

Think Tank 3 Summary

Discussion 3: Shaping Sustainability

Hosted by Dance Ireland, 29th July 2020.

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Dance Ireland, Dance Limerick and Dublin Dance Festival have partnered to host a Think Tank - a series of in-depth conversations – with representatives from across the dance sector on the island of Ireland in July 2020.

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

The third Think Tank – ‘Shaping Sustainability’ – looked at how we can build resilience within the dance sector and support its sustainable development and growth into the future. The session was structured around two main approaches to this topic: (i) mapping challenges within existing models of dance work and support on the island of Ireland, and thoughts for development of sustainability and resilience within the dance sector; (ii) capturing ideas for change and action to support new ways of working together.

Summary of Discussion

1. Sharing Challenges and Ideas for Solutions

- The current funding models and cycles do not support sustainability within the dance sector. The sector is “critically underfunded” and “needs more money”.¹
- The dance community continues to be extremely hard-working and resilient, “working harder, faster, smarter and better in every which way”; “we’re forged in the fires of Mordor”. However, due to the cuts made to dance funding schemes since 2008, there is an increasing imbalance between the labour required to continue to produce high standards of work, and the financial supports available to enable the sector to continue growing.
- Dance artists’ continuous “chasing” of funding deadlines and “leaping from project to project”, creates a climate in which “[w]ork doesn’t have a chance to breathe”. We need to think of funding structures in a “different way”, “aligning funding structures to suit artists’ needs”.
- There are currently many opportunities available for dance artists to show work in a studio setting. However, making the transition to a performance context on stage can be difficult and needs further support.

¹ As in the previous two Think Tanks, participants noted a lack of parity between funding for Dance and funding for other art forms.

- There is a lack of year-round dance performance opportunities available for dancers on the island.² Due to this, dancers are pushed into choreography “before their time”, as there is a funding support infrastructure in place for making dance, but not for supporting dancers to dance. This leads to more competitiveness for existing funding schemes because it creates a “huge pool” of choreographers.
- The short-termism of the current funding cycles also impact the ability of many dance artists to engage in international partnerships. International partners in receipt of more secure, long-term funding often develop their production plans much further in advance than Irish artists are able to. This can lead to Irish artists either not being able to commit to collaborative plans, or needing to withdraw from them if their funding applications are unsuccessful.
- Dance artists have the same levels of ambition and production values as theatre artists, yet they are expected to produce work on smaller budgets. In order to achieve their ambitions for a production, choreographers can end up going into debt: “essentially the top line gets cut”. This is “completely unsustainable”.
- There is still a stigma attached to dance as a profession, especially for male dancers, resulting in the pool of available dancers on the island being very small, and the pool of male dancers being “absolutely miniscule”. If dance is to be seen in a “new light”, we need to change cultural views about dance in Irish society. This requires support from the Arts Council and the national broadcasters. Dance should have the same reach and outlet as any other artform (e.g. literature, film, music).³
- Very few independent dance artists receive touring grants, which reduces opportunities for them to build audiences for their work regionally.
- The dance sector has “shallow roots” due to dance education not being embedded in the education system across primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This results not only in a lack of dance literacy, “audience fluency”, and a general lack of understanding of the artform, but also an “undemocratic” access to dance education: there is a perception that dance is becoming “a very middle class pursuit”.
- It is very difficult for dance artists working in Ireland to access international touring circuits due to the limited networking opportunities with international programmers on the island. Due to this, after one run in Ireland and “maybe one outside of Ireland” for productions, “the whole show goes into storage”. There is a “real absence” of Irish-produced work on international dance touring circuits.
- However, it would be difficult to develop a major, annual “Irish Dance Showcase Platform” due to the small pool of available dancers on the island. Dancers would need to work across multiple productions, so shows could not be programmed simultaneously, which would be necessary to create the critical mass required to make a trip to Ireland attractive for international dance programmers.
- It is understandable that public funding bodies are not keen to fund shows with high production values that only have a handful of performance opportunities. This creates a sense of “wastefulness” and compounds issues of unsustainability.
- The dance sector in Ireland has “import / export issues”: dancers who are forced to leave to access training and work cannot afford to come home, and dance artists working on the island who want to tour abroad are not supported to do so.
- A broader understanding of what dance “is”, which incorporates work that is more conceptual or interdisciplinary in nature, needs to be developed. Many contemporary dance artists are working across different disciplines and it is a challenge to fit their work into current funding schemes.

