

The Unstoppable Company by Donald Hutera – autumn 2011

There is, or so it would seem, no stopping Stopgap Dance Company. In terms of personnel this British contemporary dance troupe might be relatively small, but its achievements are considerable and its ambitions – and potential – remain huge.

Even a cursory perusal of chronological development since Stopgap was officially founded in 1997 reveals a steady, substantial and highly varied line of progress. From humble beginnings as a one-off community dance project the company has grown in both experience and reputation. A wide-open and literally far-reaching mind-set has helped send a handful of supremely eager dancers vaulting from England's rural touring circuit to Europe, the United States, the Far East and back again. But although it has gradually blossomed into a creative force to be reckoned with both within and outside the UK, Stopgap is not yet nearly as well-known as it might be.

'We're still evolving, still discovering our art,' admits Chairperson and Founding Artistic Director Vicki Balaam. 'We've only scratched the surface of integrated dance. And although we spend a lot of time honing our craft, we probably haven't spent enough time shouting about what we do.'

For some people the notion of integrated dance – that is, movement embodied by dancers both with and without physical and learning disabilities – might seem a peculiar, even wayward base from which to operate. Such an attitude presupposes a standardised 'ideal body,' a viewpoint that tends to devalue the kind of diversity and difference that integrated dance recognises and celebrates as a true and correct social and aesthetic model. Candoco is the UK dance scene's highest-profile repository of such aspirations. Founded two decades ago, this London-based company could be regarded as Stopgap's elder sibling (and one that has sometimes taken a close, mentoring attitude towards its younger relation). Both share as a key motivational impulse the desire to be perceived first and foremost as artists.

'I hope we can make great dances,' says Balaam. 'We're certainly passionate about bringing art to people.' To do that Stopgap has devised work for both traditional small to mid-scale venues and site-specific events. The company has also toured to village halls, offering dance in intimate community settings. What it all boils down to are performances in which visceral impact is wedded to a strong sense of human engagement.

Ultimately, as Balaam sees it, 'The work is about the people in the company.' What this entails is spotting what a dancer's true potential is, not by focusing on weaknesses and trying to make those better but rather by 'discovering what someone's strengths are and developing those.' So what has she, in her former post as artistic director, wanted in a company dancer? 'Great technique and charisma. The ability to engage with an audience and to bare your all with fellow performers. They need to be individuals who can also be part of a team.' But, as Balaam acknowledges, 'All of this requires a huge level of mutual trust.'

The current dancers of Stopgap – Chris Pavia, Laura Jones, David Willdrige and Sophie Stanley – are exemplary in their hunger for the sorts of choreographic challenges that can be interpreted with maximum expressivity, energy and sensitivity. Lucy Bennett was, until recently, also in their ranks. Joining Stopgap as a dancer in 2003, she gradually worked her way into a position as associate artistic director before taking on full directorship in 2012.

Bennett's appointment signals a decisive change in the company's outlook and goals. Certainly having been a Stopgap dancer gives her an inside track on what the company's strengths - and its needs - are at a key transition point. 'In my previous role I was in the thick of everything in the studio and on the road,' says Bennett, 'so it was easier to get a clear view of what the dancers could do, and how to fix problems. Now I'll be expected to play less of a practical role, which could mean that I might lose touch with the dancers a bit. But having a little more distance by being in a management position can make space for me to consider future directions in which they can progress.'

Since its inception Stopgap has learnt how to foster an uncommonly cohesive team of performers integrated on multiple levels. In part this expertise has come about by being a repertory group collaborating with a wide range of dance-makers. 'The company has an air of generosity about it,' remarks choreographer Hofesh Shechter, responsible for one of the pieces in a mixed bill entitled *The Portfolio Collection*. 'There's something non-competitive and honest about its ambitions which I really appreciate, and a sense that progress is what we're after before anything else. I felt that this wonderfully friendly, encouraging atmosphere was the basis of the dancers' motivation to experience and learn. It was a very pleasant environment to be in.'

Rob Tannion, who's made two pieces for the company, seems similarly smitten. 'They're an essential part of the UK dance scene, and well viewed on an international level as gutsy and hard-working.' But he also recognises that as Stopgap evolves and matures the dancers 'need to be pushed in new directions.'

Bennett whole-heartedly concurs. 'Our next step is to etch out a distinctive style,' she declares. One way of achieving this is to provide greater creative opportunities for the individuals within the company because 'they have something to express through our work and want to have more say over how that's done.'

Stopgap's achievements have not gone unnoticed within the industry. Vidya Thirunarayan, the company's relationship manager at the South East office of the Arts Council, dubs it 'a little gem, small but perfectly formed and sparkling in its energy and aspiration.' In her opinion it is Stopgap's successful transition from the community dance sector to the professional world that renders it a bone fide role model for other dance groups that might define themselves as integrated.

Meanwhile Eddie Nixon, director of theatre and artist development at *The Place* in London, praises the company's inclusive artistic policy. For him it is this, plus the fact that Stopgap is based outside of London, that helps make it unique. But he would also like to see it 'up the ante in terms of physical virtuosity. It would also be great if the company could keep discovering original ways of programming and presenting dance, and exercise bravery in its choice of choreographers.'

Bennett is attuned to the challenges and rewards of riskier thinking. In its upcoming projects Stopgap will examine different methods of dance-making to see, as she says, 'what processes can push us out of old habits and help us be more daring in uncovering new territories.' An even bigger, long-term goal is to increase the number of dancers capable of working within an integrated context. To address this issue Stopgap will institute SG2, a two-year training scheme aimed at disabled performers demonstrating high potential. 'SG2 is a way of diversifying the pool of dancers who can bring something fresh to Stopgap,' explains Bennett. 'Having more options in the types of artists within the company's creative framework will make us more resilient and flexible and the work itself more exciting.' But, she adds, non-disabled dancers will not be neglected.

As for the dancers presently employed by this open-hearted, diligently playful and non-hierarchically run company, what do they most want? Having spoken with them in autumn 2011 at Stopgap's headquarters in Farnham Maltings, I know they share a need for 'something new that

will push us and take us to the next level.' Bennett herself fully believes it's within Stopgap's collective power to someday 'make a masterpiece.' For her part, Laura Jones is keen to leave 'a positive legacy. I've felt so much determination here to get involved in dance, and to find and make opportunities that I hope we can make things easier for the next generation. We're ready. Just bring it on.'

Jones, who uses a wheelchair, knows first-hand how much greater the 'potential for things to go wrong' there is in a company, which counts her and Chris Pavia (a dancer with a learning disability) among its members. And yet this very unpredictability, she says, 'thickens the connections' between performers and audience. 'It's like what happens in other companies,' adds Bennett, 'but heightened.'

It may well be this intensification that distinguishes Stopgap from any other contemporary dance group in the UK. Pavia expressed it most simply and eloquently when asked where he expected both himself and Stopgap to go in the near future. 'From here,' he said, holding a hand at the level of his head, 'to up here,' at which point he raised it far higher.

*Donald Hutera writes regularly about dance, theatre and the arts for many publications and websites in the UK and abroad, including The Times of London, Dance Europe, Dance Magazine and Animated.*

*Stopgap Dance Company, Farnham Maltings, Bridge Square, Farnham, Surrey GU9 7QR  
+44(0) 1252 745 443, [admin@stopgapdance.com](mailto:admin@stopgapdance.com), [www.stopgapdance.com](http://www.stopgapdance.com)*