

**Dance
Dialogues
Podcast**

&

**dance art
journal**

**a
WebRes
event**

**HOW CAN DANCE
JOURNALISM SUPPORT
INDEPENDENT ARTISTS?**

**micro-
commissioned
and hosted by
SIOBHAN
DAVIES
DANCE**

WebRes 2020 - How can dance journalism support the work of independent artists?

A reflective document written by Katie Hagan, dance art journal and Rachel Elderkin, Dance Dialogues Podcast.

Introduction

Following our WebRes event for Siobhan Davies Dance, we felt it important to create a document that highlights some considerations that artists and writers can take together going forward.

As context for the following document, our question ‘how can dance journalism support the work of independent artists’ was intended to open a dialogue around how there might be more interaction between dance journalism and the practices of independent artists – particularly in terms of the innovative and experimental ways in which this dialogue can be considered.

Our WebRes event highlighted a sense of disconnect between the traditional form of dance journalism used in mainstream publications and the work produced by independent artists.

National press and mainstream publications often require a performance to have, at the least, a two-night run and generally maintain the traditional format of ‘watching and reviewing’, usually requiring this review within a short time frame and word count. While that format may be suited to mainstream publications and can work for larger artistic productions, it is not necessarily fitting for the majority of work presented by independent artists – especially the scenarios in which independent artists choose, or are required, to present their work.

Independent outlets have greater freedom to explore new ways of interacting with work and test formats that might better support and engage with the work produced by independent artists. By asking our question the aim was to explore what these alternatives might look like, while offering a space for an open dialogue.

As we move forward we hope that, by continuing to ask this question, we can begin to build a clearer picture around the forms of engagement that might better support the work of independent artists in the future.

Produced from the conversations that took place during the event, alongside participants’ manifesto contributions, the following document reflects an initial step in that ongoing project.

How do we engage with the work beyond reviews?

Reviews are far from the only way and form for writers to engage with dance.

When considering different forms and ways of engaging, it's useful to remember that in contemporary dance many performances are limited to a 'one-night run'. Forms that allow for more dialogue around the performance and/or artistic process could be valuable for both the profile of artists and engaging audiences with dance work.

Forms of engagement for writers that might work well around the 'one-night run' could include:

- Preview activity, including opportunities for dance journalists to work with venues
- Post-show talks/discussions – perhaps making more use of formats that allow for the audience to respond to and question what they have heard and seen
- Online engagement – artist talks and interviews, engagement with online festivals, and new digital dance platforms
- 'Dance writers in residence' – a writer who comes in to observe, document and write about the choreographic process

In terms of building a dialogue with venues beyond reviews and press nights, could dance writers work alongside venues to offer a more in-depth insight into the artists and work being publicised? For instance, engaging with mailing lists through artist interviews or Q&As, or more venues engaging writers to create programme notes or to host talks with artists.

There could be more exploration of forms that ask questions rather than offering single person views. Podcasts, for instance, allow an in-depth dialogue and a way for the artist's voice to be represented. Likewise, hosting spaces (virtual and non-virtual) that allow interdisciplinary conversation could help engage wider communities and allow dance to reach beyond its own circle.

Social media is also a prominent and immediate way for writers to engage with dance, plus it has the potential to help dance work reach a wider audience. Can dance writing play with its use of form on these platforms? (Of course, writers should consider the language they use to portray work in these spaces.)

On the other side of this, perhaps writers/journalists with media training could work with artists to generate a more in-depth knowledge of the ways in which artists can interact with the media and how this relationship can help disseminate their work.

There was some concern around allowing writers access to an artist's process, as another form of engaging with an artist's work. It is important to maintain a space for artistic and creative freedom and experimentation. However, perhaps there are ways that writers can help open up and make more 'visible' that process to audiences, giving those outside the dance world an insight into how dance is created.

As well as looking to new forms of engaging with dance, long-form writing should not be forgotten as it gives the opportunity for writing to engage with dance in more depth. Allowing a space for this, and compensation for the time and skill this writing takes, is important.