² As in the previous Think Tanks, participants also noted the continued Dublin-centric focus of dance activity in Ireland.

³ As mentioned in Think Tanks 1 and 2, bringing international dancers into the country to address this lack of dancers has become increasingly difficult and expensive during the pandemic.

- The biggest challenge for presenting organisations and venues looking to programme dance is audience development. There is a perception that “dance doesn’t sell”, and for programmers “it can be a real pressure to find audiences for invited artists”. This is a major structural issue that needs to be addressed.⁴
- Institutional partnerships don’t happen enough, whether through co-commissions or co-partnerships with venues. There needs to be more joined-up thinking across different venues and support organisations to develop further performance opportunities for dance works. The development of institutional partnerships would also assist with marketing needs for artists, and would build knowledge of artists’ practice within organisations and venues. Dance artists could then be involved at an earlier stage in programming which would assist with the development of touring and audience engagement.
- There could be greater pooling of resources between institutions and organisations that support dance.
- There needs to be better alignment of the funding cycles for different kinds of applicants (e.g. independent / individual artists with project funding; organisations / companies with strategic funding). This would allow for easier “negotiation of opportunity deadlines to coincide with what dance artists are doing”.
- The award of strategic funding should be expanded to also include “emerging” companies, as this is an important way for dance artists to develop their practice.
- There needs to be more accountability and transparency about Arts Council decision-making processes regarding the support of dance resource organisations. Some resource organisations are delivering outstanding support for the sector, but some are not felt to be supporting the development of local artists sufficiently.
- Some of the challenges facing dance in Ireland can be seen to be identity-based and linked to a colonial past that has left the sector “impoverished”. Ireland’s “island identity” can lead to parochialism and introversion.⁵
- The fact that there is no recognisable “Irish” contemporary dance style (which can be seen as resulting from a lack of a national dance school) has the positive aspect of bringing great diversity of styles and practices to the island. This can be an exciting aspect of working here, but it also creates a challenge for dancers moving across different productions and choreographic styles. Nordic Dance Platform is an example of the development of a distinctive dance identity across a region. How do we develop a distinctive dance voice in Ireland? And is this even a desirable or necessary goal?
- The establishment of a National Dance Company housed in a dedicated national producing house for dance, and with an integrated professional dance school and junior company, would address many of the fundamental problems associated with the sustainability of the dance sector in Ireland: “people could be proud of their national ensemble”. It would also create a clear identity for dance and would be a key driver in developing dance audiences.
- Dance artists and companies need to work at “garnering presenters and partners from the ground up” before a production is made. They also need to work with local and international venues and

⁴ As discussed in the previous two Think Tanks, participants of Think Tank 3 also noted the “enormous work” that Dance Artist in Residence programmes have achieved across Ireland in developing audiences, but that when these artists leave and there is no-one to fill their role, the groundwork accomplished “evaporates”.

⁵ It should be noted that in previous Think Tanks the opposite point was argued, and it was felt that the Irish dance sector is particularly outward-reaching and international in its membership and practice.

organisations in advance of production to develop a touring schedule, as “it’s really hard to remount a production once it’s already been up”; “this is where we’re falling down”.

