



Collated Notes: *On Recovery & Re-Imagining*

**Federation of Scottish Theatre  
& The Work Room**

**Dance Forum**

**23 June 2020**

## **Dance Forum: Recovery & Re-imagining**

On Tuesday 23 June 2020, over 100 people involved in dance throughout Scotland gathered on-line. This embraced performers, choreographers, community & teaching artists, producers, managers, programmers, funders and lecturers. It was a space to share experiences of dancing – or not dancing – and surviving through the pandemic. And begin a process of re-imagining how our sector could be when we emerge from this.

The forum was organised by the Federation of Scottish Theatre and The Work Room. It was co-hosted by Anita Clark (The Work Room) and Christine Devaney (Curious Seed).

### **Welcome & Setting the Scene**

We acknowledged that COVID-19 has changed our world and how we live. It has also brought to the surface systemic inequalities. After the initial cries of ‘we are all in this together’, it is now clear that we are not – it is the poorest communities in our country that are being most acutely impacted; and Black and Asian people are 3-times more likely to die of coronavirus in the UK.

The Scottish Government’s advisory group on economic recovery of Scotland published their initial report on 22 June. The introduction to this includes the statement -

*The last few months have exposed and illuminated the scale of inequality across the world and here in Scotland. And the events of the last few weeks have brought an acute, overdue point of inflection in how we reflect on racism.... Many of the lowest paid essential workers have put their health and that of their families at risk during this crisis.*

It is in this context that we met; to reflect on our experiences over the past few months, and to consider how we dance again. It was a space to give some consideration to what is needed – individually & collectively for dance in Scotland to re-cover and re-activate beyond the pandemic. It was a moment for us to come together – to share, listen and learn from one another, acknowledging and embracing that we are all in different places and dealing with different things.

The format included some time all together listening to presentations, moving in to smaller groups for discussion and some exercises which allowed time to reflect individually.

Participants included:

- Those who had previously attended an FST dance forum – and those who had not;
- Those who have danced online during lockdown – and those who have not;
- Those who have lost work and income as a result of COVID-19 - and those who have not.

### **A Moment to Move**

We began by moving together. Christine played music from her close collaborator Luke Sutherland and invited us to stretch: up and out and beyond ourselves. We imagined we could reach beyond our on-screen boxes to touch one another. We allowed our bodies to lead us and to lead our thinking.

We were invited to write one or two words on a small piece of paper reflecting how we were feeling and lift it up to our screen. The screen filled with mixture of thoughts and feelings and states of emotion.

### **PRESENTATIONS:**

The first presentation was from artists **Claire Cunningham & Luke Pell**.

In their presentation Claire & Luke offered a moment to think about all those who were not able to be with us. People we had lost, those who couldn't or wouldn't be able to make it. They shared things they love *kissing, looking into someone else's eyes, people cooking for me* and things they had loved and lost *the person I am when I'm onstage, privacy, the small scattering of spaces I could go where I felt safe*. They asked us to linger with grief and to think about what it will mean to return to dance, to theatre, to touch and how we might prepare to support one another through this process with care and attentiveness. They recognised the knowledge of dancers and choreographers to guide others through these processes. They asked us to not rush on and leave behind or forget others, to reject the language of 'vulnerability' as dangerous and to care and to care harder.

The presentation is available to read and watch here:

[Presentation with audio  
Transcript](#)

The second presentation was from **Project X – Ashanti Harris, Rhea Lewis and Mele Broomes**. Ashanti, Rhea and Mele collectively established Project X in 2017 to platform dance from the African & Caribbean diaspora. Project X works across five strands:

- Take Part
- Artist Voice – choreographic platforms
- Productions
- Xchange – international collaboration
- Conversation – sector work for better understanding & presentation of dance of the African and Caribbean Diaspora

<https://www.projectxplatform.co.uk/>

Ashanti started by sharing about the immediate impact of the pandemic on their work and they were in the process of developing a new dance work for young audiences that was to be presented as a work-in-progress at the Edinburgh International Children's Festival. She talked of responding rapidly to an uncertain

and changing situation. She talked of their huge sense of responsibility to their collaborators, moving forward with financial redistribution to ensure all artists were paid fully for promised work, even before they were clear of funder support.

