

Dance Ecology One:

Written by Martin del Amo

Angela
Goh



Rhiannon
Newton



Ivey
Wawn



CHOREOGRAPH
INVEST
INSPIRE

CRITICAL



For the first edition of *Talking Dance: Dance Ecologies*, I have been talking to Sydney-based choreographers and dancers Angela Goh, Rhiannon Newton and Ivey Wawn.

In many ways, these three artists exemplify the kind of mini ecology prevalent in the Australian dance sector. All three of them are close personal friends as well as frequent collaborators. In fact, their personal and professional lives are so intricately interwoven that they find it difficult to pinpoint when and how exactly they met. They all remember attending Ausdance classes and participating in Critical Path workshops together around 2012/13. Other than that, their recollections of first meeting each other are a bit foggy.

Beginnings

There is no question that these three artists quickly gravitated towards each other and started working together in a variety of contexts and configurations. In 2014, Rhiannon was one of the collaborators on a research residency Angela conducted at Critical Path. For the end-of-residency sharing, they launched a publication called *Outcomes*, containing a series of manifestos they wrote throughout the process. Even though Ivey wasn't part of the residency, she attended the sharing and was impressed. 'I remember thinking, oh it seems they've had a very nice time,' she laughs.

When a year later, Ivey started to explore her own choreographic practice through two DirtyFeet residencies (Choreographic Lab, 2015 and Out of the Studio, 2016), both Angela and Rhiannon were part of the process. 'Yes!' Ivey enthuses. 'The first time, Ange was the mentor. And the second time, Ange was the producer and Rhiannon came in and taught the morning classes.' In 2017, Angela and

Rhiannon were again both involved in Ivey's durational group piece *Greyness and Infinity* for the Underbelly Arts Festival and Lab at the National Art School.

This time Angela was one of the performers, and Rhiannon took on the role of an outside eye. Ivey, in turn, has performed in both Angela's and Rhiannon's ensemble works: Angela's *Scum Ballet* (2017), and Rhiannon's *Bodied Assemblies* (2017) and *We Make Each Other Up* (2018).

Shared Reference System

Contributing to the strong bond existing between Angela, Rhiannon and Ivey is the fact they share a complex reference system in terms of experiences and influences. They move in similar circles, are inspired by some of the same artists and share certain key collaborators, including dance artists Atlanta Eke, Brooke Stamp, Amrita Hepi and Patricia Wood; visual artist Agatha Gothe-Snape; and Norwegian choreographer and performance maker Mette Edvardsen.

About being in a constant, ongoing exchange with each other, Rhiannon says: 'Even when we're not working in relation to the same thing, because of our friendship we are sort of discussing things, making sense of things, critiquing something together. Maybe not reading things in the same way but we are aware of each other's knowledge of things.' Angela agrees that it's their friendship that anchors their working relationship: 'I feel like everything is so inter-connected through friendship and time spent together and common experiences. That, I feel, is the thing that connects all the practices and the work.'

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Critical Path

Another factor Angela, Ivey and Rhiannon have in common is the significant role Critical Path has played in the development of their careers. One of Rhiannon's first projects with Critical Path was Next Stages, a multi-year initiative (2013-14), conceived and delivered in partnership with STRUT in Perth and Dancehouse Melbourne.

Through Next Stages, Rhiannon developed her first work as an independent dance maker, *Assemblies for One Body*. The piece, a full-length solo, looked at the impact of repetition on the dancing body and was partly improvised. Subsequently, Rhiannon went on to turn the work into a group piece. The result, *Bodied Assemblies*, featured Ivey alongside dancers Bhenji Ra and Julian Wong and premiered at Dancehouse as part of Dance Massive 2017.

Since then, the practice of exploring choreographic ideas across solo and group contexts has become a staple of Rhiannon's work: 'The going back and forth feels almost like a part of my process. I work on something by myself, make a solo and then try it out as a group version.'

As with Rhiannon, Critical Path also played an important role in the early stages of Angela's career. Dissatisfied with what she learnt at University, Angela, by her own admission, tried to 'grab' as many international dance artists passing through Sydney as she could, to learn from them. As a result, she participated in numerous Critical Path workshops with choreographers as varied as Marten Spangenberg, Mette Edvardsen, Ros Crisp, Rosemary Butcher as well as Portuguese writer and dramaturg Paula Caspao.

