

Critical Path & Dancing Sydney Archive Project

Archiving 30 Years of Performed Neuro-queerness and other Biodiverse Interdependencies

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Content warning: The following article contains descriptions of abuse and domestic violence.

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Delving into this archival project has been such a consolidating and reaffirming experience. It has also, at times, been quietly perplexing and requiring breaks to process. In my case, in the ways in which I need to process certain things, that has sometimes extended to several months at a time.

Going back into the busy depths of 30 years of my eclectic dance, teaching, choreographic, research and outreach practices, has resurfaced so many memories. Some of these have been life and method-of-approach reaffirming. Some have been disarming and heart-sinking – even as I went in prepared. But mostly, revisiting all these productions, collaborations, projects, residencies, tours and teaching programs has generated a deepening sense of achievement, at a time (really, ever since Brandis' vampiric feast on Australia Council core funds), when all things arts support, appreciation, value and respect have taken way more blows than presented shows.

When the bad memories threaten to ruin a day – those being hopelessly classist or homophobic reviews (a few too many to mention, particularly from the 90's and early '00's), a few utterly abusive choreographers who got away with far too much, works that were so authentic to my own context and existence, and/or the groups I was working with, only to have them brushed off as ("too dark for dance. Dean, you're such a gorgeous mover. Why don't you just celebrate that?" or "It belongs more in other forums, not professional dance stages" – and there are others), or works that had just about stolen my sanity due to last minute funding cuts, creating havoc in the ranks.

Taking in the whole journey to where I find myself currently as a more senior artist, has been, and continues to be, an extraordinary 'zoom in' and 'zoom out' dynamic, this going back, sifting through, re-evaluating, digitizing much by default.

In much of my work I've sought to communicate, through embodied and spoken mediums, what I find difficult to process and understand in life. With much of the more personal content in my works I've wrestled it into shape through the craft of choreographic rigour, so as to avoid (as much as possible) them being only seen as possibly indulgent or alienating. But "indulgence" is also very relative. There is much to discuss about "performing the personal" as so much of who we are is necessarily integrated (or coincides) with making and performing our own danced work. A good part of the responsibility of how such works are made, supported and received, lies not only with the artist but also with the audience. This is why I am such a fan of Q and A's.

I have found, across quite the stretch of time, that there exists a lot of policing within the contemporary dance and performance community (other artists and our related supporters), around what is deemed acceptable "professional practice", thematic and form-based rigor or even the specific and unique needs within some artists' processes. Too much of these opinions resonate, and are developed from, ignorance - or very limited exposure to complexities within diverse needs, methodology and culture.

In writing about my own archival process for *Dancing Sydney: Mapping Movements, Performing Histories* project, I've decided to "keep it real" and to not skirt-around-the-edges of my practices' content base. My dance, performance, choreographic, research and teaching career has been steeped in several, very diverse, communities and performance forums. From contemporary dance and theatre, several queer performance platforms (mostly 90's and "naughties"), disability arts access and inclusion, marine environmentalism (my 'extended cognition' research).

I've been in and out of therapy all my adult life trying to unravel an extremely neglectful and abusive childhood. These sessions covered sexual, emotional, psychological and physical abuse by both my father and stepfather, as well as densely emotional and psychological abuse and neglect from a close family member, to the degree that I became deeply enmeshed in others' substantial pain and other deeply complex problems.

My stepfather was an absolute unbridled beast. He was cruel and tortuous, extremely violent, terrifying and sexually transgressive. I was even asked to perform sexual acts including "foreplay" of dancing naked and showing him my anus. He would also force me to watch them through windows whilst they were having sex, late at night, often after hours of horrendous violence. My homework, and subsequently my school work, suffered greatly. Teachers could not understand why I'd suddenly become so "unmanageable" or "insubordinate" when I had "so much academic potential, Dean".

These kinds of things were said to me often, but we moved homes and schools so much that it was, even back in the 70's and 80's, difficult to identify a pattern of behaviour that would be considered to be caused by other means than just simply misbehaving out-of-the-blue. Harsh physical punishments (the cane) were still entirely in order. "Six-of-the-best" was a regular abuse I received for being the "bad boy". Bullying was also rife as I was so often the "new kid".

