

Double Dialogues Conference: Final Session

Some comments by Shirley McKechnie on aspects of research in dance performance.

I have been asked by Ann McCulloch to offer some final brief thoughts on the proceedings of this conference, especially in relation to research in dance. Let me say that the conference has opened up a whole range of yet more questions about the parameters for research in performance and I certainly have no new answers to add to those which have been offered. It is not difficult, however, to find new questions, or at least, new ways to phrase old questions. It almost always comes back to definitions; to being clear about the questions one is asking.

•**What** is being researched? - The field of investigation may draw on a huge range of knowledge and experience; each project defining its parameters according to quite different criteria. Models for research processes, and criteria for evaluation of research in the sciences and the humanities are already well established and widely accepted. We now need to define the field we call *Performing Arts* and to set about establishing what we believe are appropriate criteria for the models which will conceivably emerge.

•**Why** is research in dance important? - The Tertiary Dance Council of Australia (TDCA), in its recent drafting of recommendations in relation to research in universities, stresses the importance of research in dance in the following areas: (1) Its relationship to teaching activities within the university. (2) Its relationship to artistic practice undertaken by dance artists across the field. (3) Its importance for the advancement of theoretical and critical debate and writing about the art form. It is, of course, the second of these which is of central interest to this conference.

•**How** then is research in dance and other performing arts to be defined? - The TDCA in its draft policy has identified several criteria for defining research in dance. Among these is the crucial one which relates specifically to dance practice and to the creation of choreographic works. The rationale for this relies on the assumption that the creation of artistic products (dances, paintings, musical or theatrical performances) is the ultimate goal of artists who regard research as central to their practice, and whose work, as defined by Howard Gardner, (*Creating Minds*, 1993) 'embodies ideas, emotions and concepts which are neither explanations of anything, (as in theory), or proofs of anything, (as in scientific experiments). Rather they are forms which invite contemplation or communicate understanding; they elicit a range of cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional understandings and in this way are very different activities to either scientific experiments or theoretical constructs.' These ideas are referred to in the draft policy as 'the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts, including design, where these lead to new

or substantially improved insights.'

The initial debates which have taken place among dance artists and scholars over the past twelve months, and our subsequent attempts to define and clarify the parameters for research in dance have been of enormous value. I think we are now in a position to point to the processes and methodologies which are intimately linked with dance research, and to the symbol systems in which ideas pertaining to the field are manifested. As with all the arts, the case for research in the domain of dance must not be accepted on grounds other than its own logic. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of defending the arts with language and criteria which have been developed to justify research in other more traditional disciplines like science, literature or history, or even newer ones like cultural theory. The tendency in the past, has been to support scholars who, (as with students of literature) write **about** the work; - critically, analytically, perhaps historically. This model has tended to dominate research in the arts to date and there has been little **real** support for the work itself, or for the role of the performer in recreating that work in new ways. If there is no support for new work, in creative and innovative thinking, then the other work, (all that is inspired by the work of original thinkers in particular forms) also won't be created.

One of the things we need to do to establish the authenticity of research in performance is to find new and imaginative ways of documenting processes and showing **how** this is new knowledge. We also need to address the issue of revisiting the work; a major issue for new forms in all theatre arts where a score or definitive text does not always exist.

I believe we must also emphasise the new and extended role of universities now that so many arts training institutions have been absorbed into the university system. The institutions of higher education are now the places where the majority of artists are developed. Universities in our time are no longer just the repositories for and transmitters of culture, they are the breeding ground for the whole development of the culture. They are now places where new forms are made: new music, new dance, new theatre; and these responsibilities can only be met by an environment which allows an art discipline to shape its own research according to the nature of the art form itself.

Assumptions about the nature of research in universities have developed over decades, even centuries. As newcomers to the field we still have much work to do in defining for ourselves, as well as for our universities, how individual artistic talents relate to particular fields and how their work is to be assessed or judged. Who are the judges? What are the criteria by which **they** are chosen? Is the notion of creativity, for instance, a relevant factor? Recent writings by Csikszentmihalyi, Gardner, and others, assert the crucial, if controversial point that nothing is, or is not, creative in and of itself. Creativity is inherently a community or cultural judgment, and notions of 'creativity' are a minefield of conceptual confusion, so let us try to deal with those concepts which seem to

have some common currency.

What we have witnessed during the past few months, and certainly during the course of this conference, is an assertion from all quarters that the arts are about ideas and that the kind of thinking engaged in by artists is highly specialised within their particular domains. However, not all are agreed on exactly what is meant by a term like 'performance research'. While I can say with confidence that performance and composition are the essential elements that drive music and dance making, I am less confident in defining what these factors are for drama. Performance, direction, and writing perhaps? I guess this begs yet another question. What, for instance, is the nature of the highly specialised knowledge possessed by a musician-composer, or a dancer-choreographer? What kinds of ideas do dance artists investigate? I believe that we should be developing arguments which illuminate and communicate understanding of the unique 'language' which is the basis of the symbol system in which dance artists think up dance ideas. Next question: **where** is this knowledge? Is it in the head or the body? What is the relationship between perceiving and conceiving?

The questions proliferate and some of them are only addressed in private conversations between artists: how can the performing arts develop within the university context yet not distort or compromise their own practice? Is there a danger that arts practice will be distorted to gain research money? I guess we need to be watchful if research in performance is to establish a reputation for integrity as well as for rigour.

'Is there a general misconception about the status and value of research in the arts?' The answer of course is yes. If it were not so we would not be spending so much time and energy in trying to change it.

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The speaker then undertook an informal analysis of some aspects of the demonstration of sequences from Kim Vincs work, *Dances From Hell*. This work was made for and with dancer Paul Schembri and performed as part of the *Fresh Start* season at Danceworks, and at the Choreographic Centre in Canberra, late in 1996. The intention of the comments was to focus attention on the following.

The way in which the dancer, Paul Schembri, performed particular movements, and how subtle changes in weight distribution, the 'physics of the body', contributed to interpretation of the movement phrases.

Where particular movement impulses originated.

How they were controlled in a way intended to give the movement particular qualities.

How these subtleties might be manipulated by choreographer and performer to influence audience perception and response.

The effect of the performer's focus on the way movements could be perceived as having 'meaning'.(This related particularly to the choreographer's dance design - a long diagonal from upstage prompt to downstage off-prompt).

The relationship between the dancer's skills and his particular body type, - Issues of leverage, balance and control of movement dynamic.

The way in which the movement material was utterly changed when performed by a different kind of dancer with a completely different body-instrument, - in this case, the choreographer.

The way in which the material was changed again when attempted by yet a third dancer; this time unrehearsed, but although also skilled, unprepared by a previous warm-up.

The speaker also commented on the performance demonstration given by Yoni Prior, noting that while the actor's use of gesture was intended to enhance and elaborate the quality of a particular character within a dramatic story line, the repeated gestural sequence was so distinctive and finely performed that it constituted a body of movement 'material' which could itself become the basis for further abstraction and development in choreographic terms.

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