Ashanti spoke of the need for care, honesty and understanding of collaborators individual responses & needs, even when they didn't have full understanding themselves. She spoke of moving to a place of collective and careful thinking, acknowledging process of grief and letting go but not wanting to add to the chaos.

Rhea spoke about where they were with Project X is as an organisation – a reflective and growing phase. They recognise that the system disables black people and people of colour and that the pandemic has magnified the racist structures we live in. For Project X this time had magnified their current situation and how they have had to work. The lockdown space has been a moment to reflect on how Project X functions, deliver projects, support other artists and how they are supported by others. This has all been on such limited resources; they have been under valued.

Rhea spoke of the pressure that is imposed by gate-keepers who don't give them the trust they need and deserve. They now have a greater understanding of their achievements and recognise their resilience - manifest in the innovation in everything they do and the challenges they encounter. They are also recognising the workload and emotional labour in this. People look to them as a support network, when they are also supporting themselves through daily experiences of racism. They create space and amplify the work of others and have transparency with their communities. They try not to be gate-keepers. They need time, space and resource to continuously re-imagine, respond and evolve their work. They provide support in Scotland but what is there to support Project X? They have proven themselves 1000 times over, they now need to be trusted to get on with this work. They recognise a broken system and a systemic lack of trust that causes destruction.

Mele spoke about the work of Project X going forward. She noted the slow pace as the work between projects in unsupported. They are thinking about how their knowledge is shared; how it gets taken, owned and mis-represented. They are undertaking consultation with artists in their communities on the impact of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. They have been paying for others time, but not been able to pay themselves in this.

They are in a process of development for Project X to be a sustainable organisation, but noted that other organisations put unrealistic expectations on them with a disregard for the emotional labour, lack of funding and resources. They are currently re-evaluating this.

She spoke of the immediate response to Black Lives Matter being clunky, tokenistic and most worryingly lacking actual commitment to working to change anything. She noted that organisations want to take ownership that misrepresents everybody and this is lazy. It lacks understanding of the work that has and is happening, and is not taking responsibility. It is time to be honest and acknowledge - it will feel uncomfortable.



Mele spoke of what they want to see going forward:

- Trust
- Value
- To be cared for
- Action

They want to see the dance sector actively working against racism and anti-blackness; working together to actively deconstruct the systems and models that support it – and support the majority.

Mele spoke of best practice in working with artists with care and support. As a basic requirement - always paying for their time. The need to acknowledge the power dynamic – it is not an opportunity for the artists, but is an opportunity for the organisations working with them.

Mele spoke of what Project X require from the dance industry:

- understanding of the time it takes for meaningful action & embedding this;
- acknowledging the importance of Project X's work
- considering what support actually looks like

Project X needs financial sustainability to action their five year plan. They are an organisation with responsibilities to others. They require more support in order to minimise the amount of harm the work can cause black and people of colour; minimising the harm that that many of us in the dance sector have caused. She spoke of the need for more understanding of the relationship between disability, mental health and racism.

It is time for the dance sector to make space.

## **BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS:**

### ***What aspects of how dance & performing arts had been operating pre-pandemic should we leave behind?***

Conversations took place across 18 Breakout rooms, which were scribed by individuals and delivered back to the Forum via the chat function. These notes have been collated and summarised for the purposes of this report while trying to retain as much detail as possible.

Points have been categorised into the following headline areas:

#### **1. Systemic Inequalities, Barriers and Disabling Structures**

- Top down power structures/hierarchies with artists at the bottom- create conditions where artists can't negotiate or feel pressured to say "yes" to conditions of work out of fear
- "Gate Keepers" controlling who gets to be an artist, who gets shown, who gets funded, who has a voice.
- Disparity between the stability of those employed full time and freelancers
- Racist power structures including unequal pay structures, lack of people of colour on boards and in positions of leadership and security
- Racism, unacknowledged emotional labour and experiences of violence
- Lack of support or care & pervasive distrust
- Ableism, ageism and inequalities for people with caring responsibilities, including privileging face to face meetings, networking, unnecessary travel & dated or inaccessible language
- Long 'one size fits no one' forms and reports

#### **2. Underfunding & Lack of Resources**

- Shortness of time leading to poor quality work or additional unpaid labour
- Working under pressure and quickly- little time for care
- Self-promotion, consumerism and the language of competition
- Underused buildings, spaces and facilities
- Lack of importance placed on dance by society and the subsequent lack of funds from governments.

