



Composers and Choreographers Exchange

Evaluation Report

12 – 16 September 2005
The Drill, Rushcutters Bay

Documented and prepared by Sally MacDonald
Project Coordinator
Critical Path
September 2005

Contents

1. Introduction
 - Participants
 - Context of the project
 - Aims
 2. Project
 - Structure
 - Roles
 3. Observations
 4. Evaluation
 - Did the structure facilitate the aims?
 - Questions raised
 5. Where to from here?
- 

1. Introduction

PARTICIPANTS

Composers

Kate Neal
Rosalind Page
Damien Ricketson

Musicians

Claire Edwardes (percussion)
Geoffrey Gartner (cello)
Jason Noble (clarinet)
Diana Springford (clarinet)

Choreographers

Anton partnered with
Kate Champion partnered with
Paulina Quinteros partnered with

Dancers

Steven Watson
Kathy Cogill
Simonne Smiles

CONTEXT

The Composers and Choreographers Exchange is a project jointly developed by Critical Path and Ensemble Offspring.

In November 2004, Damien Ricketson, composer and director of Ensemble Offspring, approached Sophie Travers, director of Critical Path, with the view to exploring possibilities for collaboration between composers and choreographers. The Exchange was born out of these discussions.

The Exchange is Critical Path's first inter-disciplinary project. It fits within Critical Path's brief of creating laboratory environments which stimulate choreographic research and development. It is, however, a departure from the workshops offered to date within the Curated program because of its cross art form focus.

In structuring this project, Sophie and Damien considered a range of models. After much research and consultation, they decided on a 'blank sheet' approach. Participants were not allowed to prepare any specific material, and they were not able to discuss ideas with their partners, or determine common meeting points or areas of interest, prior to the project. The aim of this project was to investigate the process of discovering these meeting points rather than to evaluate any final product.

The focus of this documentation is to evaluate how effectively this model facilitated this exploration, and to assess where this kind of research can lead.

AIMS

Critical Path's aims for the Exchange:

- To facilitate collaboration between NSW based choreographers and composers

- To provide an opportunity where the participants challenge their own thinking and working methods
- To trial different research models
- To explore the possibility of new partnerships: e.g. Ensemble Offspring, Australian Institute of Music.

Artists' aims:

Sally spoke with several of the choreographers prior to the project commencing about their aims. Each choreographer and composer also gave an introduction about their work and interests on the first morning.

From these conversations, it was clear that the participants commenced the Exchange with a range of objectives.

Aims included:

- Having no expectation of outcome at all and just being excited to take part in the process
- Wanting to explore specific things like percussion and rhythm
- Wanting to investigate whether choreographic principles could be applied to how the musician interacts with their instrument
- Wanting to meet artists from the other art form and gain an insight into how other disciplines approach making work
- Several participants are planning projects involving choreographer/composer collaboration and they approached the Exchange as specific research for these projects.

2. Project

STRUCTURE

The week was divided into three basic session types: an introduction session; two pairing sessions; and two sharing and discussion sessions.

Introduction session:

Monday 10am – 1.30pm

Each composer and choreographer had 30 minutes to introduce their work and discuss their experiences working with the other art form. Discussions were interspersed with video footage and listening to excerpts of compositions.

Pairings:

1st pairing: Monday 2.30 pm – Tuesday 5pm (1 ½ days)

2nd pairing: Wednesday 2.30pm – Thursday 5pm (1 ½ days)

The group of twelve was split up into three groups of four (1 x composer, choreographer, dancer & musician). The pairings were arrived at arbitrarily - it was a random pick-out-of-the-hat method. Each choreographer worked with their own dancer for the whole week. Composers were partnered with choreographers and then assigned a particular instrument. These pairings then swapped half way through the week.

In initial planning meetings, participants indicated they preferred to maximise the length of time with each partner. So, whilst Critical Path entertained the idea of allocating one day per pair (or rather quadruple) and working with three partners, it was decided to pair up for a day and half and work with just two partners.

The participants also indicated they wanted as much practical working time as possible. In terms of structure, Sophie and Damien considered a range of options including: guest speakers; discussion sessions with senior artists and outside eyes; examining case studies; setting exercises for solo, duo and trio; setting specific themes. But the general consensus was to keep the structure as simple as possible and focus as much as possible on actual collaboration time.

Sharings and Discussions:
Wednesday 10.30am – 1pm
Friday 10.30am – 2pm

At the end of each pairing, each group showed snippets of their work. This opened up into discussions about the process. The sharings were documented by Bridget Elliot and CP using both stills and video footage. Copies of this footage will be made available to participants.

The final discussion session on Friday was chaired by musicologist Rachel Campbell and attended by Dr Raffaele Marcellino, Principal & CEO of the Australian Institute of Music. Rachel provided an outside eye and helped focus the discussion. Rachel also directed the group to consider ‘Where to from here?’

