



Interview with founder and former Artistic Director of Stopgap Dance Company Vicki Balaam about her work with Stopgap company dancer Chris Pavia. Full story <http://stories.article19.co.uk/chris/chris.html>

1. *What was your impression of Chris as both a dancer and a person when you first met him at the Ridgeway School?*

Chris learnt to become a dancer at the same time that I learnt how to perform in the 'real' world, to teach and lead a dance company (and we both grew alongside Stopgap 'learning' to be a dance company in a way). So from the beginning we were all learning from each other. Chris taught me how to "see" ... to 'clean my eyes' each rehearsal and see the young man that moved before me, and it took me a while to gain the skills (and discipline) to actually see what he was achieving in each rehearsal and to understand his developments each day, rather than relying on what I thought I knew.

It was his head-teacher who pushed Chris and I together. I was learning from her staff about how they worked with their students, and in return I was sharing my knowledge of dance.

I was fresh out of Uni and very honest about how much I didn't know about working with people with disabilities but I was curious ... curious about what any human being could truly achieve if they were supported to reach their potential, rather than be restricted by what others thought they knew about them and their abilities. Against that background, when Maureen said "I think you should work with Chris, he has something magical about him", I trusted her, and we gradually began to work together.

When I first saw him move, I held my breath. There was something about the honesty in his movement, the softness in his transitions, his concentration and the joy that rippled out of his body that made me want to just stop and watch. It was very exciting! He was very charismatic - he still is - and is far better at networking than I ever have been! I think he knows every member of staff and regular passengers on the trains that he regularly travels on!

When I started working with him, the first thing that I noticed about him was his love of sleep! The first thing I had to teach him was that if he wanted to go to sleep, it couldn't be in the middle of the room it had to be to the side, ideally under a table. When I first asked him, he grinned – sleepily – and was snoring under a table within seconds. His willingness to take on suggestions, meet requests and challenges, and his charm, has never ceased to impress me. I adore that what you see with Chris is what you get.

The willingness to develop, focus to work hard, natural charm shines through him as a person, but also is key to what makes him such a captivating performer. A few years later, as the community project was making the terrifying transition towards becoming a dance company, I walked into a rehearsal late, and noticed it was Chris who was looking after everyone, listening to their problems, trying to make them smile and feel better ... and I realised in that moment Stopgap was the two of us, and was built on that generosity of care, fierce determination and ambition for yourself yes, but also each other.

The innate ability was always in Chris, but so was his ability to approach every challenge with determination and a work ethic that is outstanding.

2. What form did the initial training with Chris take and how did Chris respond to that training?

His training wasn't formal – I knew I was making this all up as I was going along, and that my work with Chris would inform what I would do for the next person coming through, and also, how the company evolved. I was honest about this to Chris, his family, and the school.

Initially he worked alongside me helping with workshops, and in our "spare time" we would create dances. His development was in two areas: how to behave like a "professional" – learning what was appropriate to be a professional dancer; and the skills and technique – how to dance.

The "how to be a professional dancer" enabled him to move in the dance world as an equal, developing his work ethic, understanding how to behave and work with a choreographer, having the discipline to practice, how to get your body fit through other training not just dance, understanding nutrition and healthy eating, and an understanding of how our art form has developed. We also worked on his logistical skills such as independent travel, asking if he was lost, telling the time to make sure he caught his train without getting sidetracked by CD's and DVD's and understanding money. He was determined to be as independent as he possibly could.

His development as a dancer evolved as the work we were making became more complex and more demanding. Initially it was as simple as sending him to aerobic classes so he became able to copy an instructor and lift the correct leg at the moment that was asked in the right direction, and trying to find a ballet class that would welcome this young man. Then as we developed, I commissioned choreographers who could bring a particular quality or skill to our vocabulary, and each revealed a challenge that Chris and I would unpick with the people we had with us.

I would help him understand what the choreographers wanted, and would work with him to unpick anything that inhibited him from progressing, and once the movement was in his body, I relied on him to remember the phrases we were working on as his long term memory was always better than mine! I would watch his movement and have to constantly see him afresh in order to plan what to work on next. His natural movement tended to be bold and stark, so I remember working for a long time on small movement, a softness, and articulating his back. Another focus was to build trust needed for contact improvisation, another was on fast accurate movement.

It was haphazard as I was literally making it up as we went along. We were experimenting with how far we could both develop as dancers. A new skill would come in, it seemed to unsettle what Chris had mastered already, and we would both struggle. I would kick myself for putting him in a situation where he was struggling and I would begin to accept we had found Chris's limits, and that was fine.

I'd relax, turn my attention to something else, and as I metaphorically turned my back, suddenly Chris would make an enormous leap forward in his development and be achieving so much more than I had even dared hope for, I'd then kick myself (again) for not remembering this is how Chris develops. I would rub my eyes to view him with fresh perspective, and we would begin the whole process over again. Now it is hard to remember how revolutionary each progression felt.