#### **3. Communication and Transparency**

- Lack of transparency around money: in funding systems, budgets, commissions, and between orgs, venues, promoters, producers and artists.
- Structures of language that place the artist outside the community 'knocking to get in'

- Lack of understanding about what other people do/how they are supported/their lived realities
- Vested interests veiled as 'opportunities'
- Transactional relationships between venues & artists with defined criteria (where there should be listening to create appropriate support)
- Lack of transparency around programming decisions, processes and priorities
- Lack of union representation within workforces

#### **4. Output focussed funding and programming models**

- Using a Capitalist Production Model to measure value of the arts within society/activity within the arts
- The pressure to produce and the undervaluing of planning, thinking, research and artistic development
- Not paying artists/freelancers for work such as going for a coffee, meetings, admin, attending a workshop.
- Number driven measures of success and extensive report writing
- Star ratings/reviews as value indicators of artwork

#### **5. Unsustainable Modes of Working**

- The assumption that all work or practices can be moved into digital mediums
- Unnecessary travel
- Freelance instability: Project based income and the need to be constantly hustling and fundraising
- Excessive workloads, burn out and no time to have lives or leisure time outside of work
- Extensive admin. Unpaid time applying for opportunities with no return
- Organisational models or opportunities that rely on unpaid time and labour of freelancers
- Rushing to find quick answers in reaction to moments of discomfort.
- Reactionary statements when reflection and meaningful change is required



## **We took a moment to look away and a short break**

### **Back Together**

Anita welcomed people back to the Zoom. She gave an up-dated on the work that FST is engaged with advocating and planning on behalf of the dance and theatre sectors.

The sector is in a vulnerable position as venues remain closed with little chance of operating while social distancing remains in place. A number of theatres have already instigated redundancy processes and the majority of the freelance workforce are facing no prospect of work for the rest of the year.

FST's advocacy work has included meeting with the Cabinet Sector of Economy, Fair Pay and Culture about the needs of the sector, with asks being:

- Short-term support on business and individual survival.
- Immediate clarity on timescales. A 'not before' can be as helpful as an 'open by'.
- Alongside that a strong public statement of support for live performing arts in Scotland and a commitment to work with us to adapt and thrive

FST's letter and response from the Cabinet Secretary are available for everyone to read here: <https://www.scottishtheatre.org/research-resources>

FST is working with [Culture Counts](#), the other sector development bodies and Creative Scotland to share evidence and co-ordinate requests for additional funding to Scottish Government and with UK partners to lobby the UK Government.

FST is part of a Scottish Government task force developing guidance on re-opening and a short-life working group to address issues around timeline for recovery. This will focus on immediate financial crisis and timescales for viable re-opening. These groups include sector and union representatives, along with government officials. FST has also brought together a Health & Safety working group to bring together all the guidance and resources in one place to help people find what they need.

One Dance UK is working with the UK Government's DCMS (Department of Culture Media & Sport) on guidelines for re-opening in the Performing Arts and, from this, will be publishing detailed dance specific advice. This will also feed into the guidelines in Scotland.

FST is working with its members to commission case studies for dance and theatre to inform a wider public-facing advocacy push. *#LoveDanceScotland*  
*#LoveTheatreScotland*

A number of Scottish organisations, including Dance Base & NTS, have appointed freelance workers to be part of a UK Freelancers Task Force set up by Fuel Theatre Company.

## PRESENTATIONS

The first presentation in this section was from **Charlotte Mountford, co-Director of Lyth Arts Centre**. Charlotte spoke about how Lyth Arts Centre was operating during lockdown and their plans for the future activity. She noted the difference between venues across the UK and their own position as a 60 seater venue in a Highland community with no regular funding. She recognised that artists were keen to know what venues were planning and shared that Lyth was not looking at events until Spring '21 although may work with local artists on outdoor events in Autumn/Winter this year and could see a return to residencies for individuals or single household companies as lockdown phases out. They are re-evaluating their role within the community and plans for future touring and programming will reflect intentions to work more closely within their locality. During lockdown they established new local relationships including a service agreement with the Highland Council to work in children's residential care homes and with care experienced young people. They are keen to be in discussions with dance artists and freelancers as they rethink their programming and touring models and role within their community going forward.

