

MOVING TOGETHER: DANCE IN A SHARED WORLD

When I was 15 years old, I went on a school trip to Florence. As you can imagine, it was an unforgettable week. My memories of Michelangelo and Botticelli, of the Medici Chapel and the Duomo, are as fresh as the *Primavera*. But it is not only the artistic experiences I remember. Everything was a revelation. I'd never been on a plane before. I'd never heard of a cappuccino. Each day brought discoveries and taught me something of how differently people in another culture think and live.

I remembered that trip when I thought about the hundreds of young people from all over the world arriving in Copenhagen for this Congress. I imagine them to be excited, happy and perhaps a little anxious at what the week might bring. Everything is new and different. How do you buy a bus ticket? How do you say thank you? How do you eat an open sandwich? There is a performance to present: will it work as was hoped during all those months of training and rehearsals? And, most importantly, will they get on with the people they meet? Will they make new friends?

My school trip to Italy didn't offer such opportunities. We had no contact with Italians of our own age as we went from one museum to another. At this Congress, in contrast, you can meet the world. You can see performances by dancers from every continent, of course, and you can talk with them too—people who share your love of dance but do so within a culture and life experience unlike your own. And, in the twinning programme, young dancers will meet one another in and through dance itself, in the physical immersion of movement, where words are not necessary but where so much that we cannot put into words can be communicated, shared and understood. The theme of this Congress, 'Twist and Twin', catches that spirit perfectly and so this morning I'd like to explore what that experience might mean and why it is so important today.

Let's begin with the idea of twinning itself. Its present origins lie in the trauma of the Second World War. Soon after the end of the conflict, the idea emerged of making formal links between former combatants. In 1947, the English city of Bristol, which had been heavily bombed during the war, sent a delegation to the even more damaged German city of Hanover, reaching out as citizens, not states. Looking back, it seems extraordinary that people who had been so recently at war should be put such effort into reconciliation. But they did and very soon hundreds, then thousands of communities in France, Germany,

Britain and elsewhere established twinning agreements with former enemies. Political opponents, ex-soldiers and civilians met at civic events and began to learn about each other's lives. That commitment has been sustained for almost 70 years, with twinning programmes continuing to encourage regular contact between European citizens and – more recently – with communities in Africa, Asia and the Americas. The mechanism is flexible and allows people to find their own common ground. For example, shared professional interests have linked the fire-fighters of Leicester and Krefeld since the cities twinned in the 1960s. Their friendship is symbolised by an annual football match they have played since 1973.

I find this a moving and hopeful story. I also believe that it is an important one in a world of increasing conflict and, with it, fear of difference. War and terror is forcing more and more people from their homes. They undertake highly dangerous journeys and rarely find a welcome if they do reach a place of safety. The citizens of rich countries do not always get a better reception when they travel abroad either. As I see the world today, I'm reminded of some words by the British novelist, E. M. Forster, written in 1939 but equally true today: *'though we cannot expect to love one another, we must learn to put up with one another. Otherwise we shall all of us perish.'*¹ Fear of strangers may be understandable, in some circumstances, but it must also be resisted – for the strangers, and for ourselves. Fear damages us first. Those Europeans who overcame their fear and hatred after the war, despite or rather *because* of what they had suffered, are an example to us still. They showed twinning's potential as a way to nurture understanding and appreciation of others – especially those we fear because we don't know them.

The arts have played a leading role in the twinning movement, with cities arranging festivals of each other's culture, or inviting orchestras and theatre companies to perform together. This is natural because it is in our culture that we express our identity and values, and so, inevitably too, our differences. Each human society's stories, songs and dances, its language and crafts, its art, reflect a unique imagination, a different world view. So if we want to understand other people, we must learn to appreciate their culture. If we want to reduce our mutual fears, we must share the dream-time of our art.

Twinning through art makes sense for other reasons too. After all, art is generally interesting and enjoyable as human activities go. Diplomacy and politics are necessary, but not much fun – even, perhaps, for those who dedicate their lives to them. Culture, on the other hand, is what we do with our free time – watching films, reading, listening to music, dancing and the rest. So it's an easy place in which to bring people together. Art is also, by its nature, a means of dialogue and exchange. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that art does not exist except in the interaction of two minds. The artist creates something she intends will communicate what she feels, thinks, imagines and cares about. The viewer, listener or reader responds with her own creative capacities for emotion, thought, imagination and investment. The work, text, composition, image or performance, is recognised as art because it has enabled that inexplicable contact between two minds – inexplicable

¹ Forster, E. M., 1951, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London: Arnold, p. 77

not because we do not know or recognise art, but because we need art to share all the things that we cannot express in everyday forms of conversation. Art allows us to imagine and empathise with all we know but cannot say, everything we cannot explain.

