

This is a personal reflection by C-DaRE's Simon Ellis on the conversation "Next Steps: Rethinking Dance Post Covid19". The conversation occurred on Friday 26 February 2021 as part of C-DaRE's Dance After Lockdown research project.

Isolationist tendencies

There is a crowd of rectangles on my screen, some with moving heads, others without. This is a pandemic-style conversation that we all know so well: the awkward silences are a wee bit more awkward, the quasi-synchronous nature of the technology gives only the impression of back and forth, like two people having a clunky first dance.

Our hosts Joanne "Bob" Whalley and Lee Miller manage the awkwardness directly and gently. They describe how this is a conversation that uses COVID-19 as a flashpoint to think about the future of the professional dance sector. We all know we will be talking about money (how can we not?) but later we'll find ways to talk about the future that is not about finance.

We talk about systems of support for artists in other European countries. In France there is a competitive scramble or scrap to reach the status of "artist" at which point you are given support inbetween jobs.¹ In Germany, if you earn a certain amount of money each year from an arts practice (€5k?) then you gain health and pension benefits.

I get the sense that people think ACE support for individuals – as opposed to projects – is important. This would be similar to the Lottery funding athletes received in the lead up to the 2012 London Olympics: they were paid a stipend so that they could get on with the (full-time) work of training and preparing themselves for the big event. Of course, that funding was stripped from those Olympic sports almost as soon as Darcey Bussell had finished her phoenix flight down from the top of the Olympic stadium in the closing ceremony.

Underneath these ideas is the concern that perhaps the answer to the problem of precarity in any public institution (can I call the professional dance sector an institution?) is more money; that without more money we are simply rearranging deck chairs. But if we had more money in dance, how ought it be distributed, and who would decide the means of that distribution?

At some stage during the conversation I ask if we all agree that the arts *should* be publicly funded, particularly given a significant proportion of that money comes from National Lottery funding (what someone on my screen calls a "poor person's tax").² Where does our sense of entitlement to public funding come from? Inevitably a question like this becomes a cipher for talking about the cultural and economic value of the arts. We have been trained to wield the thinking of ideological systems we are mostly sceptical of in order to make a case for survival. This is fighting fire with fire.

¹ etui.org/publications/art-managing-intermittent-artist-status-france

² See also theweek.co.uk/97333/are-lotteries-a-tax-on-the-poor

How would we start to have that conversation about Lottery funding? It's a conversation that is so much bigger than the dance sector, and the insidious nature of Lottery funding speaks volumes about who our society is prepared to climb over in order to survive, or in order to make our art. Dance is a relatively expensive art form – it requires people and spaces – and the losses would be acute if dance were to take a moral stand against Lottery funding.

I think it's important to say here that I have never been an independent artist in this country. I arrived here to start earning a salary for the first time in my life – I was 37 years old and carried with me the attitudes and experiences of a practising artist used to living from job to job. But here now my experience of this conversation about dance after lockdown – and my questions in it – are emboldened by a sense of financial security that I understand is not shared by everyone in the zoom.

The questions and responses in the conversation are rich. There is care in the room (or on my screen) and people seem to be curious. But perhaps there is also frustration, the feeling that this is a very familiar conversation; that COVID-19 will not change anything about the perceived and real status and value of contemporary dance. Why should it? Why would it?

I can't help but think about culture, and the pride I've taken over many years of being an artist in an art-form on the fringe of culture. That part of what I liked about being a contemporary dancer was that it wasn't popular, and that if it were popular I'm not so sure I would be into it. Such a contrary position is also an entitled position. Who gets to say or do such a thing? As I'm listening to the conversation, I ask myself how do we make work that would make the UK public demand more funding for arts? That we make work that involves people and lifts people into saying, *our culture needs this*. In 1981 John McGrath wrote in *A Good Night Out* that theatre "is a public event, and it is about matters of public concern."³ He refused to accept the assumption "that the 'audience' for theatre is an idealized white, middle-class, etc., person and that all theatre should be dominated by the tastes and values of such a person."(p.3) I imagine that McGrath would be turning in his grave at my previous (and unsuspecting) celebration of the solipsism of contemporary dance, and indeed at most of the work I've made over the last 30 years. We must fight and resist the idea that *commercial* art is equivalent to *bad* art. If we do not do this, *and* we continue to be concerned about the suspect morality of Lottery funding for the arts, then we will be cleaved apart by our own cognitive dissonance.

I hear someone say the words 'policy acorns' and we are talking about proximity to policy makers. Who are these policy people? How do we best communicate with them? How do they end up making the decisions they make? I imagine dance artists generating a public network of policy makers and their policies that is in turn fed by other art forms. That through this work – and the art work we create – we make these relationships with policy less abstract, or less like we are simply on the receiving end of their 'power'.

³ McGrath, John (1981), *A Good Night Out, Popular Theatre: Audience, Class, and Form*. Methuen, London, p.83.

Towards the end of the conversation, it shifts in tone. We are talking less about policy in the professional dance sector and more about values that extend into other equally precarious communities. They are communities at minimum wage, or zero-hours contracts, communities at heightened risk of injury or illness. They are other communities at the heart of the terrifying *churn* created by the pandemic. This broader ecosystem – how wide do we go? – is about how we live our lives, and the values that might be shared across different organisations, institutions, sectors, and people. This has nothing to do with dance, but everything to do with dance being less insular even under ideal economic conditions. In full precarity mode, insularity or looking inwards is at the same time an understandable response: to circle the wagons around one's own world. But as our bodies come back together after COVID-19 I contend that our work is to keep challenging contemporary dance's isolationist tendencies. These are big questions about how human beings live our lives together: the things we do, what we say about what we do, and how they ought to be valued.

– Simon Ellis, 5 March 2021