

Summary findings

Company Report by Zoe Partington



“Some of SDC’s works are so memorably beautiful, as to be unique in their own context, constantly changing and fluctuating from what is seen as ‘traditional dance/theatre work, sign dance embeds not only a visual spectacle, but unconventional approaches including music as soundscapes, sign and spoken languages to engage different audiences’.

Zoe Partington



Introduction

Welcome to the work of SDC. It's a departure from what is traditionally known as dance. To merely put pen to paper and write about their work does not give it justice, as its something that needs to be experienced live and visually. In more recent times SDC have under gone some incredible transformations in digital work, to embrace a flavour of their unique, organic,

immersive and often surprising professional insights to collaborations between artists, who they mentor and facilitate exchanges between practitioners.

We are presenting this report in multi-faceted layers, as sign dance, inclusion, climate change and international partners which are all intertwined as priorities for SDC

SDC is continually developing as a flexible and fluid organisation establishing their work in a difficult financial climate. The compassion and energy of these artists has been overlooked and ignored and it's important to value, recognise and celebrate the diverse work and confidence they inspire in others. This is often unseen and hidden from the public in mainstream art and culture. SDC is continually shifting and expanding new horizons to build more inclusive thinking in different ways. The performances are often on the street in the heart of our communities and not in the 'ivory towers and expensive theatres, that can be off putting or separate from the everyday person living and experiencing culture in our towns, cities and rural locations.

“Sign Dance Collective has given me a magnificent opportunity to share work with a variety of people of all ages and talents. The brainstorming we do is awe inspiring! The brilliance of the members of SDC is far beyond the scope of anything that I have ever encountered. They listen, they accept, they augment (when necessary) any and all ideas brought to them. The results? Mind-boggling!”

Viviana Molinares

There are 72 million D/deaf people worldwide who identify proudly as members of the Deaf community More than 80% reside in developing countries. D/deaf people and their human rights are still not fully recognised by the mainstream arts sector or cultural funders. SDC continue to include D/deaf people in their work and to celebrate sign dance with audiences in the UK and other countries in Europe, USA and around the world.

“Sign Dance Collective is unique in that it pioneered inclusivity as one the world’s first companies with both Deaf and Disabled professionals at the helm. As we approach the company’s 40th anniversary its longevity stands as a testimony to sign dance theatre’s relevance and its ability to mine diversity for creative discovery.”

David Bower Artistic Director



Background

SDC brings together Davids's background in studying theatre for Deaf audience and actors and Isolte's vast experience of dance. She is a dancer / choreographer and has trained with the best dancers and choreographers in the world. Their work expands across Europe and the USA as a fusion of her cross skills, which is why - it is unique. Originally when training David researched collaborative practice between Hearing and Deaf practitioners. He looked at sign theatre technique. Eventually joining the Sign Dance Collective as an apprentice and studied Signdance Theatre technique exploring contemporary dance forms and ways to fuse and embed sign language into the choreography. The company creates roughly one new piece every two years and each new production carries through the evolution of their working methodology and form. They have worked as SDC since 1987 whilst occasionally freelancing to film, radio and stage productions with other organisations.

Isolte and David create new work, and this is supported in Europe and UK., and they are finding different ways for SDC UK to work with new partners in China, Indonesia, and Thailand. Creative and production funding would allow them to be fluid and keep a flexible approach. Working in an open, inclusive way means that new partners, artists, and theatre staff need more education about using Sign language; the company promotes inclusion, and all their dancers, performers and musicians gain skills in sign to support their work.

“Signdance Theatre began as a conversation between the grass root Deaf community and Dance Artists in the mid-eighties. It was endorsed by Deaf pedagogue and Philosopher, Daphne Payne. Since the outset the exploration of sign language fused with Dance Theatre and has taken the company on a journey of creative discovery that reveals the creative wisdom that inclusivity has to offer.” David Bower

Then there is the usual misperception surrounding diversity but when SDC make a breakthrough in dispelling the prejudice it can be quite profound to witness. They try to be clear and communicate the nature of their work as best as they can. But Dance Theatre can be a new thing for some people, yet the form has a prolific and well-established cultural history.

“Working together the balance between different people different backgrounds, languages and different art worlds opens up new perspectives” Course participant.

How is your work produced/made?

