 in April. Watch this space. ●

[www.oneyouthdance.com](http://www.oneyouthdance.com)



Troy Rochester of One Youth Dance