

# Roots and branches

Artistic Director of Joon Dance, **Zosia Jo**, describes how letting go of generational hierarchies and embracing local, radical, collective growth, is sustaining her company through a time of personal change and securing its young artists' collective future.

Joon Dance has been my dream, my passion project and my first baby! I started Joon alone and unpaid after graduating from Northern School in 2008 with the goal of bringing contemporary dance performance and participation in a bigger way into the rural community of Pembrokeshire where I felt most at home.

Though I attended school and dance training in London, throughout my childhood, I spent all my school holidays since the age of fourteen working with horses in Pembrokeshire and living with a sort of adopted second family in the village of Nolton. The Owen family taught me the value of hard work, community, loyalty and, of course, how to teach physical skills in an enjoyable way to children and adults as we took people of all ages and abilities out for rides to the beach and through woodland. I credit them with inspiring my whole career in community dance to this day!

Though I felt most welcome and at home in the rugged landscape of West Wales, as did my Australian born mum, we didn't feel we could put down roots there as I was committed to dancing and struggling to find contemporary classes in the area.

While independent dance artists, Simon Whitehead and Stirling Steward were offering incredible work for adults, they were very far in the north and the county is huge. I reached out to Dawns Dyfed (who'd just lost their funding), Theatr Gwaun, the Pembrokeshire council arts officer and finally Peter Doran at Torch Theatre, trying to find out what was around and what I could do with my newly founded "dance company". Peter gave me my shot. He was generous with space and Dan Shaw, general manager at the time, helped me create the first ever funded Joon Dance project, Breakout.

A dream formed in my mind: a performing dance company based in Pembrokeshire. I would bring brilliant performers and teachers (from elsewhere at first), tour schools and run intensive summer schools. We would create performances with local people, blurring the lines between professional and participatory. And in this soil, I would lay the foundations to build a whole company of dancers born and bred here. I couldn't believe that

somewhere with such inspiring views and thriving visual arts, theatre and music scenes was so lacking in dance culture.

I committed and dug in. The Torch Theatre summer school became synonymous with the company itself. Participants simply say: "Are you going to Joon Dance this year?" It has run annually since 2009, only stalling twice, due to resources in 2010 and the pandemic in 2020.

Joon grew mostly through word of mouth and the repeat attendances were astounding, with whole families attending every year, including some young people who didn't normally dance except for with us. It has been at times completely inspiring and directly nourishing, providing me with both a testing ground for new choreographic ideas and an annual source of renewed joy and belief in the power of dance as we came together, participants alongside teachers, to perform year on year. We started to refer to Joon as a family. We all grew up together.

However, it was also completely unsustainable.

I have worked on Joon mostly unpaid and, though I wanted to offer more regular classes and put down roots, I never felt I could risk being isolated, so constantly travelled around Wales and beyond (see my previous Animated article on my work in Cairo!) to make a living creatively.

In 2022, as I created and toured my group performance, Fabulous Animals. I was also growing my new and literal baby, Tedi. I was apprehensive about what motherhood would mean for this work so close to my heart yet unpaid. During the last few summer schools, I offered extra sessions for advanced students and a small, talented loyal group had emerged. I knew I wanted to grow the company into a new model that could exist beyond me. I started talking about it. Would they think about working with me one day? We brought them into company rehearsals, gave them extra material in the performances and found out their goals and dreams. When I became pregnant, I asked them if they wanted to collectively hold the fort. Four of them, Ciara, Sophie, Caitlin and Indigo said yes.

I created two weeks of training as a handover. We started each day with a creative session from

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Clockwise from top left: Indigo Tarran, Spring Gather 2024. Ciara MacFarlane and Caitlin Howe, Spring Gather 2024. Big Flock 2024 with Zosia Jo, Sophie Lorimer and Tedi. Zosia Jo with Tedi, Spring Gather 2024. All photos: Karel Jasper.

Right: Joon Dance, Spring Gather 2024.  
Photo: Karel Jasper.

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someone whose practice I admire, with sessions on choreography, improvisation and technique, with a focus on creative and inclusive teaching and facilitation. We spent afternoons looking at my administrative systems and breaking down project planning, budgets and funding applications. We discussed dreams. I asked what they wanted to develop for Joon and for themselves. We wove together the existing elements of Joon I wanted to continue and some new ideas the group wanted to pursue.

We called the project Roots and Branches. We share roots in Pembrokeshire and in Joon Summer School and each of the four artists has led a branch of the project.

