

Kirsty Alexander and Gitta Wigro of Independent Dance reflect on the challenges and freedoms of working outside the mainstream

Travelling Rather Than Arriving

The Research Institute for Media, Arts and Performance, at the University of Bedfordshire, recently published a report that pointed out perceived and real hierarchies experienced by independent dance artists.

That people have different roles and resources is not necessarily bad. Such differentials can offer a useful clarity regarding expectations, responsibilities and demands.

Yet it is important to understand that while roles and resources are ascribed to individuals, hierarchies are relational. They function as a dynamic within a society or particular community of practice that can shape and reinforce existing privilege and lack of opportunity.

The dance ecology mirrors hierarchies pervading wider society in relation to, for instance, race, gender and

disability. There are also dance-specific hierarchies of funding and public perception, for example: classical over contemporary dance, and mainstream regularly funded companies over independent dance artists funded on a project basis (if at all). Within the arts, we could argue that contemporary dance is on the margins, and in terms of resource, status and visibility the independent dance artist is

positioned on the margins of that already marginal sector. Differentials of privilege go further still, with independents usually accessing status and resources only in their role as choreographers, rather than in their roles as performers or teachers.

However, it is our experience that teaching, researching, making and performing are co-creative and co-generative practices,

and that independent artists work across all of them simultaneously.

Independent artists therefore offer an alternative to the hierarchies that pervade the dominant parts of the sector, creating possibilities for new kinds of work and new ways of working, in an atmosphere of collaboration and exchange. Using the freedom of working outside of the mainstream, we can create spaces for the unfamiliar, for ambiguity or even for downright failure, which are a crucial part of artistic practice and imperative to the way in which art can function as an affective force to those who encounter it. A "shock to thought" (in the words of philosopher Brian Massumi) that is other to the confines of instrumentalism and to the neo-liberal ideals of efficiency. Therefore, existing economic measures of success might not be suitable for the kind of work independent dance artists make.

We therefore need to find ways to support funders in their efforts to more appropriately "get the measure" of how different kinds of work might have different kinds of impact. How do we measure the way a work niggles away at our dreams months later? That kind of resonance is not captured in an audience survey immediately after the performance, or represented by audience numbers.

At the same time, it is a problem that we are performing all too often to ourselves and for little or no money.

Although independent artists judge the returns (financial, creative, and practical) of the work they take on, the funding they secure never covers the full extent of the hours of application writing, accounts management, rehearsal scheduling, email correspondence and general admin that the artist puts in. Even funded organisations

know the difficulty of achieving full cost recovery. However, the situation is more complex than just wanting artists to be funded at full cost recovery. Public funding brings with it accountability demands based on assumptions of growth and audience numbers which reinforce existing differences in funding and visibility. In seeking to break this cycle, we need to be careful not to migrate towards the mainstream. It is essential that we seek a better deal on our own terms.

For example, our language and funding structures need to reflect the collaborative nature of the artistic endeavour and problematise the company model's reification of the artistic director and its concomitant reinforcement of the idea that creative work is one individual's achievement.

It is not just about crediting the labour of dancers in the making of a piece. In seeking to cover the costs of our self-

administration, we have to challenge the low status of administrators, and the current lack of recognition for all the different work and workers that make something happen. We work in an ecosystem of individuals and organisations, and we should be vigilant whenever some contributions are seen as lesser. Only by claiming all the dimensions of what contributes to an artistic work do we confer status and visibility, which in turn helps us argue for full cost recovery.

For a vibrant and diverse dance sector, we need a wider recognition of the many contributions to a process, and the plurality of roles played by an individual.

The question now is what kind of dance ecology can support the independent artist in such a practice – a way of working that demands a radical shift in how we conceptualise "success": a practice of travelling rather than arriving.

Summer Dancing participants



Further information
<http://bit.ly/IndependentDance>
Independent Dancers: Roles, Motivation and Success, research report by Imogen Aujla and Rachel Farrer, 2016



Bottom left: Photo: Christian Kipp; Photos: Roswilha Cheshier