SDC's work is created and produced by having a strong, as David says “follow through journey” developing, testing, trialling, and remaking and utilising the evolving techniques and Artistic Direction afresh in each new production. A new production will sometimes bear a family resemblance with preceding works as they reinvent performance tools that they have. Each new work ideally reflects the development of sign dance theatre albeit within context of the new genre of each new piece. For example, "Carthage" written by Caridad Switch is a stark, charcoal-like impressionistic prose rendered into signdance theatre that examines the horrors of human trafficking within a post-apocalyptic world and then "In Between Spaces" explores communication within a world transfixed by the saccharine neon glow of virtual reality. The company has a strong commitment to a diverse and inclusive process as well as production.

Developing areas centered on performance.

Spotting the need, facilitating the conversation, navigating issues and solutions, bringing that into a proposition that becomes an application. To support, promote, celebrate, and develop programs with theaters/ city councils/ venues/festivals is crucial to the lifeblood of SDC.

Your vision as a valued service?

1. We recognize that the context that SDC are working in, is very tough.
2. Changing performance practice at a national and international level with partnerships. A dichotomy in terms of helping small partners working at the heart of their community, very local, raising their game. They must be meaningful at grass roots level. At the same time, acting in a '**catalytic role**' that helps create a way of thinking, sharing, and growing a network of strong diverse performers that can learn from one another.
3. A learning approach: "Developing excellent models of practice and methodologies, evaluate with universities and capture in a very methodical way."
4. With specialisms in "Disability equality work", Deaf culture, dance in new forms, creativity, and environmental impacts. Eco sustainable practice.
5. Beyond theatres SDC's work is found in, "Landscapes/green spaces, industrial landscapes, localities, environment, opens up to audience reach and inclusion, relationship with the heritage, built environment and landscape and then understanding diverse cultural communities and their hidden archives."

Assets SDC can deploy.

- Some funding already in the pot for activity going forward to 2025 Rothschild, Erasmus, Creative Europe
- Sign dance knowledge exceptional, passion, commitment
- Senior credibility especially with international partners
- Base of supporters
- Credibility and trust in staff expertise especially from smaller producers.
- Limited access to any IP but SDC plays a role in engaging communities often neglected and ignored.
- History of SDC and Deaf heritage
- Web presence & some digital assets including learning modules but more established could lead to high value needs and developing rapidly in partnership with a core digital organization/thinker who has capacity to support SDC
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The work

"I imagine SDC's work in public spaces and not separated from everyday experiences." Lila musician

- A consistent sense of purpose & vision on their broad themes but this needs to be shared more widely.
- Some differences in their emphasis on their powerful organic process and diverse inclusive way of working need to be clarified and goals and milestones set for funders to understand their strength in artistic and organic expansion.
- The existing model has stretched across 70 performances, 14 residencies in 1 year– the team are tired /exhausted. SDC need some alternative ways to reach a wider audience or funding to reach groups and audiences other performers/dancers through training , summer schools, and training seminars. Diversifying using film with Rob their film maker and other film makers.
- The work reveals another cultural perspective, performers and associates believe the methodologies are strong for the company to develop quality performances. It gives an example for the next generation of how arts can be diverse and organic.



Finances

- SDC is underfunded for the remit they try to achieve, but their passion and drive persists.
- SDC's assets are largely vested in the performers-people and track record.

- Cash reserves are low– how does SDC build reserves and continue delivering their work.
- Income generation is constantly required, some of the team (experienced) need to be charging higher fees for their diverse range of skills, using their assets and skilled leaders to offer consultancy to performance establishments (NPO's European and International companies), dancers and Deaf people.
- Transition for funding often must be fast, what is the purpose? What do you offer? Who supports you?
- Future model must assume much lighter costs but gain more income/salaries for SDC core funding.
- Do less for more.

“Definitely SDC reveals another cultural perspective, I believe it is so strong what the company does with quality and generosity. It kind of gives an example for the next generation of how arts can flourish. Companies such as this need to be invested in and valued. Its tough for any organisation but when your managing new complexities and programmes across countries with cultural differences, it takes strength and imagination.”



Workshops and performers

“As a musician I played in several bands. I was always interested in unconventional spaces. So we played in fields and old houses and on the street and at one point I met SDC I had the chance to develop my practice with them. This was quite powerful because we explored, the musician changing position and also at this point playing a

character in a theatre performance so the idea and the connection between a story dance and music comes from a very intuitive point. This intuition fills the space with the very intensity it deserves and over years of formulating and rehearsing the pieces.

