

**PLANNING A FUTURE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL ARTIST
A PAPER FOR THE TERRITORY ARTS FORUM
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How to approach this paper? I find myself feeling reticent. I don't want to put in writing thoughts & feelings I may not want to own in a few weeks time, let alone tomorrow. This is not cowardice but it strikes at the core issue of this paper. How can I, as an individual, attempting to be an independent artist plan for a future when I don't know, or even want to know, what it is. To plan a future seems to kill the ability to be fully 'in the now'. One constantly hears about the need for future planning, for policies that will help us determine the future directions, for forward thinking, for strategies, for any number of things that will thrust us into the future. So why do I feel a tinge of rebellion here? Is it a problem I have? - A personal inability to accept a future that I have no idea whether it exists? Is it my childish desire to remain free of constraints? Is it my inner fear of control? Is it something my father did to me in the past that I can't remember?

No! It is because I am a contemporary artist, a dancer & choreographer amongst other things. It is because in the creation of ephemeral art I know that only the present truly exists. By the time I come to the end of this paper I may have made a liar, or at least a confused person of myself.

To quote: Jean Morrison Brown in *The Visions of Modern Dance*:

"Modern dance thrives within the context of rebellion because of the continuing & absolute respect for the individuals right to creative expression. The result is an immense diversity ... It is likely that there will always be an established centre & a radical fringe, with most dancers found somewhere in between".

I'm not sure where I stand but I would like to think it is closer to the fringe. Well, here goes!!

PLANNING A FUTURE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL ARTIST

Contemporary dance in this country stands in a difficult position. Distanced from the major world art movements. Most people would look to the USA or Europe with regard to contemporary dance heritage. Very few of our contemporary dancers/choreographers have made in-roads into international debate & the discourse in this country is minimal. However, we are developing a history that is unique, we are beginning to articulate this history. So, with this background, I pose the question "what is the value of the individual artist?"

Within some other art forms - especially the visual arts the individual artist is seen as the norm. It is these artists who develop processes which when put into practice affect how other people perceive the work. It is expected of contemporary visual artists that they will challenge, perhaps shock, but always forge onwards into new territories. It is also unfortunate that the artist is expected to work in a state of relative poverty.

People tend to see "real" dance or "artistic" dance as being strongly related to classical ballet, & it is the dancers, rather than the choreographers, (the makers of dance) who are known.

However, it is always the makers of the art whose innovative vision moves our culture forwards. These individual & independent artists create works that encode their view of the world as contemporaries in it. History shows us that it is these artists who create the works & styles & processes which later often become mainstream, (or acceptable to the masses). It is these artists who also usually lack the social/cultural support for their work & who are often perceived as being in "left field". This is not to say that every independent artist is a genius, or even that work which appeals to the general public is not innovative.

To round off this point, I see the value of the individual artist as pivotal in our cultural development. Through their work they open debate about our own aesthetic development; they remind us that life, & our own personal development is not linear but rather terribly convoluted, sometimes down right ugly, always changing & usually difficult to understand. How often does the individual artist hear said of his or her own work "But what does it mean?"

In hindsight we can see that these individuals are usually the leaders of succeeding generations - they tell us to question our mentors, to question the status quo, to comment - to make our voices heard. This may all sound like supporting the naughty child but we all know, in our hearts, that we prefer a bit of spirit rather than blind following.

In thinking about this paper I thought of several titles. However, nothing encapsulated the seeming paradox of "Planning a Future for an Individual Artists." So how do I deal with the issue? It is my own belief that as an individual artist I must continue making work. I know that this process of making demands that make choices, & that this exploration constantly leads me into new areas. Moving forwards I leave past work behind; I may even reject much of it, but never disown it. In maintaining my life as a working artist I need to look at certain issues:

- * Planning a future versus working in the present.
- * Planning a future versus creativity.
- * Making a financial living.
- * Maintaining my independent status versus working with organisations.
- * Accessing current thoughts, techniques

- * Keeping in touch with self.
- * Playing the funding game.

PLANNING A FUTURE VERSUS WORK IN THE PRESENT

As a working contemporary artist it is always the current work which is important to me - it is only in the present that I can bring myself to my project - I "think" & "do" now because it is only "now" that I exist. Even in writing this paper I can only express what I think now - as I mentioned before I am quite likely, in the future, to reject my own past ideas. This is not to say that I lack purpose but rather that I see my role as particular to a specific society & time. This attitude, though, leads me into a dilemma: In order to work in the present, it appears that there needs to be some future planning. This planning involves me with questions such as: place - where can I & will I work; Personnel: as a choreographer I need to think about who I want to work with. (Other questions of personnel will be dealt with later under funding); the big juggle - fitting in with other life activities such as part time work, availability of resources, venue etc; how to finance the work (this will also be dealt with later under funding).

A problem with this is whether I will need to, or want to, work on the project when the possibility eventuates - often up to 18 months after the planning. Other priorities may eventuate, desired personnel become unavailable, personal issues intervene, limitations of the body. All of this is part & parcel of maintaining one's autonomy; that is the nature of the individual/independent artist.

