

# Active Bodies Active Minds

South Asian Dance  
& Older Adults



## About the Project

Active Bodies: Active Minds was a Research and Development project led by Akademi's Education and Community team and a small group of artists, project workers and professional researchers. Funded by the Baring Foundation, the project took place in the early part of 2012 and followed on from Inter-Action (2011) as the second phase of a larger initiative focusing on community dance practice, health and wellbeing with older adults, in particular with Bengali older people. The outcomes of Inter-Action informed both the planning and delivery of Active Bodies: Active Minds with regard to the dance and research activity. This project focused on work with one group of participants from the Surma Centre in Camden, in order to gain in depth knowledge over a longer period of time.

The research aspect of this project was underpinned by two specific aims. First of all, it aimed to identify and disseminate best dance practice relating to community dance, wellbeing and the involvement of older participants. Secondly, it sought to explore and develop an appropriate research model, which would involve researchers, artists, fellow professionals and participants as collaborators in processes of research and evaluation. To this end, Active Bodies: Active Minds provided two bursaries to support existing dance

artists in developing additional skills relating to working with older people through dance and research. The research strand was coordinated by lead researcher, Helen Angove, Head of Learning and Teaching at London Contemporary Dance School who worked with co-researcher Elsa Urmston, Course Leader for Dance at University Campus Suffolk. Helen was supported by a research associate, Showmi Das, a practising dance artist who was the recipient of an Akademi research bursary.

Helen Angove and Showmi Das worked onsite at the Surma Centre in Camden with the dance artists and participants using a range of ethnographically informed research methods including observation, participation and discussion. The co-researcher worked remotely, contextualising the project by identifying appropriate examples of literature and practice, which in turn helped refine the research focus and parameters. She also acted as an impartial 'critical eye' with regard to the review and interpretation of data. Lead dance artist, Amina Khayyam, supporting artist, Sudeshna Paul, project worker Tahmina Khanoum and volunteer, Rina Begum also contributed to both the collection of data and the evaluation of the project.

## About the Project (continued)

Akademi agreed the two aforementioned research aims with the lead researcher, but beyond that, left the research brief open which provided the research team with a degree of freedom in establishing the research framework. The team had initially experienced concerns regarding the focus on mental health as they were not qualified to explore this area in a clinical sense. However it became apparent that the discussions around mental health resonated with existing academic areas of study relating to emotional health, well-being and happiness and also coincided with notions of '*Moner Khushi*', a term used by participants within the project to describe the feeling that they got from the work performed on Inter-Action (2011). '*Moner Khushi*', translated into English means '*Moner*' -Heart/Mind and '*Khushi*' - Happiness or '*Happiness of the Mind/Heart*'. This is a term frequently used in Bengali to describe ones 'inner' happiness, which may also reflect upon ones physical well-being and health. It is this positive term, which is widely used to measure one's contentment, which led the research team to make two key decisions:

- To use '*happiness*' or '*Moner Khushi*' as a focus for supporting research. This would enable the co-researcher working remotely to undertake a literature review of comparable/related sources that might assist in the collection and interpretation of data.

- To lean towards a qualitative rather than a quantitative research model. This would remove the need for tangible measuring activities to be undertaken before and after the twelve week project and instead measuring would be undertaken as part of a bigger qualitative dialogue. This removed a need for the use of questionnaires and statistical data collection.

Four potential outcomes were defined at the beginning of the process. These responded to the particular aims and objectives of the project, but also aimed to inform and/or act as a catalyst for future work that Akademi might develop. These were:

1. To disseminate best dance and research practice pertaining to work with older adults.
2. To establish the potential of participatory dance projects to address issues relating to mental health.
3. To provide developing artists with the fundamental knowledge and skills needed to research and evaluate their practice.
4. To identify the type of issues arising in relation to small-scale research projects for small institutions and consider alternative approaches to more traditional research processes.

## Outcomes and Considerations

A concluding evaluative report was produced for Akādemi's internal purposes, which addressed some of the anticipated outcomes. Some of the recommendations and considerations are summarised below:

In relation to the dissemination of best dance and research practice pertaining to work with older adults, the team found a need to define research aims such as 'mental health' through appropriate cultural and disciplinary lenses in order to ensure a synergy between the practice and the research.

