

My first, my last

Greenwich Dance's *Last and First Cabaret*, part of its 20th anniversary celebrations, also marks the departure of the organisation's director, Brendan Keaney. To mark the occasion, a number of personalities from the dance world shared their first and last experiences with **Carole Edrich**

My first....

Brendan Keaney, director of Greenwich Dance



My earliest memories at Greenwich Dance, 16 years ago, were of blind panic as I wondered

how to make an impact without a budget. The first time I started to really feel that we were [making an impact] was when we produced *The House of Delights*, in 1997. Made for the Queen's House at the National Maritime Museum for the company Edwards and Watton, this piece and Ricochet Dance Company (the resident artists) went on to win *Time Out* awards that year. I remember walking away from that award ceremony feeling extremely proud; Greenwich Dance Agency (as it was then known) was beginning to get noticed.

The Sugar Dandies, ballroom competitors and promoters

From the moment we walked into the Tower Ballroom, that shrine to the fabulousness of ballroom dancing, we were totally amazed.

Stepping on to the floor for the first time, our knees almost buckled. This might have been its softness, which seems to move with you, or our nervousness at being the only gay couple in the ballroom. They thought we were joking at first and some laughed. Then we started to dance and they could see that we were serious. By the end of the day, we had made many friends and the only awkward thing was how far out of their way people went to let us know we were welcome.

Alistair Spalding, chief executive and artistic director of Sadler's Wells

One of my first-ever contemporary dance experiences was Merce Cunningham at Sadler's Wells while I was still at college. It was very strange. I seem to remember the entire performance took place behind gauze, so it looked as if the dancers (including Cunningham himself) were swimming in some kind of underwater world, an impression probably aided by the fact that John Cage was in the pit blowing into a conch shell! I was quite bewildered, but the images and the impression of that night stayed with me and may well

have planted a seed somewhere deep in my consciousness that meant that I found myself, 30 years later, running that same venue. If you had told me on that night what was in my future, I would have said you were mad!

Darcey Bussell, former Royal Ballet principal and *Strictly Come Dancing* judge

My first insight into dance as a child came from the late afternoon Sunday films with Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse. I just loved all those Busby Berkeley numbers. The Hollywood movies achieved such glamour and, of course, had dancing. That's when I thought: if I do anything, I want to dance like that.

Ruth MacKenzie, director of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad

With Greenwich Dance, we presented the UK premiere, I think, of Elizabeth Streb, and that decisive meeting led to Streb's *One Extraordinary Day* on the London Eye and other London landmarks as a highlight of the London 2012 Festival.

Hofesh Shechter, choreographer and company director

The first day I went to the studio on my own to work on *Cult* for the Place Prize – I'd found a very basic, cheap church hall at the end of my road – it was really raining hard and I seriously considered staying in with a hot chocolate instead of braving the weather to get to the end of my road... It felt that if I didn't go that day I'd never have started.

For me choreography is all about persistence, about beginnings and endings. It's not easy, but it's the consistency in coming back to the studio again and again that makes things happen.

Ben Wright, choreographer and company director

A first for us is *Just As We Are*, a new choreography for my company bgroup in a triple bill. The second section is the duet that I last presented in the semi-finals of the 2012 Place Prize, the opening section is a brand new work for five performers and the first is a work I created four years ago for the Place Prize in which I encouraged audience members to dance with us on stage.

Tommy Franzén, dancer and choreographer

I was very young when I started show dancing and all the other boys were older than me. We had learned our choreography to the count; you know, one-two-three, but I couldn't understand the timing when we started rehearsing to music. It was only then one of the older boys told me to dance to the beats in the music. Before that I had been dancing to the counts in my head. It was the first time I understood how to fit moves and music and just in time because we performed that night!



Paul Russ, chief executive and artistic director of Dance4 and Nottdance Festival

In the first open masterclass I had with Nigel Charnock we had to leap wildly across the floor, projecting our spirit to reflect the feel of the song. He said I wasn't lifting from my appropriate place, my perineum... Although I was mortified at that moment, it also felt completely appropriate for a man of his stature and magnitude. That particular workshop defined me as a person by making me more aware of myself physically. To be given the opportunity to lead Dance4, the organisation that was so much part of my early formative dance years, is another first and an incredible honour.

Shobana Jeyasingh, choreographer and company director

As a six-year-old I was first captivated by the dancing goddesses of the Indian cinema. I stopped dancing when I started choreographing.

My last...

Simon Selmon, founder of London Swing Dance Society

My last memorable experience was doing an exchange (swing for tango) with a tango teacher. She pointed out a basic beginners technique and I realised that, in over 30 years of dancing, teaching and performing, and 20 of tango, I still have things to learn.

Kav-Man, from *Got To Dance*

I was three years old when I did my first 360-headspin and my last favourite experience was meeting Ashley Banjo [judge

and leader of dance troupe Diversity] twice on *Got To Dance*.

Cathy Marston, director of Bern: Ballett

I'm very much looking forward to creating my last ballet for the Bern: Ballett – *Hexenhaut* (Witch-hunt), which I'll bring to the Linbury Studio Theatre at the Royal Opera House in May 2013. Although it's still to come, I'm sure it's going to be a memorable creative process and the final work of my tenure here!



Robin Windsor, *Strictly Come Dancing* pro In a few years' time there will

come a day when I take off my dance shoes. That will be a final "last". There will be one day when I'll have to say enough is enough as far as being able to perform is concerned, that will become the end of my dancing story.

Brendan Keaney, director of Greenwich Dance

My last moments are yet to come. However, despite the fact that I am hugely excited about the move to DanceEast, I will be sad to be leaving Greenwich. I have worked with some great artists, and the staff and board have been truly amazing. The Borough Hall is a complicated and slightly tatty building, but it is a magnificent space. It's a dance cathedral rather than a dance studio and there is nowhere else like it. ●