When Angela received a DanceWeb Scholarship in 2012, taking her to ImPulsTanz in Vienna, her exposure to a gamut of approaches and practices was radically accelerated. Angela, in part, attributes her ability to take full advantage of the opportunity to what she learned during the workshops at Critical Path.

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Once Rhiannon and Angela began developing their own work, they both undertook various Critical Path responsive and research room residencies, allowing them to conduct research they would, in some cases, later draw on to create works. The same is true for Ivey, who collaborated on responsive residencies by Rhiannon and Brooke Stamp, and also conducted one of her own, together with her cousin Mark Mailler, a visual artist. It aimed to begin building a foundation for collaborative practice, using shared family history as material. A public outcome, *Consejos de Farez* was presented at First Draft in 2018.

Ivey’s most recent work *In Perpetuity* was supported through a whole range of Critical Path initiatives – the Experimental Choreography Residency, an annual co commission with Performance Space; an international residency in partnership with Tanzhaus Zurich; and Choreo-hack Lab: The Anthropocene at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, in partnership with Strange Attractor, as part of the 2019 Sydney Festival.

Loving Dancing

When asked about the similarities in their creative practices, a lively discussion ensues. One point they all agree on is their shared passion for dance as an art form. Rhiannon recalls an early encounter between herself and Angela: 'One of the first times we must have met, Ange, was that Fondue Set showing [Carriageworks, 2012]. Do you remember that? I feel like we had a really nerdy conversation beforehand. It was like: How great is dance?'

Angela confirms: 'I remember that! There was a long line up to get in, and we were in the line together, and we were just like, loving dance. I clearly remember that feeling.' Upon reflection, she adds: 'I think all three of us are really dance lovers. That's what we have in common. We're all in love with dance.' Ivey agrees fullheartedly: 'I feel personally that I have to continue to dance in a fun way, just to dance for enjoyment. I don't want to do it if it's not a good time.' She laughs: 'If I start to hate dance, I'll probably just give it a break for a little while and go to a club.'

However, Angela points out that being a professional dancer can have its drawbacks: 'Just because I say I love dance, it doesn't mean that there isn't also multitudes of

frustrations and disappointments and worries and heartache or stress about the question: If I'm to make this a professional career, what does that mean? And that's the part about this type of career I enjoy the least, the point where I have to meet the system, or the kind of market, or the kind of professionalisation of something. But somehow, at least so far, I can separate that from what I feel about dance.'

Photo credit: 'In T(w)o' (2017) Rhiannon Newton in collaboration with Adelina Larsson. Photo by Alison Laird



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Importance of Community

There is no doubt that Angela, Ivey and Rhiannon share an understanding of the dangers that the demands of professional life as dance practitioners can pose not only for the mental health of individual artists but also the relationships between them. Angela explains: 'I think between the three of us there is a similarity in that the care for the work is the same as the care for the relationships that are part of the work, or that are the work. When that's embedded in each other, I think it actually does manifest in the kind of work that's created. You can perceive the kind of health behind the scenes, I think.'

With this attitude towards the care it takes to set up creative processes, it is no surprise that all three artists feel strongly about contributing to the dance community and creating opportunities for others. According to Angela: 'I think there is definitely an acknowledgement that the community that you are part of has to be a healthy one. To get something out of something together, one has to be active in it. Or maybe not even active, but sort of present. It's nice to be part of something. It's really what that comes down to, I think.'

It's this kind of consideration that led Angela and Ivey, together with Miranda Wheen, to initiate Potluck, a casual gathering where participants were invited to contribute by either sharing a work in progress or through a conversation about the works afterwards.

Starting in 2014, Potluck took place, in irregular intervals, over a period of two years, and was assisted by several presentation partners including Brand X, Critical Path and ReadyMade Works. Angela, Ivey and Rhiannon all showed work on various occasions. Angela, for one, used the platform to first introduce her ongoing project *Predictable Dances*.

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Credit: Greyness and Infinity (2017) Ivey Wawn. Pictured: Lucien Alperstein, Arini Byng, Evan Loxton, Shota Matsumura, Jimmy Nuttal, Megan Payne, and Amaara Raheem. Photo by Keelan O’Hehir

Speculation / Imagination / Fiction

As much as the artists share attitudes and approaches towards making work, what about any shared choreographic or thematic interests? Angela volunteers: 'I would say that our work shares a kind of similar fiction-type speculation, a speculation that arises out of imagination. The meeting of imagination with actual theory and politics. But all of us are quite interested in imagination.'

