



# Dancing down the road not taken

**David Ainsworth**, a member of Ascendance's Parkinson's Dance Group in Headingley, in the North of England, shares his experience of choreographing for the first time in his sixties, eight years after his diagnosis.

“What do you think it is?”, the neurologist asked. “Parkinson’s,” I replied. “I think you’re right” he said. “Two things you need to know about Parkinson’s: firstly, it’s incurable and, secondly, it’s going to get worse.”

Actually, I’d already gleaned these pieces of information from the internet, so I wasn’t bothered about his brusque bedside manner. They were the second and third pieces of information I looked up – after life expectancy rates.

That was nearly eight years ago and during that period my life has been dramatically transformed. “Exercise, exercise and more exercise” is my mantra. Hopefully, to stave off decline for as long as possible. I’ve seen the future in my consultant’s waiting room and it’s not pretty.

I’ll give anything a go. If there’s a group physical activity the chances are that same activity will exist in a form ‘...for Parkinson’s’. Typically, this will be a collection of grimly determined individuals guided by dedicated and relentlessly upbeat leaders, who certainly aren’t in it for the money.

The main problem at the outset was that most of these groups met during the day and I was trying to hold down a job as an accountant, a role which does not sit well with a progressive neurological condition. It was interesting that almost half of the participants in my evening exercise group had been accountants. I always knew that it was a dangerous occupation. In early 2021, I decided to take early retirement and devote myself to maintaining my health.

Joining a dance group was top of my to do list. Dance was the only activity that I sought out, without any influence from flyers, social media or encouragement from my physio or Parkinson’s nurse. I had no formal dance experience whatsoever. There was no frustrated dancer emerging like a butterfly from the accounting pupa

in which he had been imprisoned. What I did have though was a love of music. I had even contributed to a study into the effects of music on exercise for people living with Parkinson’s (it helps). For me, music, especially up tempo tunes with a regular beat, reduced the effects of Parkinson’s for at least some of the time. Also, from country dancing as a ten-year-old through head banging as a teenager to drunken dad dancing in my fifties, I’d always been willing to have a go.

I had heard that there was a Parkinson’s dance group called Ascendance that met in a church hall in Headingley. I contacted them and arranged to attend the next session. I was immediately impressed. The group leaders, Rachel and Emma, were welcoming, talented and filled with boundless positivity. The music was the right blend of familiar and not-so-familiar and the dancing itself contained many moves that I recognised from my Parkinson’s specific exercise group, but given a joyous, rhythmic twist. The members of the group itself were refreshingly uninhibited and displayed a wide range of abilities.

What made (and makes) Ascendance even more special however, was their practice of developing and performing original works, under their banner of Fuse Dance Collective. These often take place in prestigious local theatres to large audiences and to a professional standard. I grasped this opportunity enthusiastically.

When, as participants, we were asked to suggest music to which we could dance, I needed no second invitation. From then on, whenever I came across a piece of music that spoke to me – especially about my condition – I pinged it on to Rachel and Emma. Noting my enthusiasm, they invited me to join the creative process.

Initially this involved an away day with the creative team to brainstorm new ideas. Drawing on my experience with Parkinson’s, I conceived a

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Above and top right: Ascendance. Photo: Rachel Wesson. Top left: Ascendance. Photo: Ant Robling.

piece which dealt with the issue of stiffening limbs and reduced mobility. This was the start of my first faltering steps in choreography. On the strength of that day, I was invited to train as a choreographer. Emma was to be my mentor and my first test was to be a day's workshop to explore my ideas with a group of professional and trained dancers.

This was a huge risk for Ascendance. They were investing their reputation in someone who had no experience of choreography or dance, on barely

more than a hunch. For my part, although I was full of ideas for music and moves, I had little confidence in being my own critic. I wasn't sure whether the ideas I was presenting were clichéd or corny. I told myself that that didn't matter because my ideas we're based on (what I believed was) the truth of my own experience. Also, I didn't have the language of dance with which to get my ideas across.

Emma deliberately took a backseat when I was presenting my ideas as it was important I was allowed to establish my ownership of the piece. I couldn't have hoped for a better mentor. Her wide knowledge of dance meant that she was able to put whatever moves I was suggesting into context. In my mind, at least, this gave the dance some credibility. Emma's notes were always positive and encouraging, she was sensitive to the aims and mood of the piece and whatever feedback she gave was in support of these.

Throughout the autumn of 2023, I developed my ideas into a dance piece which became known as Signature Moves. The title was inspired by the loss of my signature, an early indicator of Parkinson's and the work itself charts the changing emotions associated with the disease: from denial, through rationalisation, to acceptance.

At eight minutes long it was first performed in public in April 2024 at the Moving with Joy community dance festival and then again in the following July at the Expressions festival. Both performances were warmly received. However,

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I found the most personal satisfaction was to be had, not in the applause of the audience, but in rehearsal; in the silence at the end of a particularly successful run through when it was clear that the performers had been moved by the experience. That they ‘got it’.

At the time of writing, we are now looking forward to taking Signature Moves to London in January for Resolution, The Place Theatre’s annual festival of original, short, new dance works by emerging choreographers.

Those of us with Parkinson’s will face a number of practical issues. The piece has doubled in length, so it is more physically demanding and there’s more to remember. The performance will be at the end of a long and busy day just as the effects of our medications are beginning to wane and we start to

flag. We will need to take all of these factors into account.

Signature Moves was conceived as a performance, however, what I have learned is that the process is just as important. Ultimately this piece will not be performed in public that many times, but as a group we will have worked on it for many hours. We have taken it apart, examining it from different angles and followed the trails it has left us. Even more important, perhaps, is that it has served as a precedent, showing that participants in a group can take a lead creatively and that Parkinson’s need not close, but can actively open the door to dance and choreography.

#### Info

[www.ascendance.org.uk](http://www.ascendance.org.uk)



Above left and right: Ascendance. Photo: Rachel Wesson.