

## Safe to Take Risks?

Students at Rambert School recently explored how to promote mental wellbeing and safeguard vulnerability in the dance studio.

Phaedra Petsilas, Head of Studies at Rambert School, shares some of the findings of the collaborative project Safeguarding the Creative Process (2019), initiated by Stuart Waters, in partnership with Rambert School, The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, and undertaken with guest artists Elsa Urmston, Steve Peck and Chris Nash.



I wish to start by paying tribute to the amazing team of people that came together to make Safeguarding the Creative Process project happen. The team were drawn together by the passion to support the next generation of dance artists in developing strategies for wellbeing and emotional safety within their practice.

Being at the forefront of the pre-professional stage, Rambert School sought conversations with colleagues from various practices to draw out the mirroring between training and the dance industry.

Stuart Waters was already exploring notions of mental wellbeing and safeguarding through his own creative processes in Rockbottom, and was the driving force in starting this very important conversation with Rambert School. We immediately connected by our shared passion for innovating training to include more awareness of the whole self, and by bringing Stuart's own safeguarding practice into a training context we opened the conversation up. The other collaborators contributed their expertise in dance science and creative practice, which were invaluable to the process Stuart and myself were embarking on.

Focusing on this issue's umbrella topic of Safety, I will discuss the project's relation to risk in order to share our processes and how we co-discovered strategies for psychological wellbeing and safety from within the studio. When I was preparing for this project, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to get it right, as we were setting off on uncharted territory. We were keen to discover, in collaboration with the students, what mental wellbeing and safety means for them and how they relate to their own sense of agency. For me, it did not mean 'compartmentalising' mental health, but bringing self-care discussions into the studio, and integrating them within the training and creative process. Our aims were to:

- Develop resilience and agency in young dancers
- Apply strategies to
- Safeguard 'risk'
- Empower young dancers
- Safeguard their mental wellbeing
- Encourage self-regulation within creative processes

We were also keen to discover how we could innovate vocational training to incorporate a proactive approach to mental wellbeing, and to prepare the next generation of dancers to develop and maintain a praxis of resilience within the multitude of creative processes they may enter into.

Stuart's previous work brought from the start the understanding that mental health is not just connected to a condition but relates to an attitude towards work, life, relationships and community.

A driving factor in our collaboration was to discover ways we can be proactively aware of emotional safety, focusing on the dancer's health in a holistic way, starting from training.

The practice of good health is not a new concept. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" has been around since ancient times. We may have lost our way a little in the dance industry in the quest to push the boundaries of the art form. "Push yourself" is the writing on the wall; these are the words that dancers hear, internalise and believe in. But how much push is too much? When it comes to the physical body we seem to know how to keep safe. But we were also keen to answer the question: what does safety and care look like for our mental wellbeing?



Conservatoires prepare young dancers to enter a competitive profession where expectations are constantly shifting. In reaction to these demands, it is our co-responsibility to respond to increasing demands and the deterioration of mental health in our industry. From my perspective, it is about following a code of ethics – practices that have wellbeing and safeguarding at their core.

Rambert School's code of practice for Student Support puts physical and emotional wellbeing at the heart of the training, not as an add-on for when things go wrong. We wanted to find ways to integrate this further within the studio practice, and also empower young dancers to create their personal 'emotional safety toolbox', by exploring with them a variety of ways for self-care. The aim overall was to develop a personal in-built safeguarding practice for and with students which is transferable to any creative situation.

*“How do we empower the young dancer before leaving the training context in order to go out into the industry and have an open and honest conversation with directors and colleagues within the studio and not be afraid to speak out?”*

**- Stuart Waters**

*“What I learnt is that mental health and mental wellbeing is different for everyone. It made me think about what questions I need to ask myself to form this overall safeguarding process for myself.”*

**- Lily, Rambert School Student**

In our time with the students we:

- Assessed at the beginning and at the end what ‘pushing boundaries’ and ‘risk’ meant in each artistic context we are working with
- Applied checking-in and checking-out strategies
- Incorporated mindfulness practice within the context of the studio
- Used creative dance processes to push participants out of comfort zones
- Used evidence-based processes in psychotherapy (psychological needs) and dance psychology (Flow, Growth mindset) within the studio through a series of workshop interventions with the students.
- Explored self-portraiture (and the notion of curating the self) through a photography process to encourage an alternative viewpoint towards self and creativity.
- Openly discussed issues of consent, participation, vulnerability and agency.
- Collected thoughts on how students feel about the importance of mental wellbeing and what they need to feel safe in preparation for their careers.

The ideas we explored, particularly that of risk, are often seen as the polar opposite of safety. Risk and vulnerability come hand in hand – the openness of the whole self within the creative moment in order to find what is authentic. The myth of the suffering artist is often internalised by the dancer – working through pain, suffering for the art, concealing effort. Behind this façade, it is the whole person we need to train – to offer the tools and practices to be able to withstand the very process of being creative.

One of the most renowned choreographers in the 21st century, Ohad Naharin, has said: “... we must go beyond familiar limits daily.” Why not? In order to innovate one needs to push boundaries and take risks. It is important, however, to have the skills and strategies to safeguard the whole self. Remembering the motto – “A healthy mind in a healthy body” – the importance of that balance needs to feed into how we train young dancers. We want them to train for mind and body equally, encouraging a holistic view of the self.

In our view, and as a result of our project, this balance can lead to increased self-awareness within the act of being creative, as well as a balanced sense of self alongside agency and empowerment.

It may be time to re-write the codes of ethics within the dance industry.

*“What this project has done, which is really important, is to encourage students to make connections between how they are feeling and their health and wellbeing and how they are as artists.”*

**- Amanda Britton, Rambert School Artistic Director and Principal**

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Rambert School celebrates their 100th year in 2020. A Celebration performance will take place at Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, 24 & 25 June.

[rambertschool.org.uk](http://rambertschool.org.uk)

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