This complex, subtle and ambiguous form of communication between people is deeply human. It is one of the best ways we know of externalising and articulating what matters to us most. And because it is not only rational, it can be a particularly safe way to express feelings, such as fear, that we find difficult or shameful. Where language divides instead of uniting us, art can create connections that foster understanding. Just as importantly, it can do so in the safety, even the privacy, of the unspoken.

If that sounds abstract or speculative, just consider the importance of dance in social life. Dance allows people to explore the possibility of developing greater intimacy with one another within a safe, socially accepted forms of contact. When we dance, we touch in ways we do not at other times, and we learn to navigate those different boundaries with relative ease. Think of the office workers and bus drivers recreating Torvill and Dean's Bolero dance in the video we've just watched – it is the safe space of dance that makes these co-workers feel comfortable with such physical contact. It is twinning at the most fundamental, human, intimate level.

The expressive language of dance is also capable of allowing artists to communicate ideas and feelings that may be too difficult or too dangerous to put into the kind of speech I'm using now. If we watch a dance performance we may feel and think differently about it, but our various responses will have some common ground because the artists' work will not allow an infinite range of interpretations. If it is hard to say exactly what *Swan Lake* is about – if you will permit for a moment the use of an unfashionable concept – I think it is hard not to understand that it is to do with love, loss and human dignity. It cannot be read as representing the opposite of those things without a distortion so fundamental that it would make philosophy itself meaningless. In sharing our responses to a performance, as audience members or with the choreographer and performers, we learn about ourselves and about each other. We discover what we have in common and what we see or imagine differently. Sometimes we discover that there are fewer differences between us than we imagined. Sometimes we discover that what differences do exist are not threatening. They might even turn out to be exciting and inspiring.

Let me try to make that concrete again. Some years ago, I spent a day in the City of York with a group of young Colombian dancers that I have known for a long time. It was a day off in a demanding schedule of performances and workshops and I was showing them the sights. It was their first time in the UK and for many of them their first time in Europe. We visited a medieval church, built before Europeans discovered Latin America and they got into conversation with some older people who were present as guides. Each group found the other interesting, though language made communication difficult, so one of the guides played the organ for the visitors. When they discovered the young people were dancers, they asked what kind of dance. Without hesitation, the company offered the church's custodians an impromptu performance. The piece they performed, without music, was a traditional court dance from Korea. It is one of the most memorable experiences

of my life: an Asian dance, performed by French-trained Colombian dancers in an English mediaeval church for three locals. The joy and pleasure it gave those present was a perfect demonstration of how we can communicate across linguistic and cultural divisions.

When dancers from different countries or cultures come together—as the young people in this Congress are doing—all those possibilities for learning are opened to them. They discover new rhythms, new ways of moving, and new patterns, of course. They discover each other's life experiences and how they influence the language and practice of dance. They learn that gestures can have other meanings than those with which they are familiar. They see that rules and expectations are not always consistent. They learn, over time and in relation to their own capacities for understanding and empathy, about each other.

None of this is guaranteed though. Every encounter between people, and especially across cultures, has a potential for misunderstanding. Even if there is, as I believe, a natural human impetus towards trust, empathy and friendliness, it is not universal and it can be blocked by clumsiness and ill will. So it is worth saying something about the qualities that can help make an encounter between strangers more, rather than less, fruitful. They are both organisational and individual and, since the first can be supported by policy and management, those may be easier to secure than the second.

The organisational qualities I have in mind are to do with how such encounters are planned and facilitated – just what has been done by the various daCi groups in the twinning process leading up to this Congress. They include good preparation, so that both sides are able to share ideas about the purpose of the work and understand one another's needs and expectations. It's easy to go wrong if we don't test our assumptions. For instance, our partners may not be able to rely on the same support that is available to us so that a cost which is insignificant to one group is a decisive barrier to another. More complex are the values that shape whether we believe it is right to pay a cost or not. Such differences are almost endless and the only reliable way to avoid them causing misperceptions is to talk things through. From the beginning that process allows us to become engaged in a process of empathy, looking at things from another perspective and checking whether what we consider to be right might just be what is familiar to us.

Beyond that dialogue, there is a need to create an organisational spirit of trust, openness and respect. Material resources might be unevenly distributed, say between groups from the Global North and South, but creative resources are not. Everyone has a contribution to make to each other and to the project that is the unique result of their working together. A spirit of openness can suspend judgement long enough for everyone to discover which ideas might have a place in the collective work. The whole point of twinning is to learn from others, to challenge our often rigid assumptions and so to become better at what we do and even, perhaps, better people.