Proposed Actions

- Funding models need to be more artist-centred and process-centred. Funding schemes supporting full-time conservatoire training abroad should be reinstated.
- The dance sector needs to establish a long-term task force that would engage in cross-sectoral advocacy for dance. A steering committee could be established that operates in an official capacity as a National Campaign for Dance. This would be a representative body that is “formalised but also ad-hoc, and that represents the broadness of the sector”. A national “Give Dance a Chance” campaign could be initiated.
- Dance needs to get behind the push across all arts sectors for a Universal Basic Income for artists. In addition to helping support the sustainability of a career in dance, the introduction of a UBI would also alleviate current pressure on both the Arts Council and on social welfare to support artists’ livelihoods. It would also ease the sometimes “really tense” relationship between artists and support organisations, programming organisations, and venues, whose decisions have such an impact on artists’ professional survival.
- Creative Ireland’s programmes for education presents an interesting route to explore in furthering the development of dance within the national curricula. However, the ad hoc nature of these programmes runs the risk of perpetuating a notion that dance provides an “interesting CPD course” for teachers, rather than being an essential element of the curriculum that needs to be taught by trained professionals: “[w]e need to fight much harder for a much higher level of inclusion”.
- “Green proofing the dance sector for climate crisis” is an important consideration for the sector’s sustainability, and a ‘Dance and Climate Action’ discussion has already been initiated by Dance Limerick. The creative flexibility of dance artists presents opportunities for dance to lead the way in finding creative solutions: “it would be great for dance to be on the front foot with this”.
- However, we need to be aware of the “power dynamics” at work within the green agenda. Artists who have already established themselves internationally have the option of reducing travel without incurring a negative impact on their career development. It will remain important for younger artists who are still establishing themselves to have the option of international travel in order to develop networks and collaborations, and to bring their work “off the island”.
- Ireland’s National Music Education Programme, Music Generation, provides a potential model for the development of dance education and advocacy across the island. The CATs (Centres for Advanced Training) scheme in the UK is another interesting model that works towards the democratisation of access to dance education.
- We need to think of ways to support sustainability in our production practice, so that dance performances have a longer life span: “we are becoming a throwaway culture culture”.
- The short-termism at work in the sector is also having a negative impact on dance artists’ wellbeing and burnout is an increasing worry: “we’re starting to run on empty”.⁶

⁶ As in Think Tanks 1 and 2, participants in Think Tank 3 also noted the need for “having time to process dance practice more deeply” and the need for “more support for longer time for research and development of work, and time for reflection”.

- There needs to be more formal representation of Dance within the wider arts sector, not just for the purpose of dance advocacy, but also to enrich the discussions of different arts bodies: “dance artists should be sitting on boards, as the knowledge and perspective that a dance artist brings is unique”. There is currently no member of the advisory committee of Culture Ireland with a dance background. However, it must be noted that it can be a challenge for artists to sit on boards as it takes (unpaid) time from their work and can compromise their opportunities.
- Due to issues related to cost and the lack of critical mass of dance practice on the island, instead of investing in the development of a national dance commissioning platform, it would be better to “bring the work to where the market is”. Dance artists and companies could continue to attend existing international platforms such as APAP and Tanzmesse. This will improve the international visibility of dance on the island and would also boost confidence levels in the sector. The costs of attendance are currently a deterrent for companies, and funding bodies could support artists to present their work at these platforms. In the past, artists have had to pay their own way and “have come away in debt”, which is unsustainable. Similarly, government agencies should not support showcase platforms that don’t offer support for artists to attend them.
- The pandemic has highlighted the need for funding support for getting work online and for learning about issues related to copyright and licencing. This is a specialised skillset and training should be professionally facilitated by people with expertise in this area. To support this, the Capacity Building Scheme could be extended beyond only supporting arts centres and strategically funded companies and organisations.
- We need to use our creativity and our “vast abilities as artists” to come up with new ways of presenting work. Dance could capitalise on the move online through a collaboration with the national broadcaster, looking to initiatives in music such as Songs From An Empty Room, a joint venture between artists, EPIC (Event Production Industry Covid 19 Working Group) and RTÉ, which streamed a programme of live performances internationally during lockdown. A barrier to adopting this model is the level of investment required to present work at the highest standard.⁷
- We need to establish pay scales for artists that reflect career stage.
- Reaching new audiences would not only help boost the profile of dance, but it would also help tackle the issue of the island’s small pool of “recycled dancers” by inspiring young audience members to enter the profession.
- The coming together of the dance community through these discussion forums should continue beyond the pandemic: “a unified dance sector is the way forward”.

⁷ As discussed in the previous two Think Tanks, participants in Think Tank 3 also felt that collaboration with venues is key in developing performance opportunities and audience engagement, and that venues need to be incentivised to programme dance.