ROLES

Damien Ricketson wore two hats in this project. Firstly, he instigated and organized the project with Sophie Travers, and so took on the role of artistic director; and secondly, he participated as a composer.

This raised questions about the need (or not) for a non-participating director to be onsite during the project to manage any potential artistic issues if they arose.

Damien reported that he was indeed able to settle into the role of composer once the project was underway. He did not feel there was a necessity for another manager/director. No issues arose. This may be due to the particular group, as well as the fairly straight forward schedule.

Sally MacDonald took the role of documentor in this project – a new role for a Critical Path project. Critical Path is trialing the usefulness of this role and whether it was obtrusive having someone sit in on sessions in this way. Afterwards, participants said that it was not distracting having an observer sit in on sessions and that having a report which documents the process is very useful.

3. Observations by Sally MacDonald

My overall impression of the week was that the organisers and participants succeeded in creating an environment of real experimentation, creative play and dialogue.

Sometimes people hit dead ends, they got stuck, but inevitably they found another tack and moved through. And other times there were amazing discoveries, like the creation of a unique language and system of scoring which was shared and used by both the choreographer and composer.

After observing the participants in their different groupings over four days many interesting questions were raised. In a way, these questions form the outcomes for Critical Path. They chart the learning process and provide essential food-for-thought for planning future Exchanges.

I've grouped my observations into three general areas: Differences between the two artforms; Roles; and Starting points.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO ARTFORMS

It became apparent that there are some fundamental differences between the way the composer/musician work and choreographer/dancer work. This became apparent when considering things like memory, improvisation and the importance of a score.

- **Improvisation.** The choreographer/dancer combos generally seemed to work more comfortably with improvisation than the composer/musician pairings.

Several musicians said they were unaccustomed, and at times uncomfortable, with improvising. One noted that as a musician not formally trained in improvisation, when asked to, they tend to fall back on material or ways of playing that they already know so therefore don't really push new boundaries musically. I have to say that for the untrained observer this was not noticeable and the choreographer and dancer also seemed happy with the musician's contributions to improvised activities.

Arguably, improvisation is more commonly used in the choreographic process than in the tradition of classical composition and this difference between the two art forms should be considered when thinking about the project model and structure. Perhaps,

in this kind of experimental situation, engaging musicians who are improviser-composers would have been a more comparable relationship.

- **Notation.** At the risk of generalizing, of the four types of artists, the composers at times seemed to sit most outside this process. One composer said, “I feel somewhat redundant...”

In processes where the music was generated through improvisation (inspired in reaction/tandem with the choreography) the musician actually seemed to lead this process. The composers worked on a soundscape level: “as organizers of sound” as one put it.

In other instances where the composer wanted to develop phrases or extend rhythms, the musician would ask them to “write it down”.

It seemed that not using scored material (or not having time to score) significantly affected the composer and musician’s working relationship and the level to which musical ideas could be extended.

The significance of the score in the composer/musician relationship, and the time required to develop notated material, is contrasted with the direct and immediate way the choreographer communicates with the dancer. This fundamental difference between the two disciplines became very clear in this project.

- Another point which became evident about the project’s structure is that not only did the composer have to find ways of working with artists from a different art form, they also had to find new ways of working with musicians. Whilst we afforded the choreographer the comfort of choosing a dancer with whom they had worked before and had a rapport, the composer had to tackle a very different working process with each musician. Perhaps the focus the composer had to give to finding different ways to communicate with the musician distracted from the exploration between composer and choreographer? This is a question for consideration in future planning.
- **Memory.** Another discovery about the differences between these disciplines centres around memory. It became apparent that dancers have a very well developed body memory and the process of learning and rehearsing a piece requires them to pick up a sequence of steps in a short period of time. Musicians, in contrast, are often more accustomed to working with a score.

This inter-disciplinary difference in use of memory could be another reason why composers and musicians felt a little at sea at times in this Exchange.

ROLES

- One of the most valuable aspects of the Exchange was that composers and choreographers did get the opportunity to step beyond their normal roles. Often they

took responsibility for the other discipline as well as their own. In the first set of pairings, Damien clearly contributed to the choreography by directing both the dancer and cellist's movements.

STARTING POINTS

- It was universal across the groups that having a common theme or starting point assisted the collaboration. It was in exploring this common idea that collaboration occurred.

Examples of starting points include:

- Kate Neal and Anton worked with the image of 'an old spaghetti tin' and developed movement and sound phrases which charted its journey along a street.
 - Damien and Paulina explored the correlation and relationship between the dancer's body shape and the shape of the cello.
 - Kate Champion and Damien experimented with changing rhythm patterns, not usually encountered by dancers.
 - Anton, Rosalind, Steven and Geoff formulated a series of symbols which they assigned meaning to, to create a shared language. The choreographer and composer then used this language as their starting point. The composer used the symbols to develop a simple score, which not only the musician read but the choreographer. The symbols had a musical meaning and a movement meaning so the choreographer was able to use this score to guide the choreography.
- Kate Neal and Paulina said in their pairing on day 3 & 4 they felt lost and unfocused at times because their process lacked a common central idea or intention.