Through discussion with participants, the team found that it was important to embed dance activity within a broader social context, thus start and finish times were flexible and classes were preceded and followed by informal discussions and the sharing of refreshments.

The research also revealed that behaviours and tendencies that are stereotypically attributed to older participants are not automatically experienced by all individuals or groups. Consequently participatory dance projects should respond to and accommodate the individuality of each participant, but also engage with the broader socio-cultural and physical expectations of specific groups of older participants within a dance and health context.

As a prerequisite to enable artists to develop the fundamental knowledge and skills needed to research and evaluate their practice the research found the need to use structures and timeframes, which enable artists and researchers to work together at all stages of the process. Ensuring that artists

have access to information (literature, practice) relating to research aims and methodology and enabling artists and researchers to inhabit different roles and positions within the process were also identified as being key to developing their skills as researchers.

In reflecting upon the type of issues arising in relation to small scale research projects for small institutions, the research recognised the importance and impact of the artists' and researchers' background and knowledge on both planning and delivery of projects. Equally when working in a short-term capacity or informal way with small, discrete or minority groups, ethical considerations should shape and protect research activity and dance practices.

Methodologies should be bespoke to the project aims, sympathetic to the target group and sufficiently flexible to allow emerging outcomes to be recognised and interrogated.

Finally, when working with a group or organisation that is well known to the artist, it is important to remain mindful of prior expectations and assumptions when planning content and delivery methods. Artists should remain open to surprise responses within sessions and be ready to change tack. The following worksheets for artists and practitioners interested in working with older adults are introduced and compiled by lead artist, Amina Khayyam, and presents a series of exercises and group activities that formed the backbone of the sessions and 12 week process with the ladies at Surma Centre.

## Artist's Introduction

Building on my extensive work with elderly groups of people in multicultural settings, this resource has been compiled after a working with older Sylheti women from Bangladesh. These workshops took place at the Surma Community Centre, in central London, where the women meet on a weekly basis, and where I have had the opportunity to run regular exercise and dance sessions with them.

During the classes we used the rich vocabularies of Indian dance and music as a creative way to engage with participants. These vocabularies drew from both classical forms derived from my own practice as kathak dancer and yoga practitioner. In addition, the women's own cultural background and knowledge of Sylheti and Bangladeshi folk forms of song and dance, which are popular in expression and meaningful to participants, also informed the workshops. This range of inspirations and forms offered us the

opportunity to experiment with exercises that were new to the participants and engage in reminiscence work, which helped participants access individual and group emotions tied to their current and past lives.

The aim of working with any elderly groups was to engage them with physical activity as well as stimulate their mental engagement. The creative dance sessions were conceived as a positive way of reducing their anxiety and increasing their mental well-being. I approached the sessions trying not to undermine group's abilities by wrongly assuming that they were too old to do certain movement based exercises. Finally it is worth saying that the sessions were a way of making individuals and group discover new forms of movement whilst imparting some knowledge of technique, which became familiar over time.

*Amina Khayyam*  
May 2013



## Deep Breathing

### Why

Deep Breathing technique is a very positive way to begin a session. This helps to bring internal focus and allows the group to come together. In our everyday, we seldom take the time to breathe well, as most of the time we tend to use shallow breath. Deep breathing is beneficial to our well being as our body depends on good circulation of oxygen and blood. Deep breathing helps maintain organs healthy - therefore happy!

### How

- Encourage participants to sit on the floor, where possible in a crossed legged position. If the participants are unable to sit on the floor, they can stand or sit on a chair.
- Encourage participants to breath in and out through the nose.
- Use arm movements to bring stability and continuity to the breathing. Ask them to raise their right arm when breathing in and to bring it down when breathing out. This motion should be repeated on the left. Longer and slower breathing can be achieved by slowing the pace of the arm movement.
- Encourage them to direct the breath into different parts of the body by placing your palm onto that area, for example around their shoulder blades or in kidney area. Encourage participants to do this work in pairs, taking turns in facilitating each other's breathing.



## Rhythm Patterns

### Why

Rhythm patterns will help challenge participant's level of engagement and memory.

They will also encourage focus and attention and help develop listening skills. It will also allow the group to connect with each other and harmonise.

