

UNMASKING PAIN

Creative approaches to telling stories of life with persistent pain



BalbirSingh
collaborations

www.balbirsinghdance.co.uk



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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UNMASKING PAIN is a pilot project exploring creative approaches to telling stories of life with persistent pain.

It is a collaboration between the worlds of arts, health, medicine and therapies. It brings together people with lived experience of chronic pain, carers, GPs, physiotherapists, academic researchers and artists.

UNMASKING PAIN will unfold through a series of ‘co-labs’ – creative and critical spaces where artists, people living with pain and pain management specialists will come together with artistic director Balbir Singh.

With access to a range of arts practitioners working with movement and dance, mask-making, clay sculpture and music, participants will discover creative ways to explore life and live well despite their pain.

At the end of the the series of co-labs, the multi-disciplinary artworks created will be curated to form an UNMASKING PAIN exhibition.

This will be shared widely in public spaces and health settings, as well as through digital and online presence.

Balbir Singh Dance Company

Who we are

Arts Council England (ACE) funded dance organisation

What we do

We make sense of the world through the art and celebrate the human condition. We have four major strands of work:

- celebrating age
- an appetite for dance
- classical revisited
- sport and art

Recent projects

- *On the trail of...* – a social prescribing project of nature walks and diverse culture
- *A Dance Down Memory Lane* – a Leeds care homes project interpreting memories through dance
- *The Wise Ones* – featuring two septuagenarian dancers exploring the nature of wisdom
- BBC Sport and Art World News Channel interview and ice skater footage for documentary about John Curry skating gold medallist to tie in with LGBTQ month and winter olympics, currently on BBC iplayer
- BBC Dance Passions and One Dance UK – 10 minute excerpt of new work, just launched in March on iplayer

Previous collaborations and partnerships

Strategic in approach and bringing together different disciplines and sectors:

- Royal Opera House (ROH) – ACE funded Links Scheme – one of three initial organisations selected for a two year project engaging across the departments of the ROH
- Leisure Sector/Local Authorities swimming pools project across the country - ACE Strategic Touring
- Rural Touring - partnered with seven rural touring schemes across the north as part of a 28 venue rural tour ACE Strategic Touring
- Libraries – developing a network of libraries across the country with new work Dewey
- University of Sheffield – Krebs Fest working with arts and science in celebration of the work of Sir Hans Krebs and the Citric Acid Cycle
- Thackray Museum of Medicine – performance and animating the galleries
- Magna Science Museum – two year Children and the Arts education project

The core team

Balbir Singh (Balbir Singh Dance Company) artistic lead

Dawn Fuller (Space 2) producer / project management

Emma Tregidden (Space 2) producer / project management

Dr Frances Cole (Live Well with Pain) pain rehabilitation specialist (retired)

Diarmuid Denny (UCL Hospitals NHS Trust) pain physiotherapist

Dr Paul Chazot (Durham University) project research

Professor Mark Johnson (Leeds Beckett University) project research

Rosie Cruickshank (St Thomas and Guys Input PMP programmes)
pain management physiotherapist

Dr Ghazala Tabasam (Leeds Beckett University) pain research team

Dr Isobel Jacob (Leeds Beckett University) pain research team

Jon Woolmore (Sessay Consulting) project evaluation

David Andrassy (Andrassy Media) project concept / graphic design





Defining the concept

Unmask

Be able to understand, process, articulate and reveal the story and have it listened to and understood to enhance living well with pain

- self understanding
- new communication skills
- explain
- make sense
- articulate

Impact

- healthier relationship with pain
- others appreciate and understand better (friends, GPs, carers, employers)

Living well

- pain does not dominate day to day existence and take over the individual
- coping strategies / mechanisms
- understand in a different way
- gain a sense of pattern/rhythms/cycles
- good days and not so good days

Role of the artists/art

- different process to understand, engage, and explore
- art is making the invisible, visible
- abstract into literal – literal into abstract
- lost in translation – gained in translation

Chronic pain – what can be changed?

- Lifestyle, perspective/frame of mind, coping mechanisms through the arts and developing a creative approach to living well with pain, relationship with self, art, environment, sense of ownership of the body, emotions, creative mindset

What happens when the story has been told?

- Has it been listened to effectively / how to listen to the story
- Process of finding the language (the ongoing journey of self-discovery and challenge)
- What is the new story to be told?



Spotlight on the artists:

Bisakha Sarker

Bisakha Sarker MBE, is an independent artist and Artistic Director of dance company Chaturangan. She believes culturally diverse dance to be an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of 21st century British culture. As a dancer living with chronic pain, Bisakha continues through her work to search for a style which embraces the demands of a body changing with time.

What is the pain?

What is the emotion?

What is indescribable in words?

