

Think Tank: A series of in-depth conversations

Discussion 1: Making Dance Performance

Hosted by Dance Limerick, 3rd 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 and August 2020.

The first Think Tank on 'Making Dance Performance' considered the present challenges experienced in the dance sector, and what is needed to provide supportive solutions, in both an immediate and long-term context. The conversation was broadly structured around three main areas: (i) mapping existing challenges (ii) sharing thoughts for solutions (iii) capturing ideas for changes and actions.

Summary of discussion

1. Sharing Challenges and Ideas for Solutions

- The current situation gives us an opportunity to rethink how the dance sector operates: “we cannot go back to how it was”.
- The way dance is funded is hugely problematic, and there continues to be an imbalance in the level of funding available for dance in comparison with theatre and other art forms (e.g. in the dance project award scheme). Lower levels of funding place dance artists at a perpetual disadvantage, making it difficult to create larger-scale ensemble work, or work that includes live music, for example. It also makes it difficult to compete internationally.
- Lack of affordable and suitable rehearsal space for dance continues to be a challenge, especially for artists working outside of Dublin. The commute to Dublin to find suitable space for dance rehearsal is a drain on available time for creative work, and an added expense that eats into budgets: “funds are depleted trying to pay for space”.
- If you are making work at festival time, there is competition for suitable rehearsal and performance space.
- Many dance artists have to self-produce their work, which takes up valuable time that could be used for artistic practice. There is also no time or funds left over within individual projects to develop international touring networks: in order for the dance sector to continue to develop, “we need to get off the island”.
- There are very few venues available for touring dance in Ireland and the resultant lack of distribution has a knock-on effect of limiting audience development: “five shows and you’re done”; “we’re creating all of this product, but we haven’t created a distribution network to get the product off the island”; “we haven’t invested the resources into looking internationally and looking to the UK and beyond”
- Artists are expected to do audience development as part of their workload, and this takes up a significant amount of time within project schedules and budgets that are already stretched to their limits. This is extra labour that reduces the available time for creative practice.
- There is a “bottleneck” of activity at certain points of the year, and particularly around festival time, when a relatively small pool of creatives, technical staff, and performers are in high demand from many artists and companies presenting work in the same period: “we’re all fighting for the same people.”

- Projects already in development for a long period of time are now having to be reimagined quickly and “drastically” to suit the new pandemic restrictions. This is impacting negatively on the artistic integrity of work.
- The uncertainties created by the pandemic are also creating pressures on budgets. Current funds are allocated to support artists, creatives and production teams that were engaged for cancelled projects, and extra development time is needed to reimagine and redesign productions to fit with pandemic restrictions.
- Smaller capacity audiences required by pandemic restrictions will result in smaller box office. The gap between money coming in and money needed to make work is increasing. Venues and companies will need a significant increase in subsidy to survive.
- Keeping artists, production teams, and audiences safe is a challenge, and uncertainty and lack of knowledge about requirements and procedures makes the situation even more difficult.
- International publicity of dance work happening in Ireland needs to be strengthened.
- There is a lack of a sense of continuous dance activity across the calendar year in Ireland.
- However, producing work outside of festivals is “not safe”, both in terms of financial viability and risk, and in terms of visibility for work produced.
- Housing international artists for productions is expensive and has become particularly problematic in the context of quarantine requirements.
- There needs to be greater promotion and support within education structures of dance as a career.
- Dancers often have to double and triple gig during festival seasons because they need to avail of all job offers they receive due to the precarity of the profession. This is exhausting for them and creates problems for production scheduling.
- Artists based in rural locations have difficulty finding suitable performance spaces for showing work and there is a lack of dance audience development. There is little support for producing, networking and promoting work.
- Traditional dance artists often have to deal with limiting preconceptions about their work. In rural venues there is a lack of understanding as to what producing a dance work entails.
- The established gigging culture within the traditional arts in Ireland is often not suited to traditional dance performance, with dance often in the position of being “a huge afterthought” or “an addition” rather than being considered in its own right. This makes it difficult to create a balanced relationship with traditional artists in other fields.
- Dance artists based in rural and/or regional locations often have difficulty connecting with dance networks on the island, and they also have the additional burden of needing to educate rural venues about dance.
- Due to a scarcity of resources and sometimes also a lack of discipline-specific skill in some rural/regional arts organisations and performance venues, a “reciprocity of values” can be missing between artists and the arts infrastructure.
- There is a lack of common access for all dance artists to protocols relating to risk assessment and other necessary documentation needed to support work going forward. There’s a sense that the onus is being put on artists to produce this documentation themselves for performance venues.
- Feedback from meetings with government bodies has made clear that the onus is on individual arts sectors to create specific and customised protocols around returning to work. This gives agency to the dance sector to take the lead in defining what is needed and how to proceed.
- Peter Jordan has drafted a *Dance Protocol for Getting Back on Stage* that sets out a methodology for rehearsing within the current social distancing requirements. It is based on the Sports Ireland protocol released for basketball and can be distributed within the dance sector for feedback. It offers a possible “back to work” protocol for dance that relies on

companies/artists engaging with a health screening and risk-assessment procedure to protect artists and production teams.

