

## Think Tank: A series of in-depth conversations

### Discussion 1: Dance of Interdependence

Hosted by [Dublin Dance Festival](#), 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

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The first Think Tank – ‘Making Dance Performance’ – considered the present challenges experienced in the dance sector, and what is needed to provide supportive solutions, in both an immediate and long-term context. The summary of the first Think Tank can be found [HERE](#).

The second Think Tank – ‘Dance of Interdependence’ – discussed how the overall dance ecology functions across the island of Ireland, examining its existing support structures, networks, processes, and relationships, and how these can be strengthened and further developed. The conversation was opened with a short input from Fearghus Ó Conchúir on the concept of Interdependence, and was then structured around two main approaches to the topic: (i) mapping challenges within existing dance ecologies on the island of Ireland, and thoughts for developments of relationships, access, and models for making and sharing dance; (ii) capturing ideas for change and action to support new ways of working together.

### Summary of discussion

#### 1. Sharing Challenges and Ideas for Solutions

- Considering the place of independent artists with the current dance ecology, independence (e.g. freelance work) needs to be understood within the larger economic system that dance artists work in. The current neoliberal system allows for certain artistic and personal freedoms, but it also requires artists to be endlessly “on” and “resourceful”; otherwise they become invisible within the system. This is exhausting, and has led to artists having a more precarious existence with less sustainable careers, and less social protection and employment rights.
- The idea that artists are “independent” is untrue; everyone operates within organisational structures, and there is a relationship of interdependence between artists and the structures that support them.
- Relationships in which artists feel like they are supported don’t necessarily have to be formed through funding relationships. There can also be a relationship of care in which organisations support artists through partnership and recognition. This allows artists – especially independent artists – to feel like they have a “home”.
- Sometimes artists can feel like they are seen as “content” that passes through organisations such as venues and festivals. Similarly, organisations can be seen to have an infrastructural and “contractual continuity” that artists are lacking. How can equality be created and sustained within the relationship between organisations and artists? How can we think of making an interdependent and supportive ecology together?

- The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has provided some dance artists with more financial security than they have ever experienced. The introduction of a Universal Basic Income would provide much-needed support for artists.
- How do we consider artists as citizens and consider artists' role as citizens within our wider society: "how do I show up as an artist and a citizen?"
- This is an emotional time, and considering the dance ecology in Ireland is an emotional subject. But the pandemic has given the sector "time to pause and time to think"; "some good will come out of all of this madness".
- There are dysfunctional elements in the dance ecology at both a macro and a micro level. At the macro level dance needs much greater recognition and infrastructural support and funding. The lack of visibility and joined-up infrastructural support for dance at the macro level leads to a feeling of isolation for individual artists working to develop the dance ecology at a micro level, and a sense that their labour is unrecognised and undervalued.
- Due to a lack of critical mass of dance practice in regional and rural areas, there is increased pressure on dance artists working in these areas (e.g. within the Dance Artist Residency scheme) to essentially function as resource organisations. Individual artists undertake significant labour in educating communities and local authorities about dance. This is an exhausting and unsustainable situation that leads to a "one leaf, one snail, one bird" ecology, which is in constant danger of collapse and erasure. For example, if individual artists developing growth from the ground up are unable to continue their work either for personal reasons (e.g. due to burnout / ill health), or due to the discontinuation of funding, or lack of long-term funding security, there is often no-one available to continue their work. Progress achieved through years of labour establishing programmes and developing networks is then lost.
- There is a sense that dance - and arts practice in general - is seriously undervalued and underused by some local authorities.
- The current funding cycle for dance, which is predominantly activity and product-based, makes artistic development difficult: "evolution is impossible", as you are "double-working your money", trying to create performance products while concurrently trying to research and develop work that may not receive funding. The current model allows no time for artistic growth and reflection on practice.
- There is a sense that "being busy" by producing a large volume of outputs is equated with success, whereas the "quieter" work of development is not prioritised in current funding models.
- The continued lack of adequate funding and infrastructural support for dance in Northern Ireland has a negative effect on both the growth of the dance sector in Northern Ireland and the growth of cross-border and all-island developments of the dance ecology. There is no "home base" for dance in Northern Ireland, and the dedicated resource organisation for dance was recently folded into the resource organisation for theatre, decreasing the visibility and recognition of dance.
- The disparity between funding support for dance in NI and ROI impacts on the development of all-island touring relationships. Touring opportunities, cross-border networks and supports need to be further developed across the island.
- There is a need for "diverse and accessible" performance spaces that might also support different audiences: "we need more places to go". This has become an even more pressing issue now that the global pandemic has made international touring "impossible" for the foreseeable future.