Lila Schwammerin Sound artist and musician - Associate Director

SDC recently worked with Leeds Deaf Theatre, who say, ***“SDC are very knowledgeable in what they are delivering. Leeds Deaf drama group gained many skills from the workshop along with excellent experience as a group”.***

In Pakostane the work observed by the evaluator was delivered by SDC in a systematic and inclusive way against all odds. The Erasmus programme was a joint initiative, but it was obvious how experienced SDC are in highlighting to young companies and performers the need to engage and interact with their audiences in specific ways. The younger companies and inexperienced Directors from other countries were fortunate to have the breadth and knowledge of SDC on hand. SDC had many jobs and roles to juggle in a programme of this nature and this at times was exhausting for a small company.

Social/media and marketing PR

- How we describe the work can be problematic and not accessible – Do people really understand what they are coming to see? How do you showcase and translate a visual medium into words to share the quality live performance provides.
- The necessity for a short film or series of videos that show the work so people can see what type of performance they are booking, SDC have investigated this and developed some film tools and art during covid which need to be expanded and developed in a learning environment and be led by an educator and workshop leader who could support the team such as Soobie.
- A longer film for programmers to get them interested in booking the work.
- Social media – be savvier in what SDC post and develop introduce more annual mapping marketing frameworks with budget costs for each element, identify who are your audiences and how will you locate them.
- Some of these ideas have now been implemented but have added extra pressure in such a small company on a tight budget.

Sustainability and eco systems

- Signdance has a role to play in this creative ecosystem as innovators and leaders. We have been proud to support Signdance’s next generation work and pass on their creative approach with others. This is clearly the future for Signdance and brings new ideas and leadership to a well-established organisation.
- Considerations of environmental sustainability are vital; we accept they can be challenging to deliver when creative organisations are struggling to survive in a cost-of-living crisis. Companies like Signdance can consider their carbon footprint: minimise commuting, maximise digital and communicate powerful messages about the climate crisis through their artwork.

“We often cycle to performances and take public transport 87% of the tour. We cook, and live sustainably on tour. The current programs are load light and self-portable and sustainable” Isolte Avila

“The work of sign dance collective is very unique because they invented this way of working/form , so when I saw them for the first time it was so powerful and intense and direct, It has everything distinctive in a diverse team working on a production, unique is that the work always develops, feels fresh- my position as a musician and its uniqueness inside the work enable me to develop new compositions. I sometimes feel even if I ‘m not moving like the dancers do, I am moving less, but I am moving. I am still dancing somehow through sound because my whole body is inside the performance, the music comes out as a kind of picture.” Lila

Conclusion

- SDC creates art by confronting stereotypes and misconceptions and showcasing the diverse perspectives and talents of its artists. Sign Dance theatre is its main artistic strength.
- SDC is a pioneer of sign theatre in the U.K. and Europe, with over 40 years of history and vitality. SDC transforms the stage into expressive medium mixing sound and silence, where images speak louder than words. The arts and society depend on each other and evolve together, as people seek new forms of creativity. To create a legacy, we must preserve the messages from the past.
- Sign theatre is always fresh and original, even though it has a long history. It stays authentic and impresses the audience.
- It is crucial and important to not remove inclusive art from the communities and every day lives.
- Art has always been a source of innovation and inspiration for the masses. It affects the entertainment we enjoy, the food we consume, our thinking patterns, and our self-expression.
- Sign dance as a creative practice has been established and has a history and another cultural perspective, that it is not part of the ordinary, sometimes it is viewed as scary and not worth giving a chance.
- SDC are always exposing people to the diversity that lies within mankind, meaning disabilities, ethnicities, culture, politics, etc.
- SDC's art is not simplistic. It's thought provoking. All performances can bring different creative minds together, to be kind and patient and inclusive is a skill which they generate through their work and dialogues., Deaf communities all over the world and audiences with more experience in visual narratives understand the complexities of the visual narrative perfectly.
- Story telling can deliver messages that have maybe been lost through time or barriers to participation and embedding these changes reminds people of how vast the world and future is for us all and the work and next generation of sign dance.
- SDC has the tenacity to develop work that engages different cultures and art professionals and to provide opportunities to perform and write music, with their accessible way of creating contemporary live performance. This is a rare asset and comes from the 40 years of partnership working.
- Technology continues to evolve at speed, presenting SDC with new opportunities while at the same time posing new questions of accessibility in digital performance engagements. Working cross art form has enabled them to research and investigate the new changing landscapes to deliver their groundbreaking work.
- SDC recognise the urgent crises of climate change and environmental degradation, which look certain to be the key forces shaping our social, political, and economic landscape over the decade to come. at speed, this has presented them with new opportunities while at the same time posing new questions and dialogue in their work.