4. Evaluation

OUTCOMES

- The Exchange was an opportunity to step away from the normal pressures which often impact composer/choreographer collaborations and enter an environment of enquiry, debate and exploration. There was overall consensus from participants that this was a valuable and worthwhile opportunity.
- A major success of the project was the atmosphere of openness and the participants' willingness to explore different ways of working. The participants were able to develop a level of trust and respect which underpinned their collaborative experiments. This allowed them to negotiate difficult questions, make decisions and experiment with the process. All of this is the basis of collaboration.
- Everyone gained insight into how the other artforms work.

- It was also a fabulous introduction to three professional practitioners from the other disciplines, and right from the beginning participants indicated that it is difficult to meet other types of artists.
- Perhaps the structure of this Exchange fitted most comfortably with the choreographer/dancers' process. A corollary of this is that perhaps the composer and musician got to explore different ways of working and push the boundaries on their process in a way the choreographers and dancers didn't?
- The musicians and composers were taken out of their comfort zone. Several musicians acknowledged that this was a great opportunity to develop their performance skills and explore different performance environments. They had worked with choreographers before in ways which required them to interact directly with the dancers and other performers and this project gave them further opportunity to build their connection with other performers.

QUESTIONS

These are some of the key questions which arose during the process. Consideration of these issues will inform future Exchanges.

Questions about how the project was structured

- Should the composer and choreographer have been able to choose their partners?
- Should participants have been allowed to discuss ideas, interests, and thematic commonalities with their partners prior to the project? Should they have been able to prepare and bring in material specifically developed for the project?
- Where does the composer fit into this model? Does there need to be an opportunity for the composer to notate within this process or bring in prepared scores?
- Has the Exchange equipped artists with strategies to work differently or more effectively in collaborations in the future?

Questions about the collaborative process

- Democracy vs. benevolent dictatorship? In the real world, is equal collaboration the best process?
- Do these collaborations work from a funding point of view? Is it a way of bringing in additional funding, or, for choreographers, is collaborating and touring with live musicians cost prohibitive?

5. Where to from here?

Faced with the question of “where to from here?” participants indicated that they are interested in going further with their collaboration between these disciplines. There is a sense that this was a ‘tip-of-the-iceberg’ experience and that the next step would be for participants to really explore their counterparts work and see their practice in ‘action’.

There was also a strong sense, at this final session that participants needed to sit back from this experience and get a little perspective before making specific plans. It was suggested that contact between participants should be allowed to evolve organically and that Critical Path could facilitate this through a contact sheet. Please find contact sheet attached.

Damien Ricketson spoke on behalf of Ensemble Offspring and indicated that this collective is very interested in working with dance and he will be actively exploring ideas, collaborations and interest from presenters. He offered Ensemble Offspring as a contact point for anyone wanting to continue this dialogue.

Raffaele Marcellino also expressed interest in furthering this conversation between composers and choreographers. Critical Path and Ensemble Offspring will include AIM in future meetings.

Critical Path is very excited about this kind of collaboration and is keen to continue to support and facilitate it. Following the completion of this report, Critical Path and Ensemble Offspring will meet for a formal debrief. From this, Critical Path will formulate specific strategies for future collaborative projects and will notify all participants of these ideas.

On behalf of Critical Path and Ensemble Offspring, I would like to extend a huge thanks to all participants. Your focus and commitment made this lab a success and has left us with much food-for-thought for future projects.

Contact Sheet

<p>Choreographers</p> <p>Kate Champion 0410 617 575 championkate@yahoo.com</p> <p>Anton 0418 964 150 quikant@yahoo.com.au</p> <p>Paulina Quinteros 0410 701 014 Paulina_quinteros@hotmail.com</p>	<p>Composers</p> <p>Damien Ricketson 0411 320 480 <damien@chilli.net.au></p> <p>Rosalind Page: 0417 667 011 <rgp@netspace.net.au></p> <p>Kate Neal: 0405 659 458 <kateneal@iprimus.com.au></p>
<p>Dancers</p> <p>Steven Watson 0404 113 534 stevenawatson@hotmail.com</p> <p>Simonne Smiles 0414 591 130 sismiles@hotmail.com</p> <p>Kathy Cogill 0411 826 112 katherinecogill@hotmail.com</p>	<p>Musicians</p> <p>Claire Edwardes: <claire@claireedwardes.com></p> <p>Geoffrey Gartner: <cellochaos@hotmail.com></p> <p>Jason Noble: <jasonnoble0908@hotmail.com></p> <p>Diana Springford: <diana@uow.edu.au></p>
<p>Critical Path 9256 4804</p> <p>Sophie Travers criticalpath@dance.net.au</p> <p>Sally MacDonald cp_admin@dance.net.au</p>	<p>Ensemble Offspring</p> <p>Damien Ricketson (as above)</p>