In "those" days I was told I was trying to achieve the impossible, and I remember the dilemma I felt when I was told I was doing Chris a disservice by setting him up to fail by asking him to attempt to work as if he was non-disabled. All I knew was that in the 1990's, Chris was very clear that the only thing that was "disabling him" was the attitudes around him, especially those who told him the only proper job he could hope for was being a cleaner in a leisure centre. Now look at him!

A big shift was in 2001. Once I had funding to employ two other dancers, Chris wasn't reliant on just me, he had more people to support and nurture him and help him as he bedded new movement and skills down into his body. I also wondered if teaching others and having to guide other's learning would deepen his own understanding of his body so I created a project where Chris was the main teacher.

By this time he was determined to be a choreographer and the deal was that he had to get to a point where he could teach independently to be able to have the skill to communicate and guide his dancers before he could choreograph. I didn't want Chris to be a tokenistic choreographer - I wanted him to be able to lead, challenge and inspire his dancers and learning to teach would enable him to do that.

He was amazing – he still is. His work ethic was outstanding. He tackled challenges that felt unachievable, but with grit and determination he defied all odds, and the dancer who emerged was breath taking. The man that emerged was the most amazing generous, caring, loyal and honorable man, and just the best dancing partner I ever had!

3. Did you have a particular goal in mind, for example; establishing a methodology for training dancers/teachers with learning difficulties?

I wanted to create a working example about how I thought society should be. It wasn't the disability that interested me, it was the fact that each of us had felt we had been put in a box, where other people's expectations felt very limiting. I was fighting against that shake of the head, intake of breath, and the inevitable "no love, I just don't think that's possible!" I wanted Stopgap to inspire – to give people hope about what could be possible if they just believed in themselves! I was frustrated that the focus tends to be on what people can't achieve, rather than exploring just how much an individual can achieve with hard work and daring to see if it is possible. I wanted to discover, with Chris, what was the best he possibly could be.

As the company expanded, I was interested in the crafting that was necessary to create a cohesive feel for a company of 4 very different bodies. I was rebelling against the times I had been told "it's not possible". I was seeking a better way of training dancers, that started from what they could do and built on their strengths, empowering them to thrive and soar beyond any expectations, rather than trying to break them and re-mould them to conform to the current fashion. I knew what I didn't want, and I was curious about what I would discover.

I was determined that we would keep our heads down until we had worked out how and why we were making OUR kind of integrated dance, and the crafting of how that integration would be honest. I always described this search as looking for the source of a beautiful fragrance but not knowing the flower it is coming from, and then searching for what is creating this illusive scent.

As the company began its search, I always dreamed that there would be a progression pathway as I couldn't see how we could recruit dancers with the skills, approach and attitude that we needed without training them ourselves.

My vision was that the performance company would be part of a continuum that began with workshops in the community, where key young people would be spotted and invited to develop a relationship with the company, there would be opportunities to train with the team, compete to win a place in the company, and then the other end.

I nicked-named it the “Uber integrated dance lab” where once a year we would invite practitioners who could extend and challenge our own practice and thinking on what is possible and we would explore the daring side of integration ... the extreme side, just like extreme sports is to the sports world, but the focus was on pushing the boundaries of approach and practice without the need to create a performance and consider our audience.

I knew I wanted Stopgap to compete equally with the “mainstream” dance world. I knew to do that I needed to be able to audition as many artists with a disability as without, but I also saw that a lot had to happen before I could contemplate recruiting a new generation of Stopgap dancers. I just didn’t have the skills to articulate the detail of what I was seeking so when I see the next generation of disabled dance artists emerging under the guidance of Lucy Bennett, Stopgap’s artistic director, it is nothing short of thrilling! Her programme IRIS is everything I had ever dared dream but couldn’t work out how!

4. As Chris has developed from a teacher into a dancer and a choreographer what are the most striking changes you have noticed in him, again, both as person and as a dancer?

What impresses me about Chris is how he is able to keep “grounded” and keep focused on being the best he can be, and that is a remarkable work ethic which has resulted in him being the accomplished star he is! I remember how hard it can be when you are buffeted by some people saying how amazing you are, and others disappointed you are not delivering their expectation of you ... it is very hard to keep your head down and keep travelling in the direction that makes sense to you and your principles, ideals and instinct.

Chris is able to do that. He is ambitious for himself, but also for his colleagues, and being able to juggle the two priorities is why he was glorious to dance with when I was performing, and why he is a terrific friend who my children adore. As a dancer, his skill, the quality in his movement, and now as he becomes the choreographer he has always wanted to be, is just outstanding. I have always had high expectations of Chris, but he continues to prove the limits of even my most expansive imagination. I am left cheering very loudly and incredibly proudly as he continues his breathtaking development, which just seems unstoppable!

Interview conducted by Email July 4th 2015.