My biological father was a very distressed man. Close family members and associates believe he was "at least bisexual" and, due to all the violence done to him as a child, including having all his front teeth knocked out by my grandfather, that he was definitely emotionally messed up and in desperate need of help. But this was far from an easy thing to seek out back in the day, for all manner of reasons – economic and pride being just two. Now that I've finally been diagnosed autistic and living with ADHD, I am convinced he was also on the spectrum.

Many of his rages were not only carried out in a typical domestic violence scenario - with all family members present. He also aimed his rage and confusion at the world and himself at me. He was especially violent to me around my sexuality - or supposed sexuality being that I was only a child. He would pick at me constantly and get me to withstand tortuous, prolonged exercises that were his way to ensure, "You don't turn out to be a fucking pervert. One of those disgusting poofers!". Some of these exercises would last hours and required me being naked. Another form of sexual abuse - more of the psychological and emotional kind, but no less damaging.

I am so glad I was asked to be involved in this project because I want readers and researchers, well into the future, to know that contemporary dance and performance in this country, this city, was populated with more diverse individuals who were carving out long careers in dance that both honored and challenged the artform and who could gain access to it. I want them to be able to have a well-rounded account of the true diversity of this city's dance practitioners in the later

20th and early 21st Century, so they can map our own unique discoveries, how these, in turn, influenced and were further influenced by, the greater dance and performance ecology.

I want readers (current and future) to be able to recognize that, when it comes to the (seriously overused) term “innovation”, people from minority groups and cultures challenged that notion of excellence measurement in profound ways and capacities. The groundswell of artists surfacing from these communities, cultures and diverse class systems, by the very act of them finally being given some agency to pursue the arts and communicate their stories, revealed that “innovation” is relative and yet another reductionistic, old systems way of thinking, measuring and awarding.

As a kid, we often lived near bush settings, the far outskirts of Western Sydney. For a 3 year spell, we lived near the ocean and inlets. When I was able to get away from the violence I'd spend entire after school hours or weekends playing, observing and fossicking through these natural environments. Their natural rhythms (sound, movement, smells) calmed me. They were, for the most part, my only place of solace and safety. The intertidal zones around Empire Bay, Ettalong and Umina in the Central Coast, were immensely captivating for me, as were the massive rock faces around Kilcare Beach and the headland between Umina and Pearl Beach. With my bike and art gear in tow, I'd be gone for as long as I could stand being away from my family, caught in a loop of shame, anger, hatred and violence. In these excursions, I would lose myself in the biodiversity - the micro and macro aspects.

My rooms were always full of all manner of natural debris and animal skins and other pieces. I would sort them all out in little boxes and jars and make collages and wall hangings with them. These tasks were my companions and I would be lost in them for hours, even days, and I'd shove tissues in my ears to try and block out the constant screaming that could go on for hours, entire days and nights.

A local wrinkly old fisherman, Greg, told me that some of the pieces have probably come from far off places like New Zealand or even South America. This fascinated me no end and had me buried in the atlas in our bookshelf, constantly checking out the places my little sea pieces might have come from.

I found dance purely by chance. Or did it find me? I've never been quite sure about that one. Possibly a destined mixture of both. Diving, my other contemporary physically disciplined love, is like improvised dancing and even artful immersion. I definitely do not see it as a sport (most eco-passionate divers don't). It is the most immersive environmental experience and what that offers me a more honed sensory “terrestrial time out”.

Finding dance also helped me outlet some of the massive panic, shame and self-hatred writ deep into my psyche and body. It helped me open up and begin to hone my huge creative passions that I'd had no formal or community-based outlet for prior. But it also unleashed a lot of deep-seated confusion, suppressed pain and anger. A suicide attempt got me into one-to-one therapy for the first time. I was in my last year of training at Bodenwieser Dance Centre in Sydney when I was 23. The long and arduous road to healing commenced.

The cross over from focusing my performance works on reflecting perspectives and stories of abuses, neglect and deep unrest in human living systems, to those being played out in other-than-human living systems, the natural ecosystems, has made so much professional, creative and personal sense to me. It also didn't / hasn't happened overnight.

