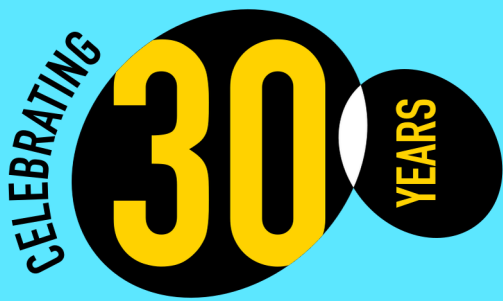




# Working Together Across the North

Spot On has collaborated with its wonderful [northern touring partners](#) almost from the beginning. We do this to share ideas, support each other and maximise opportunities. Dance Across the North is such an example. Led by our Yorkshire colleagues, Blaize, this touring project brought fabulous dance to venues across the north of England, including Lancashire. Here, Balbir Singh company explain why they do what they do.

For Balbir Singh Dance Company (BSDC), Dance Across the North reaffirmed a guiding belief: that dance should be a shared experience. Whether in a theatre or a farmhouse kitchen, the aim was always to perform with people rather than to them. This intimacy transformed performances into dialogues, moments of recognition and connection that lingered long after the final bow.

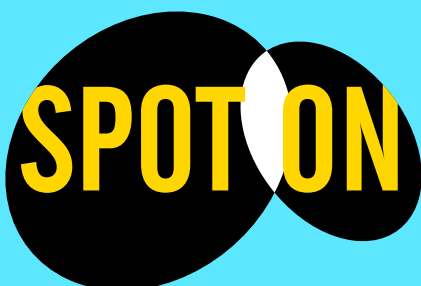
In 2016, BSDC teamed up with arts organisation Blaize to take culturally diverse dance into countryside areas across the North of England. The collaboration offered a unique opportunity to explore new ways of reaching audiences in remote communities and in the process, to reinvent an ancient Indian tradition.

Dance Across the North was a partnership of arts organisations and rural touring schemes that together covered a vast region, from Northumberland to North Lincolnshire. The project's aim was to bring a contemporary mix of culturally diverse dance, live music, and workshops to Northern rural audiences. As project lead, Blaize secured Strategic Touring Funding from Arts Council England, while BSDC, with its strong record of connecting with "arts cold spots," led the creative delivery.

*"We're specifically working in areas where artistic development is hampered. Balbir Singh Dance is providing world-class artistic experiences, which we hope will spur on young artists to enter the profession and deliver equally transformative future projects."*

— Ellen Thorpe, Blaize

During the planning phase, Artistic Director Balbir Singh realised that what was being attempted would, in fact, have been quite at home in rural India many years ago. There, isolated communities would still see and hear great artists thanks to a tradition known as the Mehfil. Derived from an Arabic word meaning "a festive gathering to entertain," Mehfiles were intimate evenings of poetry, music, and dance held in the homes of Indian nobility.



Balbir asked himself: If this worked centuries ago in rural India, why couldn't it work in 21st-century rural England? Replace the Maharaja's palace with a country cottage, and the rest should fall naturally into place. And so, the modern Mehfil was born. Traditional Kathak dancers, musicians, and contemporary performers shared short pieces with invited guests, transforming living rooms into small but vibrant performance spaces.

The Mehfils acted as catalysts, creating a "buzz" that spread through word of mouth and local networks. They generated enthusiasm for the upcoming programme and empowered community promoters to publicise subsequent performances in nearby venues.

*"We met with local promoters and venues to look at which pieces would best suit their space, and how we could adapt work to fit a given setting or audience."*

— Balbir Singh

Rural venues, of course, come in all shapes and sizes, from village halls and libraries to barns and sports centres. BSDC's long experience of working in non-traditional spaces proved invaluable. The company had performed in libraries, swimming pools, even rugby stadiums, tailoring each piece to its environment. That flexibility, born from years of community engagement, became central to the project's success. This collaborative model gave local promoters agency and made programming accessible and playful. It also reflected BSDC's core ethos, that the relationship between artist and audience should be one of co-creation and conversation, not instruction.

Audiences responded with warmth and curiosity. Many had never seen Indian classical or contemporary dance before, yet they recognised its emotional power instantly. After one Mehfil, a farmer remarked how the rhythms of the tabla reminded him of the pulse of the harvest, an echo of life and labour he hadn't expected to find in a dance performance.

Moments like that captured the true impact of the project: dissolving the barriers between cultures, genres, and geographies.

Dance Across the North became a creative turning point for BSDC. It gave rise to several new works : Love & Spice, Champion of the Flatlands, and Painting the Indian Gods, each of which went on to tour widely, carrying forward the spirit of collaboration and intimacy first cultivated through the project. Love & Spice, the company's first major live show after lockdown, rekindled the joy of shared experience through rhythm and storytelling.

At its heart, Dance Across the North was about more than touring dance. It was about reconnection, between people and art, between rural and urban, between the ancient and the modern. It proved that high-quality, culturally rich experiences can flourish anywhere when trust, imagination, and partnership lead the way.

For Balbir Singh Dance Company, the Mehfil continues, an ever-evolving invitation to gather, share, and celebrate the simple human joy of dancing and creating together.