Read more about the updates from the Lyth Arts Centre here:

<https://lytharts.org.uk/an-update-from-lyth-arts-centre/>

The second presentation in this section was from artists **Simone Kenyon & Neil Callaghan**.

Neil & Simone shared their thoughts about time- *this* time that we are in and what we can possibly learn from it. They reflected on the thoughts and conversations they have been having during lockdown. They talked about their individual practices, about the importance of touch and being with others, the unsustainability of traveling for work while parenting and about the cycle of project based funding and the instability of short term planning. They recognised a desire for change- to reconceive how artists relate to organisations, to spend more time within their localities and to reflect on the kind of artist they each want to be. They shared some of the questions they have been thinking about:

- How can we allow this moment to shake us out of the habitual? What are our politics?
- What are our collective politics, beyond aesthetic concerns and genres?
- How can we get busy with the business of culture-making rather than making another piece for the market?
- How can organisations and institutions dialogue with artists and share the resources and knowledge they have?
- How might this period change our cultural attitudes towards touch?
- How can we reconcile our desire for international travel and the opportunities of cross-border collaboration, whilst being responsible towards the oncoming climate catastrophe?
- How do we find a way to contribute to the decision making as artists?
- How do we carry one another when we have moments of fatigue, depressions and overwhelm about continuing to survive?

- What does the future of work look like 6 months from now, 2 years from now, 10 years, 100 years? And how are we shaping that today?
- Who decides the value of art and how is it measured?
- What kind of work does the world need at this time?

A link to this video is available here: [Vimeo Link](#)

Password: DanceForum20

The final presentation was from **Morag Deyes and Jim Hollington, Artistic Director & Chief Executive of Dance Base.**

In their presentation, Morag and Jim shared the effects of lockdown on Dance Base. Morag reflected on her personal experience, noting the polarity of the situation; on the one hand - some kind of incredible creative, peaceful, new, empty space. And on the other hand, feeling the global suffering of ourselves and other artists and artists around the world not just in Scotland or the UK. She reflected on lockdown, individual wellbeing and pressures of productivity, sharing a quote from an article '*What Coronavirus Can Teach Us About Hope*' by Rebecca Solnit, which had resonated with her. You can read the article here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>

Jim reflected on his recent appointment as CEO of Dance Base and how lockdown had changed the way in which he was approaching the new role. He noted the struggle with the challenges of trying to concertina two years worth of thinking and timescales into a few weeks and a few months in order to achieve short-term financial stabilization. In this, Jim talked about the pressure to make enough good decisions now, but still allow space for things to develop over time.

He recognised the time, which had offered a pause to the activity in the building including classes and residencies as well as the cancellation of the Edinburgh Fringe, had offered a unique moment to look at the role of the National Centre for Dance, talk about long term plans and goals and a pressure to really think about how decisions made now should consider their future impact. He shared three thoughts that they Dance Base team are considering;

- it is the sector's success that should be the measure of the organisation's success.
- modeling best practice in how they work with dance artists and with them and with the sector more broadly; the importance of both collaborating with others, but also knowing when to compliment and to step back;
- becoming a more porous organization, with dance artists in the sector feeling part of the planning, decision making the way that they think and work.

Jim concluded by that Dance Base is asking how they can still think about change radically while in times of high pressure.

## **BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS**

***What do we want to take with us from the lockdown experience? Looking to the future, what could or should dance be beyond Covid19?***

Again, conversations took place across Breakout rooms, which were scribed by individuals and delivered back to the Forum via the chat function. These notes have been collated and summarised while trying to retain as much detail as possible, with points categorised into the following headline areas:

### **1. Leadership & Governance**

- As a leader: Resist the urge to throw short term solutions at long term or systemic problems. Sit in uncomfortable silence, listen. Recognise when we don't have the answers and bring in those who do.
- Opening up dialogues about leadership - who is leading? Considering multiple leadership, artist led and cooperative models.
- Communication across sectors, a more outward outlook for Dance .
- Committing to ongoing evaluation as a process of reflection and change making. "Is this sustainable? As an organisation? As artists? As communities?" Better ways of doing/resisting the conveyor belt of repeating or churning out processes.
- Collective organising: shifting from the bottom, an undercurrent, rather than waiting for a top-down change.
- Recognising the current funding ecology is broken: committing to changing this and making sure that radical overhaul of our sector supports everyone. Not returning to what we know/what is easy
- Increased investment in professional development and artistic development that are crucial for delivering quality, nurturing relationships and enabling artists' autonomy.
- Remembering the "hidden industries" of the dance sector incl. Education, Training, Onstage, Backstage, Recruitment and ensuring that change making happens across all industries.