When we look at our planet as our only known possible home, one from which we cannot easily leave, (unless we're among the 1% billionaire elite), then one can quite easily make parallels with domestic violence (and even class systems) and the catastrophic neglect of our "home" and those of us living within it. This is a global version of "domestic violence" that is long-established, insidious and overt, with accelerated cycles of violence and violation (especially since WW2), that have so negatively influenced countless lives, communities, homes and habitats across the entire population, of all sentient beings. I'm not looking for perfection here, I'm suggesting a dire need to bringing about a wider and more equitable wholeness. This needs to be done with all contexts considered and knowing that this is going to bring about a very big change, indeed. But it will take time, so best we get crackin'.

As with family-based domestic violence, just because the abuse may not be directly aimed at or even affecting us, the ramifications most definitely are – or eventually will. We desperately need to communicate in all the ways we possibly can, about trauma. The larger acts and the more remote, hidden and insidious. We all need to listen more deeply and stop the reductionist, minimizing and deeply damaging dismissals that have landed us all in this time of dangerous unrest and uncertainty. What is certain is that things are changing. It's up to us to be at the forefront of that change, as artists and people, so we can ensure the voice of creativity, imagination, social challenging and a wider sense of beauty is being woven into the change. It is all so deeply complex because it is a transcontextual set of systems within systems that have been deeply problematic for far too long. I have felt this acutely as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community, as an artist, as someone stemming from impoverished, utterly neglectful and abusive past and as someone living with comorbidity that has been hidden so long because of our reductionistic systems.

Only through acknowledging our interdependency around and within these changes will we be able to start the process of more intelligent, equitable and inter-environmental systems (re)thinking and change. The long, drawn out and grueling age of reductionism needs to end. Fascism loves reductionism. So the changes needed are, in themselves, vastly complex processes. I deeply feel (like I do with everything) that it's time for us to use all our sense-making processes, hold all of them with equal importance (not just focus on a neurotypical intellect), if we're going to engage in and bring about systems change and positive social evolutions.

Art, in all its interdependent forms, is pivotal to this change. Art is where the "warm data" (to quote Nora Bateson with whom I spent a 5 day live-in residential last year becoming a "Warm Data Lab" host), must be held up as important as the "cold data" – the facts, figures and stats. All people's contexts need to be given more space and opportunity to be deeply listened to, understood and included. Inclusion, compassion and deeper engagement in our complex contexts breeds wider understanding. Blame sets us apart and is a weapon of the oppressor. It also seeds fear in a garden of confusion, anger, hate and then, more blame. I've learned this lesson across my lifetime all too painfully.

As with the rather urgent need to "rewild the wilderness", we need to bring everything back into a focus on art, as made available for everyone to view and/or directly, or even indirectly, engage in and encourage more intricately researched fusions between science, environment and the arts

and develop more diverse communities through this. My reference to “the arts” here is one that includes all variables of it – including, most pivotally, First Nations and other cultural communities, classes and individuals who have been sidelined for too long by the colonizer’s definition of “Art” - including the colonizer them/ourselves.

I’ve done a lot of outreach work across my career. Both through facilitating workshops and putting on performances with people who have fallen through just about every crack there is in our society’s living systems. Many of these people they have not had even a remote chance of entering the dance community as a self-determining, agency-promoting, seriously respected career. I’ve met so many people on the fringes of society who are just as talented as the rest of us but have had little to no exposure to higher calibre dance training and performance-making. These are people who show considerable passion, skill and talent artistically. Being involved in creative play and exchange changes their lives. It also changes mine and my arts practice, evolving it in all manner of interesting ways, that are then returned to others through classes, discussions and production processes.

Much of these experiences have also informed my choreographic and performative choices over the years – especially in the last 10-12. Even as I’m delving into my own lived experiences, past and present, I’ve always been gathering other contexts and perspectives through deep connections with other people who feel like they don’t belong, or cannot belong, anywhere they’d otherwise love to be.