- Ciara focused on our shared passion of outdoor and site-specific dance, leading a family



Above left: Sophie Lorimer, Spring Gather 2024. Above right: Joon Dance 2024. Photos: Karel Jasper.



day and planning our Gather/Casglu project, an intergenerational site responsive movement workshop.

- Sophie wanted to bring the classic Joon summer school to Cardiff and held a wonderful week at Chapter Arts. (We may be at Wales Millennium Centre in 2025, fingers crossed!)
- Caitlin explored site-responsive choreographic work and ran open movement sessions at Theatr Gwaun as part of their warm spaces initiative, another new partnership for us.
- Indigo focused on a program of creative development we called 'nourishment sessions', which enabled the team to come together to dance alongside their project planning and administration.

The team performed, created and facilitated together throughout the year, around a central creative theme: Outside-In (inspired by nature). Their practice developed, they reached new audiences and participants; they made some beautiful work. The feedback was rich and highlighted their open, kind energy.

When we came back together to evaluate, Indigo curated a beautiful week, with time for the business side and time for moving together – complete with a fun exercise in putting on and taking off the various 'hats', real and figurative, that form the company roles and a board meeting on the beach!

It was the perfect way for me to step back into the company. Movement sessions led by Stirling Steward and Simon Whitehead freed us to connect as movers outside our company roles and responsibilities and helped us recoup and reflect. Stirling and Simon's work with their local community in North Pembrokeshire is highly recommended. Their incredible site responsive workshops and Stirling's creative classes for children can be found via their local Twmpath (1). I felt I stepped in cautiously, not knowing how my new mother-self would find dancing and planning, but, by the end, I was enlivened, inspired by the group, re-finding my dancing body and excited to plan our next program of work together.

Dancing together and in physical contact was a new challenge. I have always seen the group as my students, therefore, kept a professional distance. Meeting in this way, as equals, we had to dance around this new proximity, tentatively moving towards more flow together. We met the challenge. By the end of the week, I resolved to dance and perform again. We thought it might be interesting for Caitlin, the keenest choreographer of the group, whom I taught since they were about ten years old, to create a performance on me, further flipping the hierarchy. This year, we hope to gain further funding to pursue new projects such as this and keep growing as a company.

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Top: Joon Dance (Indigo and Ciara), Spring Gather 2024. Photo: Karel Jasper. Above: Caitlin Howe, Ciara MacFarlane, Sophie Lorimer and Indigo Tarran, Spring Gather 2024. Photo: Karel Jasper.

“I had to take a deep breath and a leap of faith to hand over the reins of something I have run totally solo, free to follow my own whims, for so many years. In trusting them and letting go of the need to control or lead, I have learned a lot. I’ve seen what I have taught them emerge and – crucially – I have learned from them too.”

It’s been both humbling and a great source of pride to see these emerging practitioners growing as artists and people, as well as to watch them grow the company beyond what I could have achieved alone. I had to take a deep breath and a leap of faith to hand over the reins of something I have run totally solo, free to follow my own whims, for so many years. In trusting them and letting go of the need to control or lead, I have learned a lot. I’ve seen what I have taught them emerge and – crucially – I have learned from them too. For example, Sophie is much better with budgets than I am!

The Joon ethos is to treat professionals with the same level of care we treat participants and approach participants with the same ambition and creative rigour as professionals. These participants have *become* the professionals, embodying that goal perfectly. We remain an artistic family and, as I start my domestic family life, we are committed to finding ways of working in dance compatible with it, in and out of the studio. How we do this is our next set of questions and I can’t think of anyone better to embark on the adventure with. I leave the last words to them:

“The Roots and Branches project with Joon Dance has been such a nourishing and unique experience. To be trusted with such responsibility by Zosia and offered such a positively demanding creative venture has been amazing; growing confidence through running a company and the skills that entails in order to deliver a project enriched with diverse activity fed by all of our artistic minds and experiences. I’ve found a heart-warming and accepting place amongst the Joon Dance team. Exploring our individual creative voices and how they weave together has been so special. I’m excited for the return of Zosia, to build collectively in art and business and to create more opportunities for the vibrant community we’re connected with.” – Indigo

“Working over the last year for Joon Dance has developed my skills as well as widening them, building my confidence in producing and creating dance workshops and performances. It has been inspiring to see how our small team has problem-solved and learnt together, facilitating experiences and projects that we are really proud of.” – Caitlin

#### References

1. Twmpath is a Welsh word that means “hump” or “tump”. It is also used to describe a type of Welsh dance and the event where the dance is performed.

#### Info

<https://joondance.wixsite.com/joondance>