- The Irish Ballet Teacher Organisation have also drafted a protocol for dance teachers based on the information provided in Irish government guidelines and resources.
- There are only a small number of mature artists, creatives and technicians in the dance sector in comparison with the number of younger members. This is a “damning” indictment of the viability and sustainability of a career in dance.
- There is still significantly lower representation of certain demographics in dance performance in Ireland, including work for children, work with and by disabled artists, work by artists of colour, and work with and by older people.
- As a result of the pandemic, there is pressure to move dance performance into a digital environment, but this raises questions about the integrity of the art form and the monetisation of work.
- There is concern about the impact of the global pandemic on the training of new dance artists. Less dancers are likely to go into full time training and this will result in a lost generation of dance artists: “we could find ourselves with a gap down the line with dance artists who are just not there.”
- There continues to be a Dublin-centric focus of dance activity in Ireland, and although regional dance residencies are providing a vital service for the sector, they have to operate without the security of long-term funding.
- There is a lack of visibility within existing promotional platforms for dance of culturally and ethnically diverse dance forms in Ireland.
- Although there are good developments in third level dance education at the University of Limerick, the continued lack of full-time, conservatoire-style professional dance training on the island results in a small pool of available professional dancers for productions. There is a concern that this pool will reduce even further if dancers are not able to travel for training.
- Dance artists should not be under pressure to make their work serve as an instrument for education, community engagement, or well-being. These aspects of dance’s reach and capacity are, of course, extremely important. However, it is equally important that dance works can also be created as art works, depending on the interest and ambition of the artist/choreographer.

Proposed Actions:

- Establish a funded “producer in residence/producing hub” scheme, in collaboration with dance support organisations, which would provide much needed support for the sector. Salaried dance producers could then engage with smaller productions that would not have had the finances to engage a producer, and they would also have the remit to build international connections and touring networks for the entire dance sector.
- Establish an artist housing scheme that would provide affordable housing for international artists engaged for performance projects in Ireland. This could be shared across different performance genres at different times of the year.
- Re-structure funding schemes so that dance works could be pre-made well in advance of scheduled performances to address the “festival bottleneck” for performers, creatives, technicians and spaces. This would move away from the current model of works being made in the four-week period running up to a festival premiere. It would also allow for a longer lead-in time for promotional activities, which will, in turn, help with audience development.
- The timescales for the communication of Arts Council funding decisions need to be restructured; its “last-minute” nature is extremely stressful for applicants.

- The current AC funding schemes also do not allow for longitudinal planning. Project Awards and alternative schemes need to encompass projects that span a number of years to allow for long-term growth and development of artists and the sector as a whole.
- Greater clarity and transparency in the articulation of requirements for funding schemes and communications about funding decisions would allow dance artists to have a better understanding of what is expected from their work and what they can contribute.
- The level of Arts Council funding available for dance needs to be increased in line with the expanded levels of activity and diversity within the sector, and to allow for further growth.
- Strengthened relationships with venues will allow for confidence to be developed in programming dance work.
- There is an opportunity to build on the current discussions between venues and dance artists to inform how new models of work are shaped together.
- The Arts Council could take a leading role in ensuring venues are informed about the specialized needs of dance artists and companies. The Venues team are well positioned to support this shared learning.
- A document outlining production requirements for dance could be drafted for use by venues that are unfamiliar with programming dance. Support organisations and festivals can help rework this document with production-specific tweaks, as necessary.
- A funded mentorship scheme that supports independent artists at an early stage of their career will encourage a sharing of knowledge about support infrastructures and networks in the sector.
- The global pandemic allows for a re-thinking of dance audiences and the dissemination of work. Festival audiences will be greatly reduced in capacity for the foreseeable future. New methods of dissemination (e.g. performing locally, outdoors, online) could be explored further.
- There should be an increased sharing of resources and knowledge that enables getting recordings of work online. This creates a new platform for dissemination and generates new audience connections. People who previously might not have traveled to a venue to see a dance work are watching dance performance online. Showing work on digital platforms can also help create connections with international dance audiences.
- However, the current, large-scale “move online” should be viewed as a “sticking plaster” to help the sector through a challenging time, rather than a new model that will replace live performance.
- The costs of creating online content could be supported either by a dedicated funding stream, or as an additional funding criterion within existing award schemes.
- The connectivity developed between artists during the global pandemic – especially through online meetings and events that have allowed artists from every location on the island to attend - should be maintained and built upon.
- A support infrastructure should be developed to enable the sharing of resources between artists.
- An “ecological practice” that connects with both the physical surroundings of a locality, and its existing networks and communities, can help build interdisciplinary, collaborative connections for dance artists.
- Intergenerational sharing of knowledge between artists at different career stages should be strengthened so that dance artists don’t feel like they need to reinvent the wheel with each emerging generation. This will also change perceptions about the sector being unsustainable in terms of there being a more visible path for career development.
- To counter the idea that dance is not a “normal” career, there needs to be a stronger promotion of existing career paths in dance outside the sector (e.g. information provided to school career guidance counsellors) that brings attention to the wide range of roles that are

available beyond the publicly visible roles of performer and dance teacher: “everybody can have a career in dance”.

- The public broadcasters should include more dance in their programming to aid with making visible the diverse range of dance activity happening in Ireland, and to inform perceptions of dance as an artform, an everyday activity, and a viable profession.