The question of whether planning into a future hampers the creativity of the artist is relative. Short term planning may be of benefit - it is the long term planning that most funding bodies require that creates the main problem. Let's leave it at the moment by saying that these are issues that are constantly looked at.

MAKING A FINANCIAL LIVING

This society demands that we have some money, that we earn money as a sign of self worth. This is a problem if you choose, as I predominantly do, to work in one of the lowest funded art forms 1.e. contemporary dance. It is also a form which by its very nature has to be away from the mainstream & therefore also has little social support. The individual artist's life, in the current climate, is insecure to say the least.

In a society that has, (even if it won't recognise fully), systemic unemployment, I count myself very lucky every time I get work. Since graduating in 1980 with a B. Ed in Dance, Drama & English, the following areas are some in which I have worked:-

Company dancer, cleaner, drama tutor, set constructionist, production assistant, company dancer, teacher, choreographer with youth company, teacher, director of dance company, cleaner, house renovator, kitchen hand, trainer of actors, tertiary tutor in dance, teacher, dancer & finally as a community dance officer who likes to work cross art-forms.

The point I am making is that in order to make a living I have taken a variety of jobs - most of them part-time, many of them related to arts & arts education, most of them unplanned. Not all of them have been to my liking, some, even some arts jobs, are purely for the money. Although I am qualified enough, experienced enough and have a strong desire to earn my living through my art, this is not an option open to me. It is these part-time jobs that can also make it hard to do what you want. In order to leave myself open to artistic work I have at times been caught with the decision as to whether I leave the low wage part-time job for a lower wage short term arts job. At times I have made the compromise to do my own work in whatever spare hours I could find. This is what eventually led me to form my own part-time dance company - a company that I kept going for 4 1/2 years. In planning for a dance future I have to take into consideration the fact that the work is very limited & that my financial future will often depend on other work. Also issues of how long my instrument, my body, will last. It seems hardly worth saying, but it is usually the artist themselves who are the main subsidisers of their own work.

Again in glorious hind-sight I can see that the range of work I have done, my level of education, my tenacity in keeping on with my own work & my "undying belief in myself (?)" have in their own "spooky" way been parts in an unknown plan for my future.

MAINTAINING MY INDEPENDENCE VERSUS THE "ORGANISATIONS"

At times, simply to work, I have to work within an organisation I find myself doing that now. This is due, in part, to State funding criteria. When planning to work with an organisation I have to weigh up my options. Is it possible to maintain my individual development, or even to control it? Am I able to change the organisation itself in order to remain true to myself? Am I able to make my own artistic, or even non-artistic statements within that organisation? Are the organisation's philosophies & priorities going to lead me into compromise? Etc.

As a choreographer I need people to work with (a level of competence is desired) & a suitable space to work in. As a dancer I need access to choreographers who will challenge me & accept my limitations. Organisations can offer these things & they can seem very attractive. Schools, tertiary dance courses, dance companies, Brown's Mart. Organisations also offer wages. Needless to say the ideal is rarely achieved. For myself, in the past, I have found myself having to work several jobs. I call this the Sara Lee method of survival; Layer upon layer upon layer. I carefully built up a range of jobs.

As an example: I worked in an Actor Training Course as a Drama & Movement Tutor. This was a night time course with access to rehearsal space. I taught part-time in a school as head of a Drama Department (money & access to resources). I worked part-time in tertiary dance courses that gave me access to experiment on trained bodies. This left me financially able to

allocate the rest of my time to work with my own dance company which I had developed into a project based company with a floating membership of independent artist. (In turn I could offer them resource, performance & choreographic opportunities).

For me, when planning a future I have had to accept that as the funding dollar shrinks in relativeity, it is always the now, the innovative, the contemporary (& often the dance) which suffers. Therefore I find ways of maintaining my independence through my own work usually on a low or unpaid basis & earning a living through ongoing establishments. This is different now in my current work which has a one year contract & thankfully allows me great creative freedom while running someone else's established programme.

The major hindrance to me as a working artist when working within an organisation is the constant administration, calls from outside, & added work, all of which can become overwhelming in the light of attempting to remain an artist. These additional things are part of running an organisation but the need to timetable regular meetings, follow up written work immediately, interminable surveys, answer phone calls, (or else have them ring you at home late at night,) general administrivia etc. etc. etc. makes regular & effective work-outs & rehearsals difficult, bordering on impossible.

ACCESSING CURRENT THOUGHTS & TECHNIQUES

This is very hard to do from Darwin & I am looking at ways of doing this more next year. Although the separation from the modern/contemporary dance can allow one to develop a separate identity; I quote from an article by Elizabeth Demptser in *Writing on Dance 2*, Spring 1987, page 7 entitled "Alone & Palely Loitering. The promise of parochialism". In this article she is talking about contemporary dance in Australia generally but it goes tenfold in the Territory.

Our geographical situation impedes access to the work of contemporaries in Europe & America, & there are some who would see advantage in this (we are presumably, in this less culturally encumbered space, freer to develop & define our own practice). But to be unmoored for any length of time is also to be directional, & to risk the chill of lengthy periods of isolation.