### **2. Wellbeing, Health and Personal Sustainability**

- Slowness, spaciousness, care, consent & meaningful engagement
- Flexibility, patience and offering multiple ways to engage: understanding of people's personal situations, home lives, care giving responsibilities, work schedules and adapt our working practices accordingly
- Saying NO. The importance of rest, time off, time to breathe and process.
- Holidays.
- Practice decentring the self; manifesting the neighbourly, mutual care, encouragement of others and support.
- Considering how dance can address our need to be together – touch, physical dialogues, communication, sense of connectedness
- Less travel, more local and remote engagement.

### **3. Connecting with Communities**

- Deeper connections with localities: as part of residencies, slower touring models & more consideration around touring activity and public engagement
- Opportunities which imagine new ways of meeting the public, connecting with audiences and access for people who are not online
- Maintaining connections with the global dance community; access to classes, talks and international discussions across continents & countries
- Strengthening care and connection within the dance community- How can the community better support each other, care for those on the margins, support those unable to work?
- Bigger sense that we are all connected. Dance in dialogue with wider society. Advocating not just for artists but all freelancers, people, workers across trades and professions.

### **4. Digital Skills and Online Practices**

- Resources and training to develop online literacy
- Communication options- Using Zoom or phone calls instead of just email – valuing seeing faces
- Broadening options for access and participation through use of digital and online technologies
- Digital events and omitting the need for travel: less fuel, travel cost, travel time, energy. Reaches more geographically dispersed audiences incl. rural and global connections.
- More widely supported digital dance practices- especially screen dance
- The softening of hierarchy through using online conferencing software. People can turn up on a more level ground. A healthier pace of conversation. Space for people who may be quieter or take more time to process.

### **5. Rethinking Priorities**

- Interdependence over Independence- working towards a healthier ecology, taking more care of each other, of our community. Speaking out about issues that affect others in the community and advocating for change.
- Radical thinking and new models of working: Championing the grassroots, local and ethical.
- Addressing structural inequalities and trauma as a matter of urgency.
- Sustainability: less travel, anti-capitalist modes of working. Focus and value of deep research, deliver projects slowly, play and experimentation (instead of producing, producing and 'reproducing'.)

- Work/Life balance: Being a dancer, a business person, a parent, a partner, a carer etc. Time with the people who we love and cherish. Being outside more, out of office email.
  
- **Ways of Working**
  - Flexibility- different ways of working- responsive to individual needs, remote working, flexitime,
  - Empathy and Patience- making time to talk. Understanding that people's time is valuable. Respecting boundaries and working hours.
  - Valuing deep process- Longer residencies, slower pace of production, behind the scenes labour financially supported
  - Imagining and exploring new ways of being and doing, and new practices
  - Dance practices outwith a studio: public, site specific, screen and digital
  - Learning to sit with discomfort; not rushing to fix or offer quick solutions without leaving space for learning, Accountability and change

### **Come back together & Reflection on discussion**

**Paul Burns**, Head of Dance at Creative Scotland, had been invited to offer some reflections on what he had heard and the conversations that had taken place. Paul noted:

- We shouldn't be looking to 'go back', but to use this pause as to shape a different future;
- That as digital platforms don't provide the access they pretend to; as an arts sector, we don't have the access that we have perhaps pretended to;
- The speed that we have all been working at hasn't provided the necessary space to reflect and to recognise who is being left behind;
- A challenge to find that space and make a commitment to giving things the time it takes;
- Within the discussions around 'sustaining the sector', lets give some consideration to what it is that we want to sustain and what its for;
- The appetite to imagine the change we want to see and give consideration to what will support this coming through.

Anita and Christine thanked all the contributors for the work that they shared and to everyone who joined for their participation in the Forum.