

DANCER-CENTRED DANCE MAKING

REIMAGINING COLLABORATIVE
CHOREOGRAPHIC
RELATIONSHIPS

Placing dancers at the centre of the process of creating dance work underpins the teaching and choreographic practices of Sarah Knox and Sarah Foster-Sproull. These principles are core to TRIGGER dance, founded by these two multi-talented dance leaders. This programme deeply values collaboration as a key 21st century skill. In this article, Sarah Knox talks about dancer-centred dance making, and Sarah Foster-Sproull in her article on pages 6 to 8 applies the principles of economics to place the dancer as the consumer in the choreographic process.

BY SARAH KNOX

“There are 100 girls outside the door, lining up to take your job... Who do you think you are? You’re nothing!”

In the early years of my career I did seriously wonder if I was as worthless and replaceable as these words suggested. I came to believe that choreographic collaboration was something to be feared, that there was danger in speaking up and having my own ideas, and that even silently questioning authority and behaviours placed me in a precarious position of potentially losing work or being punished. Even though the movement contributions I created were almost always utilised by the choreographers I worked with, I was constantly hiding parts of myself to get the job done.

Later I came to realise that many of my fears were unfounded and that there was relief and joy to be found in collaboration. Some choreographers I worked with created safe and rewarding environments. I was able to relax and learn more about who I was as a dancer, and as a person through my role as a dancer. I felt valued and useful, and was able to bring my full self to the process, rather than feeling like I had to shrink or change myself to suit the choreographers’ whims.

Throughout the past 17 years of working in diverse choreographic environments, I have continually reflected upon the role of a dancer within choreographic collaboration. I have come to recognise some issues that deserve attention from all of us, to challenge and shift inherited and unethical leadership styles, problematic hierarchical relationships, limited teaching of collaborative skills within choreographic education, and the placement of dancers at the bottom of creative pyramids within the dance industry. I have questioned, if I really was to believe that I was “nothing”, and was replaceable, then what purpose did I serve? How could I negotiate the contradictions of working within a collaborative dance making environment, where creative expectations of what

and how I should contribute were so deeply intertwined with certain social dilemmas? Also, what was I getting out of the process and how could I engage with my own creative agendas alongside what the choreographer wanted? I know I have not been alone in asking these questions.

More recently I have seen and experienced choreographers engaging in new modes of collaboration. Many draw deeper attention to the dancer’s creative and personal agency within the collaborative environment. In these moments we can draw connections to person-centred relationships. I have called this approach, drawn from psychology and leadership theory, ‘dancer-centred’. In a dancer-centred paradigm, the dancer as a holistic being is brought to the heart of the dance making situation. This allows us opportunity to reimagine the hierarchical frameworks between choreographer and dancer, often evident within contemporary dance, and to envisage dancers who are not, as dance scholar Larry Lavender calls, ‘parasitic’ on the choreographer. The dancer-centred view does not seek to devalue the role of the choreographer, but rather highlight the value of the people involved.

This responsive approach seeks to create relationships that are not premeditated. This may be particularly useful when applied to collaboration, where often choreographers will work with new groups of dancers for different projects. The dancer-centred paradigm engages four principles that deliberately invite dancers to recognise their own creative and personal agency, and provides them with explicit opportunities for diverse engagement in the collaborative environment.

The first, and most important, viewpoint of the dancer-centred framework is to take a holistic view of the individual, inviting the entire person into the collaborative relationship. This contends the well recited notion of “leave



PHOTO: JOCELYN JANON

your problems at the door” and of dancers needing to be a blank canvas upon which the choreographer paints. It is often the case that the dancer’s physical ability is valued, neglecting their intellect, emotional contributions, history and background. However, these things may in fact deeply inform the ways in which dancers move through collaborative processes, and are also highly likely to influence their creative contributions.

The dancer-centred framework also requires a shift in how power is viewed between dancer and choreographer. Person-centred psychology suggests that three key principles guide relationships. Firstly, that an empathetic understanding drives the relationship, specifically through careful listening, and in the case of dance, sensitivity and awareness towards what a dancer might not be saying. Secondly, a genuine positive regard for the individual is important. Rather than being rewarded only for exhibiting particular characteristics desired by the choreographer, instead a warm and respectful relationship is built between parties regardless of what takes place within the creative process or product. Thirdly, contextual congruence requires all parties to display consistency of behaviours across the various roles they play within collaboration. When deliberately engaged in, these factors have real potential to undo some of the issues of power, coercion and fear dancers may face.

Active steps to foreground opportunities for the dancer to make decisions and take initiative are another vital element in a dancer-centred framework. Although the choreographer may be perceived as the person who makes the ‘decisions’, dancers are also navigating a series of choreographic situations, challenges and provocations that also require such thinking. Allowing dancers time and space to problem solve and take initiative to negotiate issues within the choreography not only allows them to create choreographic information that may better the art

work, but also creates collaborative trust and respect, and provides opportunity for the dancers’ on-going creative development.

Finally, the possibility of self-actualisation is imperative within dancer-centred choreographic processes. This is likely to be experienced as fulfilment and growth, but may also assist dancers in constructing their identity throughout their choreographic and performance practice. A sense of individuality, independence, and being able to exploit their own skills and talents can help a dancer find personal significance in their work. Research shows that people who are personally satisfied with their contributions, engagement and growth are likely to work harder and be more loyal to the process and team.

Finding new collaborative methods that respond to the realities of the 21st century is pertinent to the development and sustainability of our industry. In particular, I believe that developing further opportunities for collaborative education within our nation’s tertiary dance training courses is one of the ways in which we challenge some of the deep-set issues within our dance communities. The dancer-centred principles are already being explored in diverse pockets of our industry and many methods being developed.

What dancer-centred may really mean is the opportunity to move closer to ourselves, looking inward to our own individuality. This acceptance of ourselves might then reflect outwards, so that the people around us might be accepting of themselves. The choreographic process, which can bring people together with the shared goal of creating an artwork, might also mirror this effort of self-reflection and intention towards action. Furthermore, experiences of collaborative choreography may be a way, as person-centred psychologist Carl Rogers suggests, “to explore, express, and live more fully what it is to be human”. This in itself echoes the art we are attempting to create. ■