Additionally these exercises will stimulate the mind, challenge participants physically as well as help get a steady sense of rhythm.

### How

- Introduce a simple rhythm pattern by clapping your hands, which the participants repeat after you.

- As they get familiar with the idea and the first pattern, add new patterns.

- After introducing a few different patterns, repeat them all one after another. Then repeat the patterns, but mix them up by changing their order. Finally keep on changing the order of patterns but add a final difficulty of listening out for the pattern they should not repeat. See if they recognised it!

- Use the same patterns but this time execute through the feet. The pattern can be developed further into slapping body parts, stamping feet and finally using the rhythm pattern to create simple movement sequences.



## Mudras - Hand Gestures

### Why

Mudras help mobilise wrist, finger, arm and hand movements as well as improve co-ordination.

It is particularly good for arthritis sufferers and those with aches and pains as the exercises help to strengthen the joints and muscles.

### How

- Introduce a simple Mudra.
- Introduce new ones as participants start mastering the ones already introduced.
- Attempt to do them together one after another in unison and if possible in rhythm.
- Select a couple of the mudras you have taught participants and give them an example of how it can be used in telling stories, i.e. the mudra for picking flowers, holding veil etc.



**Reminiscence:  
Story telling through  
Mime, Objects & Words**

**Why**

Reminiscence work is very popular with elderly groups as they have a wealth of life experience to draw from and lots of stories to tell. However it is important to note that when doing reminiscence work take extra care not to invoke any unwanted memories from the participants.

Use of props or an object, to which they have an association, is an easy and less intrusive way to learn and engage with the participants. It helps to stimulate their imagination and re-connect with their past.

It is important to think about the kind of object considering the age, ability and cultural background of participants. For example - working with an elderly group of Sylheti Bangladeshi women, a possible object could be a Sari.

**How**

- Mime: Introduce a simple story ideas i.e. picking flowers / washing face / getting dressed etc. As they get familiar get them to create their own stories and get them to mime using face, body and gestures.

- Bring the group together in a circle, using a Sari. Invite the group to take hold of the same sari so that it is pulled tight by the group and connects each individual around it.

- Whilst assembled around the sari ask individuals to share a positive memory that the sari or the coming together around the sari evokes from the past.

- With eyes closed get them to run their fingers through it and ask them:

- Does the touch of the sari remind you of anything?
- What texture is the sari?
- Do they wear a sari?
- What is their fondest memory of a Sari?

- Speech: in circle - introduce a story by you speaking out the first line of the story, e.g. 'my parents want me to get married..'

- The next person should then continue the story forward until everyone has added something to complete the story.



## Dance Movement Sequence

### Why

Create a simple dance sequence to help engage with co-ordination as well as stimulation of the mind.

Exercises involving co-ordination are always very popular and challenging. This type of exercise also requires a lot of mental focus, which helps to engage and exercise the mind as well as the body. Try and incorporate some mudras in the movement sequences, making links between this activity and previous ones.

The method outlined aside takes Kathak inspired movement as frame of reference. This can obviously be adapted to different dance styles and traditions.

### How

- Starting with the upper body and arms, introduce a simple and short movement sequence that fits into eight counts.
- Add new movement as participants' progress.
- Put all the movements together into one sequence.
- Once they get familiar with the sequence, add footwork in co-ordination with arm movements.
- Depending on their ability you can do this at two or three different speeds.
- Encourage participants to share the sequence by performing for each other in small groups.



## Circle Dance

### Why

Circle dances are common to most cultures, although in some cultures they are more popularly practiced. Regardless of participants' familiarity with circle dance it is always possible to create something simple with the participants. It is also the most effective way to create a sense of unity and a shared experience.

### How

- In a circle use movement based on folk or harvest dance traditions, i.e. stepping in and out of the circle whilst the entire group gradually rotates through the rhythm and cycles of the dance.

- As the movement and the circle develop, add a simple clap to accompany the steps. As the group develops confidence to move together and in rhythm, they can then be encouraged to create their own movement, adding their movement to the dance.

- Depending on the mental engagement and physical ability of the group, ask participants to repeat the movements that each individual participant has created whilst adding theirs on top, in a cumulative fashion. Not all participants will have a sharp memory; in this case this exercise can be done in small groups of 3-5 people.



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