Talking things through and creating a space of mutual respect are essential elements of twinning, then, but they in turn depend on making time and space for the work. It is not quick and easy; it should not be rushed. Nor is there any need to, since it is the process of interaction with each other that offers us its rewards. The bumps on the road are not incidental obstructions – they *are* the road. Finally, on the organisational side, I would suggest

that there should be no predetermined agenda. Everyone has to go into such an adventure for its own sake, with the only goal being to learn about and from one another. That should not be so hard for artists. After all, it is in the nature of creative practice to accept uncertainty, to hope and aspire but to have no security of outcome. Done well a process of twinning – whether among young dancers or any other similar group – will produce its own rewards, even if we cannot be sure, at the outset, what those rewards will look like.

The individual qualities that each person can bring to that process are much harder to manage than the organisational ones. Our characters, experience, education and life circumstances make each of us unique. We all bring a range of strengths and weaknesses into the studio. It seems to me that a creative exploration with people of another culture will benefit from some important human qualities. These include curiosity – which is also essential, I think, to genuine creativity. If we are not curious about other people, their lives and their ways of doing things, we are unlikely to get much from the experience, nor to give much either. But that curiosity is not abstract: other people are not mere objects of study but active subjects like ourselves. So a capacity for empathy seems necessary – by which I mean the ability to imagine what things look and feel like to another person. It can be one of the hardest things to truly see oneself through another's eyes, but it is always worth trying. And finally, let me suggest that that without some humility, we are not likely to get very far in such a process. There are always differences of power, rooted in our economic, social and cultural capital: humility might help us avoid confusing our resources with our selves. Of course, we cannot count on possessing such qualities as we open ourselves and our creative practice to others. They are, like much that is most valuable about people, qualities we need to develop. Fortunately, an open-minded, open-hearted creative engagement with people from other cultures is a good a way to do that.

There are risks in all this, and I don't want to end without highlighting at least one important problem, which is that the kind of cultural exchange and artistic exploration that I've been speaking about naturally attracts those who already share its values of empathy and openness to the other. We are all here, I imagine, because we love dance, because we believe young people should have rich opportunities to learn and because we are interested in other cultures. We are, if you like, already halfway there. But what about those who fear difference, who are hostile to other people and cultures? They have most to gain from the kind of mind-expanding experiences that the participants in this congress will share over the next week but, for that very reason, they are least likely to want to be here.

The task is therefore to keep extending the invitation to twin—individually and organisationally—to those who do not take it up. We must always be expanding the circle to include more people and we must never deceive ourselves into thinking that the knowledge and value of human diversity fostered by a movement like daCi is universally shared. Bringing young people from different backgrounds and cultures together in dance is important precisely because there are so many who hold other views – including, I'm afraid, the idea that dance itself is wrong. So the work of daCi collectively, and of each member individually, is a deeply important enactment of a belief in the value of human beings, their essential equality and the importance of working to help every one to flourish and fulfil their potential.

This Congress is for and about the young people who give daCi its name and its purpose, and I should like to end by addressing them directly, even though they are, quite properly, not sitting in a hall listening to a middle aged man go on about dance, but dancing. You, the younger participants in Copenhagen today, will remember this week in 50 or 60 years time, in a world that may be quite different from the one we now live in. To a large extent, the character of that world will be shaped by you and your generation. You will face obstacles and threats, as your parents and grandparents have done. But you will have resources with which to overcome them and among them are the resources that you have shared and nurtured this week. I'm thinking of creativity and curiosity; empathy; mutual understanding; care, courage. And, as dancers, you have the particular gift of being in touch with your bodies. You appreciate their strength and their fragility, even if you do not yet understand everything that they can do or express or experience.

When you leave Copenhagen to return to your homes you will take new insights and new friendships. You will not know what it is to be Indian, Japanese, Peruvian, Danish or South African – unless that is you – but you will know more about other cultures than you did when you arrived. You will have real, close experience from the twinning workshops. Your muscles will remember different gestures and your mind will understand something of the expressive resources of cultures other than the one you have been brought up in. You will go home with many intangible gifts from those you have met and worked with, and they will leave with something equally precious you have shared with them.

Plant those seeds. Water them. Look after the new flowers they produce. The friendships you make through twinning can twist themselves through your whole lives, if you let them, like new vines that grow with you and support you. We're often told that it's a small world, as planes and computers bind us ever closer. But the more we know of the people with whom we share this earth the bigger it seems to me. There are unimaginable riches in the seven thousand million of us who breathe this same air, here, now. This week you will glimpse an infinitesimal part of those riches but it will be enough to fill your hearts and minds as you take your journeys home. I hope it will be enough to make you want to continue in this journey of discovery, in dance, creativity and mutual development through twinning with the others that share your time and your world.