Movement

Hand gesture / dance (styles - abstract and narrative based)

Sound

rhythm, mood (colour), music (instruments), nature, spoken/voice

Clay sculpting

Giving shape to the pain and having a conversation with it

Written

Capturing words and helping to articulate

Mask making

Self image/reflection/projection/external-internal

Digital capture

Film, audio, photographic, vlog, blog, podcast, photos

Exhibition

Define the partnership, project, development - engage wider sectors and court future funders

Social media

Strategy across the sectors

Tools of communication /
languages (expanding
vocabulary) / art forms /
artists to tell the story /
creative collaboration

Each session to have an entry point (warm up),
content, exit (cool down) – neutralising the
emotions and leaving in a positive frame of
mind and energy

Environment - room size, shape, colour,
natural light, greenery, food at lunch time –
herbalist/nutrition

Changing behaviours

Emotional perspectives

Evaluation data and anecdotal capture



Spotlight on the artists:

Kali Chandrasegaram

Kali Chandrasegaram is a dancer who lives with persistent pain. "I was a child who was not allowed to dance, being a boy! When I finished school at the age of 18, I rebelled against my parents' outdated ideology and pursued my love for dance; this love for dance blossomed, and I never looked back. I strongly believe that dance is a personal journey of the soul for self and collective awareness and not falling into a convention. Having been born and raised in a multicultural society in Malaysia where diversity is ingrained, integrating differences is in my veins."

The process and outputs

The process in itself

- to explore and use the vocabularies
- understand with compassion, tenderness and kindness
- interpret
- translate (literal and abstract)
- collaboration - make sense of it together
- gain a new perspective
- reflection
- what is the story
- what will the story be
- what to tell the GP, clinical, and social prescribing teams now/in the future
- how does the range of clinicians – family doctor, physiotherapist, pharmacist, social prescribers etc – listen and respond now/in the future
- what is the conversation with physio treatment
- beyond the story being told / the artistic treatment
- evaluation / data / digital capture (pilot)

Image top right: Paul Chazot from Durham University, using an experimental infrared technique to map pain as part of the project



Outputs

- change in self and identity:
 - changing way of thinking of pain
 - thinking moving from then to now and future with “me as myself now”
 - letting go of the self that was, accepting the losses and seeking gains, or just being
- come to terms with new self and at the same time encompass previous self
- for some of the group to co-deliver with the artists to new satellite groups as part of consolidating their journey and providing legacy
- create music, footage, exercises etc creative tool kits - written, filmed, sung for the individuals to have to hand to repeat and strengthen the artistic discoveries made (creative treatment)
- end mask external and internal - what is the difference?



Spotlight on the artists:

Adam Strickson

Adam Strickson is a writer and theatre maker, specialising in masks and giant puppets. He is Senior Teaching Fellow in Theatre and Writing at the University of Leeds and a lead artist for 6 million+ Charitable Trust. After working with Horse and Bamboo Theatre, Adam co-founded Chol, taking intercultural work from Batley to the fishing villages of Bangladesh. In 2010, he founded Wingbeats, a music-theatre company for the Cultural Olympiad in Yorkshire. Since 2015, for 6 million +, he has directed *The Weeping Sisters*, a procession of giant puppets and music that commemorates different genocides.

The activity

Co-labs

Day-long sessions at weekends one weekend a month for five months with different core group participants (Durham and Leeds).

Bringing the full teams together for the detailed work and consolidating learning from other activity.

To recruit 18 participants assuming a drop off rate of six. With sensitivity to energy levels and pacing.

Satellite activity

Satellite activity will operate in various ways and run alongside the co-lab sessions, the discoveries from which will feed into these sessions as well as from the co-labs into follow on satellite activity.

Other activity

Each participant to do weekly online sessions with an artist to develop the ideas and conversations

As part of the journey to gain the trust of all and find the best ways of monitoring and capturing through digital and sharing that people are comfortable with.

Image top right: Balbir Singh leading community members on a health walk through urban woodland in Leeds, Autumn 2021



What are the satellite activities for?

The satellite activity will range from and serve purposes of recruitment and exploration:

- one-to-one sessions
- coffee conversations
- identified groups with a specific focus eg. care home residents and workers for follow on activity, cultural groups, others to identify and recruit and also partnership build with others interested in the project eg physio group, GP group, older people's creative group (eg: Older People's Ensemble; Association of Blind Asians) park walks participants
- testing out ideas and artists development of delivery
- online sessions with matched artists regularly where there is an affinity
- carers to engage in sessions



Spotlight on the artists:

Jesse Bannister

From a mixed-race background of Indian and white British heritage, Jesse is a world-renowned Indian classical saxophonist and composer, who has written for the Hallé Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and City of London Sinfonia and has collaborated with many artists including Bickram Ghosh, Siva Raman, Talvin Singh, Andy Sheppard and Balbir Singh Dance Company.

Jesse Bannister's recently released album *In Tune* is played on a re-tuned piano drawing from Indian classical rāga, minimalism and Impressionist piano music. It is a musical journey to a particular state of consciousness, inviting you to grow, bloom and expand through sound.

The artists

Balbir Singh artistic director

Kali Chandrasegaram dancer

Bisakha Sarker dancer

Jesse Bannister musician, composer, healing through music

Charlotte Watson musician, music therapist

Adam Strickson mask and puppet maker, lecturer University of Leeds

Chris Speyer writer, clay sculptor

Sam White dancer

Plus other artists to engage as and when the need is identified

