



[Performing Arts](#) [Festivals](#) [Events](#) [Spotlight](#) [All Europe Countries](#) [France](#) [News](#) [Working Conditions](#) [Featured Stories](#)

Dance has the power to transform lives and communities - Report from the EDN Atelier

The EDN Atelier ‘Dance in Society’; focused on dance’s multifaceted ability to improve well-being, foster connection, and trigger important reflections within the dance profession itself.

From helping individuals living with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's to regain a sense of autonomy and joy, to empowering dance artists to reconsider their own working conditions, the event hosted by Le Gymnase CDCN in Roubaix, France, during Festival Le Grand Bain, that took place from 28 to 29 March 2024, in Roubaix, France painted a compelling picture of dance’s capacity to heal, empower, and unite.

Through physical practices, presentations, and discussions, the Atelier was an opportunity to question the relationship between dance and wellbeing from several different angles, ranging from the role dance plays in society to how socially engaged dance projects begin to trigger new reflections about the wellbeing of dance professionals themselves.

Over 45 [national and international attendees](#) included choreographers, dancers, artistic directors, dance teachers, dramaturges, producers, public relations and outreach officers as well as professionals outside of the cultural field, such as medical care, sophrology, research, physical therapy, and local citizens. The diversity of backgrounds provided multi-layered viewpoints regarding the role of dance in society, while also affirming the shared belief that dance can positively impact quality of life.

Guest speakers included choreographers Malika Djardi,

Massimo Fusco, and Alfredo Zinola, who shared their personal artistic approaches to care, companionship, touch and consent. Also presenting the local Dance Well project were choreographers Mélodie Lasselin and Alejandro Russo, along with Célia Bernard, Louise Flores-Garcia and Shruti Iyer from Le Gymnase. Additionally, a discussion on wellbeing and working conditions was guided by Nicolas Naudé, director of Travail et Culture, with break dancer/physiotherapist Damien Noudelmann, break dancer/sophrologist Babette Amand and choreographer Alexandre Goyer.

Care Rituals for Acceptance and Connection

Choreographer [Malika Djardi](#) discovered that her mother had Alzheimer's disease in 2019, which eventually led to her moving into an institutionalised care home. As Malika witnessed her mother lose ground and struggle with accepting her situation, exacerbated by the isolation caused by the pandemic, Malika understood that to help her mother find acceptance, she needed to feel a sense of peace. To try to help her find this, Malika gave her care rituals, such as painting her nails and washing her hair. She also experimented with different dance forms, sometimes teaching her mother specific dance moves or playing music she grew up with, as well as encouraging her to move freely in dance studios and gardens. Gradually Malika also made a link between the kind of rhythmic movements her mother made while in Muslim prayer and the role rhythm could play in freeing her body and bringing joy.

Malika did not enter the care home with an agenda, but rather with curious inquiry, as a daughter and as an artist. She was met with open-minded nurses and social workers, who would also sometimes join the dancing, as well as other inquisitive residents living in the home, people whom much of society has given up on. Malika observed how people living in such homes lose their autonomy and how it is often forgotten that they can be included in more complicated activities. She sees dance as a pathway for reconnecting with the will to live and to trigger the desire to continue learning and knowing oneself.

As Malika witnessed her mother's dancing growing, in both expression and spontaneity, she invited a friend, who is a filmmaker, to accompany her visits and capture the dances. The films became a part of the dance piece Martyre, which Malika premiered the evening before the Atelier, as well as a forthcoming documentary film. She describes what she has

learned from her mother over the last few years: learning how to learn, how to share movements, the willingness to create and how to be in the present moment. From these experiences, Malika advocates for a full reinvention of medical homes and for the role that dance can play in rethinking health care.

Dance Well

[Dance Well](#) began in Bassano del Grappa, Italy in 2013, spreading throughout Italy in the following years. Dance Well, which focuses on promoting dance in museum spaces and artistic contexts, is primarily aimed at people living with Parkinson's, but open to everyone. Through funding support from Creative Europe, Dance Well expanded into five more countries in 2022, with Le Gymnase being one of the two French partners. In the spirit of what makes Dance Well successful, several members of the team co-presented [the project](#) during the Atelier, including Alejandro Russo (Choreographer/teacher), Mélodie Lasselin (Choreographer/teacher), Célia Bernard (Secretary General), Louise Flores-Garcia (Public Relations) and Shruti Iyer (Outreach Officer).

To open the presentation, Célia set the tone by describing how Dance Well positively disrupts ways of thinking and working within the organisation. Shruti described the attention and time that was needed to establish the classes, to build trust, to reach the people the classes were meant for and the need to leave room for uncertainty and novelty to guide the next steps. Louise described how since beginning the project, their focus has been strongly placed on the care of the participants, which gradually also triggered them to think about their own wellbeing and how they are working. She also questioned how to both build bonds with the participants, but also protect one's own emotions and personal borders so as not to be pulled into nonstop working, meeting everyone else's needs while forgetting one's own.

