

**Folk Education Network
Folk Education Development Day**

**Cecil Sharp House
Saturday 16 March 2024**

Theme: Engaging Young People in Folk Dance



Dance leaders, Judith Palmer MBE and Stella Carvalho, with percussionist Charles James, from African Heritage UK. Photo by Jen Cox.

Review by Jowdy Davey

It was a pleasure to join three fellow youth Cornish dance leaders on a road trip to London for this brilliant day of dance development. As we launch Perghenegi: The Cornwall Youth Folk Ensemble, Treys Lowen Cornish dance sessions for young people and families and support youth dance groups such as Kekezza representing Cornwall at major international festivals, we looked forward to sharing and bringing home some ideas and inspiration.

First up were **Folk Friendly** who led us through a warmup followed by an example Border morris dance they teach at their sessions. Not usually getting much chance to do morris dancing, I really relished the opportunity to get my hands on some sticks!

As we caught our breath, **Carol Robinson, Artistic Director of Folk Friendly**, talked us through their approach and the importance of constant reflection on what worked / what didn't. Carol underlined this didn't need to be heavy, and even a verbal 'mini evaluation' at the end of each session was enough to ensure sessions remained engaging and relevant.

We talked about leaving space for young people to find their own feet (physically and metaphorically!) and ensuring sessions flow – not stopping everything because one step or shape went wrong. It was more important that young people were having fun and wanted to come back.

This led to discussion around getting to know young people in your groups and playing to their strengths, and how as dance leaders we manage to keep the interest of different skill levels from total beginners to those with years of experience. Carol explained this opened opportunities for more experienced young dancers to take on a teaching role and develop their skills.

Segueing beautifully was a longsword workshop with the **National Youth Folklore Troupe of England (NYFTE)**. Starting with a demonstration, we then had a go ourselves with **River Coomber of NYFTE** taking the teaching lead, ably assisted by the other young people from the group.

Chris Nikel, Technical Director of NYFTE, explained that young people start with expert input, and are then encouraged to make the dances and choreography their own. We reflected on how for this day, the young people had become the experts teaching the workshop participants and sharing their own skills and experience. What shone through this dance development day was that young people were integral to it, not just the subject of it.

After a break for lunch, we moved on to a workshop led by **Judith Palmer MBE, Founder and CEO of African Heritage UK, percussionist Charles James and with support from dancer Stella Carvalho.**

We learnt dance and drum rhythm patterns associated with Kpanlogo and created dance movements experimenting with technique from the old, Kpanlogo and the new, Azonto dances.

Judith taught us to build and layer the rhythms, and how the dance steps mirrored these. I enjoyed the playful interaction between the percussionist and dancers, with different drum patterns signalling a change of step or pace.

Once we'd learnt the steps, we created a circle where workshop participants entered and performed their own freestyle approach to the dance, cheered on by their fellow dancers. Judith explained that this safe space was to express and to love yourself, and we talked about how these skills in expression and team working were so important for young people, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic where there's high risk a generation has missed these crucial social development stages.

The day finished with a session led by **Jade Hunt, Head of Dance at Horizon Community College**, who led us through examples of how her group of young people have combined traditional folk with modern dance such as street dance.

Doing a Cotswold morris / street dance mash up to the Fresh Prince of Bel Air theme song was one of the highlights of my day, despite my horror that most of the young people in the room had no knowledge of the original TV programme!

Jade talked about the importance of young people taking ownership of the dances and the choreography to make it relevant to them. We also looked at how incorporating different themes or props can provide inspiration and created our own Border morris choreography to a song from the musical 'Newsies' with newspapers as props.

Jade explained that there was a big draw for young people to have an opportunity to share their work in performances at festivals and other events, which shouldn't be underestimated. Jade and fellow teachers have been taking a group of up to 50 young people to perform annually at Swanage Folk Festival since 2014 following their school's involvement in the EFDSS project The Full English. Their students love performing at the festival, very much look forward to it, and receive a very enthusiastic reception from festival goers!

A huge meur ras / thank you to all the workshop leaders and to the EFDSS for organising this friendly, informative and uplifting event. More please!

Jowdy Davey is Chair of Lowender CIO, an advocacy and development organisation for Cornish culture. Lowender connects communities and champions Cornwall's living traditions locally, nationally and internationally. We run a festival, put on events, support projects, working with musicians, schools, community groups, to make sure that Cornish culture is accessible and celebrated in Cornwall and beyond.

Jowdy is a dancer and musician who has grown up immersed in Cornish culture and founded her first Cornish dance team 'Tan ha Dowr' at the age of 15. She's now enjoying bringing up her three young daughters in the world of folk / traditional music and dance.

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