



Gordon and Sam in discussion at the 2006 Guild AGM at the NRCD, Guildford.

A Tribute to Sam Thornton 28th October 1931 - 18th November 2020 *Susi Thornton*



How did Sam - a working class lad from the North East - come to dance and facilitate the spirit of dance in others from many parts of the world?

His first experience was ballroom dance: "if you couldn't dance, you couldn't pull the birds", he said, and ballroom dance he could do well. At the Training College, Bognor Regis, all students had to take part in all the subjects at the beginning of their arrival, and that meant Creative Dance with Mrs. Richardson - and so a seed was sown. When Susi also attended the College in Bognor and wanted to continue her studies, Sam said he was sure there was a Creative Dance school in Manchester; their research found it was now in Addlestone, Surrey - the Art of Movement Studio.

In 1963 Sam studied at Carnegie in Leeds and for his dissertation he wrote about the pioneering work of Rudolf Laban. The dissertation turned into a book, published in 1971 by McDonald & Evans, *A Movement Perspective of Rudolf Laban*. It also led to his meeting up with the deputy head of the College of Arts, Bretton Hall - Margaret Dunn, where he was offered a Lectureship post. At that time David Henshaw, with whom Sam and Susi had danced in *Orchesis* in London, brought them into *Choreos*, another Laban inspired dance production group that travelled up and down the country performing at colleges of education.



The Choreos Dance Group including Stuart Hopps, Brian Morgan and Sam Thornton

Sam started in *Orchesis* as a help to play the tape recorder but Molly Davies, the artistic director, said to him "Sam, you've got a good pair of legs, you must dance with us". Sam and Susi played a very



active part in the West Riding Movement Study Group started by Alec Clegg. Wonderful dancing days - learning, making life-long friends, and a time when Susi, with Shelly Sorkin, were proud to study to become Graduates of the Laban Guild. They were all part of the West Riding contingent in Geraldine Stephenson's wonderful Kaleidoscopia Viva which was pioneered by the Laban Guild and performed twice at the Albert Hall. Sam and Susi often remembered the gathering of all the groups at Lady Mabel College (Rotherham) and rehearsing the amazing finale for the first (and only) time - the next was in the Albert Hall.

In June 1971 Sam became a Senior Lecturer at the Laban Art of Movement Studio in Addlestone, Surrey. At his interview he noticed Warren Lamb studying him! Here was a job he loved, a time of fascination with the creativity outpouring from Lisa, from colleagues Rosie, Henry, Janet, Hen, Vera, and Trevor, and we have had many cards glowing with positive comments from students he worked with. He taught on the Summer Schools and Lisa told him in his 2nd year to take the



Movement Choir choreographed by Sam at LInC

whole course for a movement choir . . . he was stunned but he did and never looked back. At that time Sam got more involved with the Laban Guild - being on Council, being involved in teaching on the newly formed Leaders Training Scheme, and leading big events in the Albert Hall for the Guild on CCPR events. His first one was to take Laban's poem Stillness and Stir and move the poem, with Sebastian Petit beautifully reading the words. There was disappointment for the wonderful dancers that this piece did not appear on the

video of the event. Sam also produced a colourful production piece to Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Sam was always humbled by the dedication of dancers who travelled long distances to be part of the event and which had young dancers as well as older dancers performing together - this is what dance was all about for him.



Movement Choir choreographed by Sam at LInC Summer School in 2000

The Summer School run by the Art of Movement Studio was threatened when there was great change in the management of the Studio and, in order to preserve this wonderful experience, Sam and Susi took over the management of the Summer School, with Lisa Ullmann being Artistic Director until her death in 1984 when Sam took on

this role. This international event was a place of high creative endeavour, as so many of you will remember. We lived as a vibrant community, returning year after year for 30 years until 2009. So many emails and cards have come from people inspired by working with him, feeling their lives were changed from their experiences of dancing in his choirs. They have used terms like 'inspirational', 'extraordinary', 'a friend', 'a privilege to have known him', 'he taught me so much', 'a high spot of my year'. It was a time of forming deep, meaningful friendships, a time for huge creative development, a real 'here and now' experience, which people told us they needed to get them through life till the next year. Sam appreciated his part in this but knew that the magic happened each year because of wonderful staff members - all of whom have sent their condolences and sense of loss: Anna, Hilary, Jan, John, Maggie, Mitch, Richard, Rosie, Su with David McKittrick; Geraldine, Hen, Henry, and Lisa have greeted him with a twirl on the Other Side. And his work lives on in the Laban Movement Choir Project run by Janet, Maggie and Susi.

Sam travelled with his gifts to Austria, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Norway and Switzerland taking his understanding and love of movement to new and experienced dancers.

Later in life Sam trained as an educational counsellor and is fondly remembered by the whole group as a vibrant, very intelligent, and humorous group member. He also developed his skills in creative writing which then led to facilitating a creative writing group for over ten years. A piece of his that was read at his funeral is:

November closes its hand
on the end of the year.

There is ice on cars
and on the lake.

Wild-fowl and sea-birds land
in lumps of wings and outstretched necks.
They stand, preen, gather in clumps
and nod to deny such indignity.

Bonfires smudge, then blaze as rockets hit the sky.
Memories of treachery still live.

At his funeral we began with *Misa Criolla* and finished with "In Trutina" from *Carmina Burana* . . . many will remember how we all stood in a huge circle with arms around each other . . . gently swaying from one side to the other in full awareness of everyone in the circle. That is how Sam would like us to be with him, holding on, smiling, Being.



Sam - LInC entertainment

Members' Classes

Due to Covid 19 physical classes are not possible. Contact the members below as they may be offering on-line classes.

Adult Movement and Dance in Belfast

Contact: **Brenda McKee**
Email: brendamckee@btinternet.com

'Third Age Dance' in Cambridge

Contact: **Maddy Tongue**
01223 302030

Weekly Drop in Classes

led by Viv Bridson
Held at The Place which is due to open in September

Weekly Workshops

led by Jenny Frankel
Contact: 07970 536643
Email: jennyfrankel.laban@gmail.com

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