- In comparison with touring internationally, touring dance in Ireland can be a “grim” experience due to a chronic lack of audience development and practical knowledge of what dance productions require at certain venues.
- There is an “artistic imperative to collaborate and expand our practice” through international networks, and there is also an expectation from funding bodies for the development of international collaborations and co-funding opportunities. However, it is not clear how this can be sustained in light of the pandemic restrictions.
- There needs to be support for artists who have caring responsibilities to enable them to continue with their practice. There also needs to be a more inclusive perception of artists as normal, “living and breathing” people who might also be parents or have other caring responsibilities. This would prevent artists feeling they need to hide this side of their lives to succeed in their professional practice, and then suffering a sense of failure if they struggle with juggling both aspects.
- Dance artists and companies have to spend too much of their time “chasing financial supports”. Due to the economic precarity of the profession and the constant pressure to secure funding to continue working, dance artists struggle with their work-life balance: “my life is my work and my work is my life”. This can have damaging health consequences.<sup>1</sup>
- Due to constraints imposed by current funding models, even regularly-funded dance companies and choreographers have difficulty developing a continuous practice in Ireland. They are essentially operating on a part-time basis and are unable to develop an ensemble, or support the growth of other artists within their programme of activities: “even three years regular funding feels really short”. This has an impact on both the artistic development of companies and on career sustainability within the sector.
- International dancers employed by companies are taxed at a higher rate. Dance companies are absorbing this extra cost so that it doesn’t impact on the earnings of guest artists: “paying people well in a capitalist society is how you express love”. However, this creates further strain on production budgets.<sup>2</sup>
- The global pandemic has had the positive effect of connecting people across the dance sector, allowing artists to “develop a broader sense of the dance ecology”. It has raised awareness of how dance artists often work inside their own “bubbles”, but that “we are stronger together than we are apart”.
- There is a lack of a dedicated, peer-to-peer networking and support platform for newly graduated dance artists who are trying to build a career. The Step-Up programme is an important and valuable scheme at this level, but it is short-term, and on completion artists are left without another peer support network to join.
- There needs to be further support available for recently graduated and emerging artists to continue developing their craft through research or training projects that are not necessarily linked with performance outputs: a “long-term, collaborative and research platform” that allows for artistic development “without pressure or obligation to make a show”. This could create a supportive “micro-ecology” for emerging generations within the broader dance ecology on the island.
- Thinking about goals for audience development in the dance sector, in an ideal world, “[w]e would encounter diverse, dance-literate audiences with a cultivated awareness of dance from an early age through the education system. People starting sentences with ‘I know nothing about dance’ would be a thing of the past”.
- The climate emergency is a call for artists to reconsider how their work impacts the ecology in a planetary sense. Alternative modes and speeds of international travel can be explored. The

pandemic affords the opportunity to think “glocally”: putting down roots locally but being globally connected through online platforms.

- Dance is still seen as something which could/should be “added” to venue programming, rather than being regarded by venues as an essential and necessary part of programming. If funders are not creating a requirement for venues to include dance, many venues will not see dance as a necessary element.
- There is a lack of sustainability in the sector created by the short-termism of the current funding models. This leads to dance artists being engaged in a “constant process of being judged on short term project-to-project outcomes with no sense of accumulation and meaningful or strategic purpose”.
- Dance artists working in Ireland who are not Irish can find it more difficult to integrate their practice into local communities. They experience a barrier - a “double flag”- of not only being a dancer, but also of not being Irish. In addition to the need for a greater acceptance of diversity, a recognition of dance as a normal profession within Irish society would help support artists experiencing this issue.

## 2. Proposed Actions

- A recent research project funded by the Arts Council and conducted by the Civic Theatre in Tallaght, the Everyman Theatre in Cork, and Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin, could offer a possible model for a “dance production hub”. The model proposes a sustainable theatre production hub with an internal ecology that supports artists and allows them to focus on their practice, rather than having to “wear 17 hats and exhaust themselves”. This would create a space for sustainable practice that allows for periods of recuperation and exploration.
- Other possible, supportive models include those recently initiated in the UK by dance development agency, Dance4, in Nottingham, and Gloucester-based, Strike A Light. Dance4 has launched a scheme in which a dance artist is employed as a member of the senior leadership team, but continues to work as a dance artist. Strike a Light is also working to provide security for artists through a scheme that supports dance artists to work in a community without having to produce an output.
- Scottish Dance Theatre is also currently trialling a scheme which supports independent dance artists within a company model. Dance artists are provided with access to space and other company resources, but are free to develop their independent practice.
- The “coming together” of the dance sector during the pandemic has been a positive development. Now we need to formalise collaborative and distributed ways of working. Support organisations could lead on the establishment of working groups.
- A union for dance artists could be established.
- We need to let the funders who support dance know the “real cost of dance”. This is not reflected in current funding models.
- Engagement and seeding relationships with venues needs to be incentivised.
- To counteract current models of “short-termism” in operation across funding and production infrastructures, artists, festivals, venues and support organisations could choose to collectively stop participating in them. This could “provoke systemic change”.
- Empty spaces suitable for dance rehearsal (whether currently vacant during the pandemic, or long term) could be made available for use: “open the door for artists”.
- A rural touring initiative could be established which supports grassroots development and production of works choreographed specifically for performance in rural venues.

- A development of the corporate tax system that integrates a “percent for art” scheme could be extremely beneficial for dance and other performing arts practice in Ireland. Existing models can be found in France and Switzerland: Fondation BNP Paribas (France); Fondation d’entreprises Hermès (France); Pour-cent culturel Migros (Switzerland); Van Cleef & Arpels (France)
- The tax exemption scheme governed by Section 195 of the Irish government’s Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997, should be extended to include choreographers and their works. It currently only applies to visual artists, composers, sculptors and writers.
- If performance venues are in receipt of public funding (e.g. from the Arts Council or from a local authority), there could be a requirement for them to also programme dance. Additionally, a funding scheme for venues to commission dance works could be initiated.
- The Arts Council could be asked to prioritise the development of dance for a period of five years, providing a much needed “stamp of commitment” to a historically marginalised and neglected artform.
- Funding models could be reworked to incentivise collaboration. A “small pocket of money” within awards to allow companies to support independent artists would have a positive impact on the most precarious aspects of the dance ecology.
- An alternative, and more holistic, model for Dance Artists Residencies could be developed in collaboration with venues. Artists would be considered employees (rather than content producers) in a 3-5 year collaboration with a venue. This would deliver optimal “conditions for creativity” in which artists feel supported and are “safe and can play”.
- Co-commissioning could be thought of on a broader scale to address the “fragmentation of the presentation ecology” across the island.