Mélodie Lasselin and Alejandro Russo are two of the four teaching artists who lead the Dance Well classes in Roubaix. Mélodie described some of her key interests and questions for the project: All bodies can dance, but what are their differences and how can we take care of those differences? How can they find the freedom to dance together? How can we experiment with new ways of dancing together that work with imagination rather than classical forms?

Alejandro described three important aspects for him when

designing a class, which include offering a choreographic experience for the participants, as well as the desire to trigger kinesthetic empathy and to practise forms of agreement and consent. Above all, he hopes that through dancing together, they are exercising choice making and empowerment. A year and a half into the project, all members of the team described how Dance Well positively challenges them to question their habits and working methods and also confronts them with new questions of self-care and the navigation of their own emotions as they nurture and develop the local Dance Well community.

Dynamics of Agency and Touch

For choreographer [Alfredo Zinola](#), touch and proximity are central to his artistic practice and how one experiences his performances. He primarily creates interactive shows for kids where he invites them to experience their bodies as positive pathways to give and receive sensitivities. To illustrate how he works with touch, he guided us to experience a few physical tasks in partners and later during a performative demonstration, we were invited to manipulate different parts of his body to bring him into new positions. The tasks revealed important aspects of his touch research, which highlight consent, agency and body positivity. He also described the process as a discovery of “side effects” that inform encounters of touch, such as personal narratives and social contexts.

Also guiding us through a physical practice in small groups was choreographer and massage therapist [Massimo Fusco](#). To begin the session, we were given specific guidelines for how to touch, such as tracing the landscapes of the body, discovering how different body parts could move and applying different types of pressure. He encouraged consent to be continually asked for by describing which parts of our bodies could or could not be touched and reminded us that we could change our minds throughout. Following the physical explorations, he presented his company, called [Corps Magnétiques](#) (Magnetic Body), which explores how therapeutic arts can enter new fields. They are often working in hospitals and care institutions, putting art, society and care in equal focus. In addition to projects he is currently researching and creating, he showed an excerpt of the children’s version of [CORPS SONORES](#) (SOUND BODY), which offers an immersive experience of dance, soundscape and massage with the interest to return audience members to their bodies.

Similar to the Dance Well team, Massimo's recent projects focusing on the care and wellbeing of the public, have triggered him to reconsider his own working methods and wellbeing. This is leading him to rethink how he will hold upcoming auditions, as well as how he can foster greater wellbeing in his team, including through a different allotment of resources within the structure. He acknowledged how bringing his work into more direct contact with society is changing his perception of fairness and wellbeing for the leading team and administration.

Dancers and Working Conditions

The final session was a discussion on wellbeing and working conditions, guided by Nicolas Naudé, director of [Travail et Culture](#), with break dancer/physiotherapist Damien Noudelmann, break dancer/sophrologist Babette Amand and choreographer Alexandre Goyer. The joy of this conversation was hearing from active professional dancers who also hold other professional roles as well as from a choreographer who initiated research on dancers' experiences during auditions. To begin, Nicolas highlighted the negative impact that can be felt on one's health over the long term when they are repeatedly required to do work that goes against their values. He also underscored the challenges for dance artists who by nature are on a quest for meaning, but also lack resources, which can place strain on physical, psychological and social levels.

Diving into the conversation, Babette described how she draws on principles of her dance practice, such as the relationship to breath and the role of visualisation, when as a sophrologist she helps people manage certain stages in their lives and reprogram negative feelings. Damien drew connections between his dance and physiotherapy practices as both being about the relationship between movement and self-emancipation. He offers protocols for people to learn more about their own body through movement and to use visualisation as a means to go beyond one's bodily limitations. Alexandre presented a survey he conducted to find out how power dynamics and pressures in an audition setting could have a negative impact on performance. Along with the data he presented, he highlighted the importance of good and transparent communication, especially about the number of contracts being offered and the working conditions of the project, for healthier audition experiences and work environments.

Cycle of Influence

Throughout the two days common beliefs were revealed regarding how dance is contributing to the wellbeing of society. This included the value of feeling and expressing emotions through the body, establishing safer spaces and trust through dancing with people one is not typically in contact with, experiencing transformative states in a communal setting, practising consent, choice making and care, and opening to the unknown, to name a few. What is perhaps new for some is how those same practices and values are triggering a new awareness of wellbeing for dance professionals themselves.

The Atelier was co-organised by EDN - European Dance Development Network and Le Gymnase National Center of Choreographic Development, in collaboration with Le Flow, Latitudes contemporaines and Travail & Culture.

--

*Courtesy of EDN, where the report was first published

- Images: © Romain Paquet_Le Gymnase

**The report was written by dance dramaturg and facilitator Monica Gillette, author of EDN's forthcoming publication Practices of Care and Wellbeing in Contemporary Dance: Evidence from the Field. As part of the Atelier's programme, Monica introduced the research, the Dance Well project, and facilitated the final discussion.