One doesn't have to look far to find works in each artist's oeuvre that support this claim. About *Predictable Dances*, for example, Angela says: 'For each performance, I engage the services of a professional psychic to tell me what will happen during the performance.' For the actual performance, Angela then attempts to fulfil the psychic's predictions.

Ivey's most recent work *In Perpetuity*, is about magic. As part of her research, she took up the practice of Mourning Dancing 'where each move is an act of mourning the moment that came before.' For research purposes, Ivey also developed a gyrating practice, 'that attempts to conjure up sensual transformations, as magic.'

Imagination is also at the centre of Rhiannon's *We Make Each Other Up*. In her program notes, she writes about the work: 'Entangled in it are stories from the peripheries of our memory and futures that have not yet come to pass. We realise we make up, and are made up by each other, our world and the possibilities of our imagination.'

Language / Books / Libraries

Another element that the works of Angela, Ivey and Rhiannon have in common is the integration of spoken text. In Angela's and Rhiannon's case, the influence to use language in their dance pieces can be traced back to their work with Norwegian performance maker Mette Edvardsen. After participating in her 2013 Critical Path workshop, they both went on to perform in her work *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* for the 2016 Sydney Biennale.

For Rhiannon especially, the work with language as well as the library as a setting for choreographic works strikes a chord: 'I like books a lot. I'm very inspired by books.' The selection of texts she has included in her work span theory, philosophy and fiction, especially science fiction. For *Doing Dancing* (2017), she used texts by Gertrude Stein as the point of departure. Her more recent research into 'long sentences' is inspired by US author Ursula Le Guin's description of long sentences as a feminist practice for attending to complex relations.

Rhiannon has also developed what could be called a library-based practice. For Dance Massive 2019, she presented her

work *Choreographed Readings* at the Carlton Library in Melbourne. Together with Katy Green Loughrey, she has initiated Talking Bodies, an ongoing series of lecture demonstrations by dance artists, at the Surry Hills Library.

For her part, Angela has collaborated with writer Holly Childs to provide text for her work *Uncanny Valley Girl* (2018). Her fascination with the use of text comes from the interest in how language operates differently from movement: 'There is something about the presence of language in a work that is quite generous. Language can be used as a direct form of communication whereas dance, if it's used as a form of communication, is very indirect.'

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Whereas language is also present in Ivey’s work, her use of it is slightly different. She often employs it to introduce her dances. This stems, she muses, from the feeling that she needs to build up a context for her work and explain what she is about to do. In this way, text functions as a framing device: ‘Language allows us to come on the same level together intellectually, so long as it’s not language that’s alienating or leaving people behind. It gives the impression of bringing everyone together even though we might all have a different understanding of what is said.’

Differences

With so many similarities between their works, how do they differ from each other? What is their point of distinction? After some discussion, Angela, Ivey and Rhiannon come to the conclusion that there is no clear-cut answer. Rhiannon reckons 'it comes down to how we're different as people, the ways we work, what we concentrate on.' Ivey maintains: 'Aesthetically we all end up in different places.' Angela wonders if there is a difference in the way they generate and perform choreographic material: 'With Rhiannon's and Ivey's work, there seems to be more of a practice with sensation. When I make work, that's not part of what I do in the process.'

According to Rhiannon, there is also a difference in the attention Angela gives to composition and structure: 'One thing I always notice with Ange's work is when I think about it the next day, it so neatly holds in my memory. There is something about the construction of her work, it's so jigsawed together.' As for Ivey, she identifies a certain mode of performance in Angela's and Rhiannon's work that she admires and aspires to: 'I think when I watch you both, there is a quiet confidence, which is completely

detached from ego and so much about a kind of dedication, or a commitment to what it is that you are doing, which is very special.'

It seems that the artists have to 'dig deep' to try and articulate the differences between them. Maybe this means that their similarities outweigh the differences? It certainly points to stability and balance within their ecology. As Angela sums it up: 'Every time I think of something that would separate what we do, I think: No, actually that's the same. But every time, I think of something we do that's similar, I think: Oh no, but that's different.'