I’ve facilitated classes and workshops in creative movement since 1994 for people outside the arts community - in community centres and agencies. These have been for men living with HIV / AIDS, LGBTIQ+ youth at suicide risk, male sexual abuse survivors and, since 2010, I’ve moved my practice into accessible, inclusive and environmentally holistic practices for people living with disability.

Although research is a strong focus of my practice, for this essay (I guess that’s what this is?), I’ve focused more on the content I’ve explored. This account of the thematic underpinnings of my works might be confronting for some and, specifically for those who’ve experienced/survived extreme domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse, it may also be triggering. If this has been so, I deeply understand you and any time you’d like to talk or participate in workshops and other processes, I encourage you to contact us at Weird Nest.

Without dance and the many complex, big picture themes I’ve continued to communicate through it, I would not have been able to process even half of what I’ve been able to in my life. Professional therapy alone would not have been able to get me anywhere near the clarity I now live with. Of that I am now entirely certain.

Below, I offer some insight into what it’s like to live with “higher” functioning autism as a co-morbidity alongside ADHD and Complex Trauma Disorders (CTD). I explain the enormous benefits, but also complex difficulties, being diagnosed later in life brings with it and why, again, my dance, along with my diving practice, allows me to process things in my own particular and peculiar ways.

I briefly outline the lower working class (impoverished) culture within my immediate family, and how I've always felt so alien in the dance community a lot of the time. With hindsight, this is also due to my neurodivergency – a lot of the time I feel like a fish out of water. But all this is me. This is my danced history. I can no longer pretend it isn't. Apart from it being unhealthy to do so, it is a lie to say my past did not (and does not) deeply and pervasively affect me to the core of my identity. It is a constant wrestle. A rigorous, exhausting but often beautifully intense dance.

So many works – dance or otherwise – that I've seen (or even been involved in) have had, at least in part, personal insights, perspectives and aesthetic choices that convey middle to upper middle class contexts. They ooze a particularly dominant set of narratives that are upheld by so much momentum and funding systems that are deeply problematic. Sometimes these works have been hard to view as I often see quasi-intellectual takes on subject matter that I, and some other colleagues and friends, know very well from extensive lived experiences of poverty, abuse, mental health and disability.

So it is my responsibility, as an audience member, to try and discern the content from the form and aesthetics, from the merit of the artist/s presenting them. If their intention is misfired, too reductive or superficial, what might be the other aspects that they were attempting to convey? Or have they intentionally made their work fit into a more class repertoire-looking contemporary dance so as to feel included themselves? Have they done so at the expense of their own, or their cast's own creative interests? Do they even recognise that their work looks the spitting image of so much other work? Or is this just the cross-pollination occurring naturally and then being deemed as a trend? As worthy of funding because it is "what's happening out there and being well-attended? Can encouraging radical difference and diversity become a better, more apt trend that will potentially generate wider funding systems for the performing arts?

I have some contempt for the word contemporary... at least, what is too widely viewed in our community as being "contemporary". What merit does a particular work that I, or others, might find terribly mediocre, suffocating in its own overly-produced and aestheticized sameness have that I can, at least in part, acknowledge and possibly commend it for? Are shared, trending aesthetics their own way of feeling a part of our community? What if there were so many more aesthetics, being crafted from diverse lived contexts and cultures? What might the evolved feeling of belonging to a contemporary dance and performance community be in such a complex, alive and truly biodiverse system look and feel like?

Then there are the almost countless other works I've viewed, been involved in, or classes and workshops I've attended, that are so saturated in middle / upper class lived experiences and aesthetics, even as they're conveying the more complex and difficult socio-political or environmental subject matter, that I've adored, even been blown away by. These have played a substantial part in my own works' development and career evolution.

The difference I've identified with a lot of these works is their commitment to their content. The research and wider-view culture feels like it has given significant space to layers within their subject matter, have worked on and discovered diverse means with which to communicate it, not allowing their depictions to be only steered by form and technique. Especially when the works are originally devised. I believe evaluation of "good work" or "contemporary work" or even "work of excellence" is entirely relative. It is also in the eyes of the beholder. Let's work on getting other eyes beholding our works through embracing a far greater sense of what Art is and who can participate in it.

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