

MARCH DANCE: THROUGH MEMORY

It is June 2022 and I have been invited to reflect on the March Dance festival. With a three-month distance, I can only write through memory – what remains of the festival once it is gone... What traces does it leave; and for whom...

I can also only write through the particular pathway I took through the festival, not knowing at the time I will be asked to write this. My reflection therefore includes only a small section of the overall program and leaves behind the mention of many. It is a biased point of view. However, as such, this recollection is authentic, because we all – as audience members – navigate the festivals by picking and choosing what is relevant to us; each of us having a unique experience and forming a unique memory; a partial oral archive. Only a quilt made from all our experiences combined would reflect what the festival was truly like. This text is not such a patch.

I also write from the perspective of a dancer who participated in the festival as part of Lux Eterna's '8th Day', a development residency boosted with a \$1,000 bursary and the Harold Park Community Hall, a stunning venue filled with light and warmed by the ochre brick walls. The space in which we create is so crucial to us dancers – well to all the creatives, really – as it affects how we move, and think, and imagine, and move again. March Dance collaborates with a wide variety of venues across the city, sometimes activating spaces that are little used, and it would be

interesting to learn how conducive each of these architecturally varied spaces were to what was developed there... What emerges out of a space?

Ten dance-makers were awarded the financially supported March Dance residencies in 2022, which meant they were able to pay their collaborators and work without a guilt-stricken: 'I am asking you for a favour'; 'I own you'; and 'I should not be too demanding, because I am not paying you'. Money is uncomfortable to talk about but it pays our bills, sustains our bodies, and provides a sense of recognition and respect. Practical tips on how to ask for it and add financial value to our work, were addressed in the March Dance online session 'Money is Not a Dirty Word', which I unfortunately missed but which I hope may become available as a recording?

Staying on the topic of money for a little bit longer, I also wish to mention the March Dance's new partnership with the Keir foundation who's inaugural \$3,000 'Start-Up Commission' will enable production of one of the projects and its presentation at the March Dance 2023. This project happens to be Lux Eterna's '8th Day', a multi-channel hybrid dance video that explores land-inspired sensitivity. Here again, my experience of March Dance 2022 was for obvious reasons particularly positive, but I think it is fair to say that this new addition of financial support is welcomed by all. At the same time, I am well aware that for any project that receives, there are dozens that don't and I hope that our dance sector will obtain more financial support, so that none of us – or, more likely, fewer of us – are left behind,

waiting; and the sense of competitiveness and rivalry is lessened. We need this desperately – not only from the material point of view, but for the sake of culture it creates.

Ok, moving on ... To another thing that is crucial to the culture of the dance sector: **Inclusivity**. We speak about it a lot these days, and Covid has encouraged some positive changes, with much more to be done. I won't focus here on what is left to do; but applaud what is in the making. This year March Dance partnered with the BOLD festival, highlighting the expertise of elderly dancers. By celebrating “the empowerment of ageing,” this program encouraged the shift in view on which bodies are meant to dance and be looked at. As said, there is so much more we need to do here, but I feel a positive wind of change when it comes to opening the dance space to the bodies that are not our usual outdated idea of beauty and excellence. Bodies that are injured. Bodies that are disabled (or differently abled). Bodies whose skin is of different colour. Bodies that are transgender. Bodies that have aged. Bodies that are.... the list can never end. We can all dance, and we can all bring unique and wonderful ways of moving into the world. And we must. Dance is not – and should not be – a privilege of some, and it is about time to resist the society that tells us otherwise.

That we are all Bodies of Knowledge and that we as dancers bring particular kinds of knowledges into the world, was recognised through the program strand ran by Critical Path. More accurately, this program supported several projects that “looked at the interface of different

knowledge areas and dance,” while finding ways to present these digitally; which brings me to the next point on inclusivity: the online space. As someone who works with the body, I personally find coming together in a physical space crucial to the experience of dance; but I am learning to soften around this edge and realize the importance and the value of making dance accessible in different ways; to everyone. Because dance is anyway so much more than we – for some centuries – have made it be. Holly Craig, a blind choreographer and dancer who was also a recipient of the 2021 March Dance bursary, and participant in the 2022 March Dance program, teaches me that dance can, for instance, be experienced even when not seen. Her piece ‘Rootles’ explores the experience of “being at home,” but I am also tempted to think of this rootlessness in terms of up-rooting our assumptions about dance, and how it is ‘consumed’.

More kinds of bodies and experiences we include and create space for, the better (and more interesting) in my view; and I think that dance offers a unique platform for the boundaries of all kinds to drop and dissolve – if we liberate it to be what it is meant to be. I come from culturally and linguistically diverse background, so was drawn to the workshop ‘Cultural Dialogue: a space for cultures and arts to mix and dialogue’, facilitated by Argentinian/Australian Coti Cibils. As someone who has been living in Australia for over fifteen years, I don’t recall a more inclusive space than the one that Coti has created, where in a circle – through playful movement and games – we’ve learned about each other’s cultures and listened with genuine curiosity and

inspiration, rather than a high brow judgement. As we danced together, teaching each other the kinds of moves and energies that originate in our parts of the world, we became one multi-coloured body. Dance does this.

March Dance has been created to “bring together the diversity of independent dance practice in Sydney;” to support the development of new works, their sharing with the audience and each other, and provide an overview of what is happening in Sydney, dance-wise. By its existence, the festival energises the sector and generates the momentum, which in 2022 was particularly needed. In only four years of existing (with the second and third affected by Covid cancellations), March Dance has become a landmark in the calendar, and I know there are many dancers and performance artists currently developing the ideas to pitch to the 2023 March Dance. Invigorating the sector in this way, March Dance fulfils an invaluable role, as it allows us to dream and move together.

My part of the quilt ends here. For yours to be added ...

Ira Ferris, June 2022