Finally, we need to look at ways to support independent dance writing and writers. Mainstream publications and broadsheet journalism will favour short reviews and well-known names to attract their readers – if we want to work in ways and forms that reach beyond the review, then independent dance writers need the financial support and space in which to do this.

Creating spaces for writers and artists

The connection between dance artists and writers was highlighted as an area that needed some refining. To help improve the relationship between the two it was suggested that it would be worthwhile to establish the connections clearly, and in which spaces they could be cultivated.

In terms of identifying the spaces, a potential solution would be to allow writers and other audience members to see more than the ‘final product’. Allowing space for various communities – writers, dancers, artists – to come in during the creative process can be informative and broaden the way in which a work is written or spoken about. Furthermore, by seeing the development of the work at various stages, it will allow audiences to become more familiar with the language used in the making process, so they can consequently home in on the specificity of the artist and work. Seeing the dance outside of its final context will give more visibility to the tremendous effort that is necessary for the art to exist. This focus on specificity, of what goes into the dance, could help create a supportive platform for the labour and artistry that exists within these particular works or collaborations.

Responsibility

Over the course of this online event, the need for accountability in dance writing was an area of debate. It is important to recognise that accountability should not be undertaken in a way that sets out to ‘police’ writers – free speech is a pillar of society – but to ensure writers are respectful and aware of the words they are using and contexts that are being represented.

Feedback from the document which was circulated after the event highlighted that individual persons should be encouraged to ‘call-out’ bad practice instead of erecting another institution of accountability, which may run into its own complications.

The feedback also indicated that moving forward, it would be highly worthwhile for dance writers to complete any necessary research before heading to a performance, including finding out more contextual information about the style and artist, etc. Writers are encouraged to be at ease with what they don’t know in order for them to improve. This extra bit of work would really pay

dividends when it comes to writing a more informed review. It will also offset this idea that it's 'the artist's responsibility to educate'.

When it comes to writing about 'marginalised' voices, it is really important that the dance writing community is diverse. To embrace subjectivities, it's important to hear the subjectivities of marginalised people. It also goes without saying then, that more focus is needed on bringing more writers of colour into the industry.

On the topic of writing reviews about independent artists, feedback also showed that writers would do well to consider the context (aka societal, institutional, financial) in which the work is made. Independent artists are not afforded the same privileges as those who are more 'mainstream', meaning that it is the responsibility of the writer to be able to capture the work in relation to its context.

The value of writing about dance

Dance writing (including reviews) is more than a form of appraisal; it's about sharing an experience.

Sharing this experience of watching and engaging with dance is valuable to the art form itself – it can help dance remain visible, connect with new audiences and open up discussion. This visibility is important to maintain the public value of an art form and keep it from being too easily 'dismissed'.

It was reiterated during the conversation that, to enable readers to feel like they have seen/ experienced a dance work - and feel influenced to experience dance for themselves – it is important for writers to be able to evoke the quality of the event.

In relation to this, the term 'critic' can be misleading – or even narrow the view of what dance writing can be.

As an art form, dance is ephemeral. It may be captured on film, but the live in-person experience cannot be repeated. Dance writing offers a way of documenting that experience and of understanding how a performance was experienced in its own time and context. We shouldn't underestimate the value of that, both historically and for the future of dance.

Conclusion

By creating this document, we hope to sustain an important focus and discourse within the dance industry regarding the relationship between dance writing and independent dance artists. This event brought to the fore many salient aspects and offered valuable feedback as to how writers and artists may work together, which dance art journal and Dance Dialogues Podcast would like to take forward into the future.

As well as drawing attention to the ways we can collectively engage with dance work beyond reviews, this document also pinpointed writers' responsibilities and considerations, dance writing's value to the sector and the need for more opportunities where dance writers and artists can collaborate.

Lastly, we'd like to thank each and every one of you who participated in this rewarding event; we are grateful that you made it a reality! We hope this reference document will be useful in some way. Extended thanks are paid to the Siobhan Davies Dance team, in particular Rohanne Udall and Jonny Goode for their precious help and guidance.