Needless to say this is also a financial problem - trips to other major centres for let's say festival times & conferences are not cheap. But it is also the lack of casual & ongoing contact with the diversity of dance artists that I feel strongly here, let alone access to browse literature. (Here I need to know & then order).

For me as an artist I need to plan a future that allows me ongoing access to current trends, techniques, thoughts, dancers & choreographers. The planning that brought me to Darwin, amongst other things, was the possibility of work with indigenous Australians & the personal development in this area. I

feel that it is something special about the Territory that it doesn't fully recognise & support. The fact is that new & exciting art forms are developing in this area in the performing arts where movement based projects are front-runners.

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH SELF

Making a living, chasing the funding dollar, creating opportunities for others, creating one's own work are all very fine. But my creative development requires special time. It is very easy to work on projects & administration etc & not have any time left. (At the moment I average between 50 & 60 hours per week contact time). It is in my own personal space that I make contact with myself as a creative artist. This may be in the solitude of a special place, it may be in the studio alone, it may be in a class or workshop with others; wherever it is it requires a freedom of time; an allowed lack of control. From the outside, especially to a bureaucrat, this apparent lack of direction & organised time may seem to be wasted time where no "product" is being produced. But for my continuance as an individual artist it is absolutely necessary. Without this space & self determined direction I would die. This personal development time should be recognised for the fertile, nurturing, sustaining act that it is.

Planning this into a future is usually at odds with both funding bodies & employing organisations. Thank god for her creation of Darwin sunsets & our nighttime weather which is perfect for long contemplative strolls.

PLAYING THE FUNDING GAME

Planning a future for an individual dance artist in this country, especially in Darwin means accepting the necessity of funding, or a sugar daddy or ... (any other suggestions?) Yet another paradox. People who give out money usually have, (or want,) a lot of control, & it is best to learn the rules of their game. Often these rules themselves, & the way they operate, are counter to the way an artist thinks & behaves. Some funding bodies have guide-lines or policies - others seem to have few or else they are very malleable, & not a lot of use to anyone except maybe administrative bodies.

Because the Performing Arts Board. funds individuals it is there that most independent artists apply. Because the funding dollar appears to be shrinking it is the avant garde end that has to do without at the: flagship companies gobble the money. As fewer projects are funded the more control the deciding panels have over who will actually work; & in one case I was directly involved with - who you will work with. The notion of peer assessment can sometimes appear tenuous.

Planning a minimum of six months ahead & knowing you will probably only get one project in the year & that you have little say as to what that might be, can be difficult to say the least. To help yourself you get your name on several grant submissions for several projects but this can also be a disadvantage. Needless to say we still play the game despite the fact that for the six weeks

of the project you probably put in that again with the planning & submission writing, the administration & accounting, & the report writing & acquittal. As an individual, getting funding from both State & Federal is almost impossible. One needs to attach oneself to an organisation that in itself is a release of one's independence. In my experience State's have no solid arts policies or else they are so general as to be of little help to anyone. Trying to learn the rules of this game becomes most difficult if there don't seem to be any.

It is difficult to remain 'solid' when you cannot apply directly yourself. The hidden implications are that an individual cannot be financially accountable; & that without the support of an organisation the individual lacks value, that State/Territory funding bodies do not value the individual artist for what they are.

One of the greatest problems of State/Territory funding is the once a year funding round. This probably more than doubles the problems of the twice a year of the Performing Arts Board. project funding. In all truth I have no idea of where I am going to be artistically in 12 months time. In making a grant application it is likely that it would need to be either: general to allow for change (often radical) but this is not acceptable; or specific-but by very nature probably not quite truthful. As far as personnel goes in Darwin who knows who is going to be her in 12 months.

It appears peculiar that an artist is expected to live in such relative poverty when they are trying to dispel the cultural poverty of the greater populace. In other areas, research & exploration are seen as essential & vast amounts of money are allocated to them. But when it comes to the 'quality' of life that the arts represent, through the working artists, the researchers & explorers, then the established policies, (or more particularly, the lack of them,) lead the individual artist towards a state of insecurity as they vie for survival.

In conclusion I say that although I attempt to plan for an artistic future I attempt to plan one that has few controls & great space to allow for change. Part of this future is also politicking for a future that accepts the role of the individual artist & the financial recognition for the quality that the arts adds to our lives. If our arts are to remain vital it is imperative that we acknowledge their diversity - & nowhere is this diversity more keenly felt than in its individual artists.

Policies developed to support artistic innovation must take into consideration the nature of the individual artists. These policies must support their growth rather than inhibit it. They must acknowledge that Government support is for the artists, rather than make the artists feel indebted to the agencies. After all, it is the artists' existence that gives the arts funding bodies part of their raison d'être. Let us never forget this. Seems as the artistic life of a place gives value such as nothing else can, I would think that most places would want to try & keep its good artists around.

So how to plan? Sometimes I wonder whether the best plan is no plan at all.
Maybe I should plan to pay someone else to do my planning.