Ausdance NSW was thrilled to receive funding from Arts NSW to allow 11 NSW dance Artists to participate in the 2015 National Dance Forum and to enable us to host a follow up Industry event. We were also excited that 2 key members of staff from Arts NSW funding team were able to attend the forum with us, to see, speak, here and watch dance for 3 days!

It’s a great opportunity for artists to come together, talk about dance and all it encompasses. Artists working together to reflect upon, share, innovate and contribute to the Australian Dance sector.

A comprehensive and diverse range of artists was selected from the NSW dance community, they participated in forums, workshops and attended Dance Massive events. The artists themselves represented a range of ages and stages of a dance artists career and also reflected Arts NSW policy priorities which include: Western Sydney, Aboriginal, Disability, Regional, CALD, Young people.

Following you can read the artists records of their experiences at the 2015 National Dance Forum. The journal pieces are the result of the documentation project that artists were asked to undertake to give us a snapshot of the questions facing dance in 2015 and the future of dance in Australia.

Ausdance NSW undertook this work as we believe this was a valuable opportunity for both professional development, networking and dialogue that also helps to build the capacity and sustainability of the dance sector in NSW and beyond. This is one of our core priority areas.

I trust you will enjoy reading the thoughts and opinions of our 2015 National Dance Forum representatives and kindly thank Arts NSW for the opportunity. Please take the opportunity to connect with them.

MICHELLE SILBY
DIRECTOR, AUSDANCE NSW
Background

2015 marks the third National Dance Forum (NDF2015).

The National Dance Forum invites Australian dancers, makers, researchers, writers, directors, producers, advocates and educators to participate in the most significant platform for dialogue across the Australian contemporary dance sector.

When: Thursday 19 March 2015 at 12.30 pm – Saturday 21 March 2015 at 5.30 pm
Where: Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, Victoria

NDF2015 takes place in conjunction with Dance Massive.

The 2015 National Dance Forum seeks to:

• instigate intelligent and insightful engagement between Australian dancers, makers, researchers, writers, producers, advocates and educators

• create the most significant platform for dialogue across the Australian contemporary dance sector

• connect Australian artists with local, national and international communities

• recognise the responsibility to acknowledge the past whilst asking important questions about the future of Australian dance practice

• provide an immersive, participatory experience, offering delegates a rich and valuable opportunity to inspire new ideas and/or refresh existing ones in an environment tailored to complement the unique qualities of the dance sector.
Ausdance NSW received funding from Arts NSW to send delegates to the National Dance Forum. In total 11 dance artists were selected to represent New South Wales at the national event. These 11 artists are from varied backgrounds, experiences and geographical locations providing a varied and broad cross section of the New South Wales Dance Industry.
NDF2015

Sarah-Vyne Vasallo
Annalouise Paul
Ian RT Colless
Vicki Van Hout
Lizzie Thomson
Cadi McCarthy
Miranda Wheen
Thomas ES Kelly
Philip Channells

Gabrielle Rose &
Rob McCredie
fLING Physical Theatre
The National Dance Forum (NDF) has been described as ‘the most significant platform for dialogue across the Australian contemporary dance sector’. Held at the Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne for the second time, the NDF encouraged discussion, debate, networking, new ideas and reflection on artistic practice across 2 ½ days in March 2015.

This biannual event, now in its third incarnation sits within the second week of the Dance Massive program, which brings together Australian contemporary dance performances and showcases, workshops and networking events and activities across three locations in Melbourne (Arts House, Dancehouse and the Malthouse).

Both the NDF and Dance Massive are attended by national and international delegates.

Having attended the NDF in 2011 and 2013, I had a clear understanding of

- what to expect
- what was important to me as a dance artist, and
- how to make the most of the program.

In 2011 I attended as a representative of Restless Dance Theatre (where I was Artistic Director from 2009 – 2012) and spoke on the Dance in communities panel led by Annie Greig; in 2013 I was part of the volunteer team brought together by Kath Papas Productions; and in 2015 I attended as one of the Ausdance NSW delegates and spoke on the Integrated practice panel led by Andrew Morrish.

This panel discussion was programmed in the morning session on the third day of the Forum. It was interesting to observe the level of delegate attendance, which was far less than I had experienced other morning sessions of Key Note addresses.

2. Developments that came out of the discussions/events

Integrated practice panel
Chair: Andrew Morrish

Panelists included:
Philip Channells (Dance Integrated Australia)
Janice Florence (Weave Movement Theatre)
Michelle Ryan (Restless Dance Theatre)
Kate Sulan (rawcus).

The Integrated practice panel was a long overdue first for the National Dance Forum which brought together some of Australia’s leading practitioners working in dance and physical performance with or, alongside artists with disability. We discussed process in a professional context, performance, access, aesthetics and disability politics.

All panelists are dedicated to the development of disability arts and dance or dance / theatre in a professional capacity and all work with artists with and without disabilities.
Some of the conversations that followed were based around:

- the culture of disability and the relevance / importance of working with person-centred creative processes
- language – what’s the wrong or right way to discuss disability in dance
- disability politics and history of integrated practice in Australia
- what’s different about working with people with disability
- generating work that celebrates all facets of life - celebrating the chemistry of working with people with and without disability
- duty of care, responsibility, dignity of risk, understanding and respect.

Here is the podcast for the panel discussion

Applications of the outcomes/developments for the NSW Dance Community

The NDF was a great opportunity to meet other Ausdance NSW delegates who I didn’t know. As a regional-based artist It was interesting for me to draw some striking parallels and differences between my practice / process and learn what some of the Metro-based artist’s experience.

In terms of a Sydney ‘scene’, from what I gathered, there appears to be a sense of disparity in relation to the Melbourne ‘scene’ at that although there are lot of artists working independently, there isn’t a lot of employment opportunities. The fact that there is no longer a full time tertiary dance course available in NSW (Sydney to be more precise) has a negative impact re: employment and opportunity.

I also understood that there isn’t a Sydney ‘style’ as some people suggested exists in Melbourne because there are so many artists working separately and there is not a situation where like in Melbourne, a small number of artists are continually offered contracts with companies such as the more established project based ones, Chunky Move, Lucy Guerin Inc. and BalletLab. I also got a sense that because of this, many Sydney-based artists feel they need to develop other skills in order to survive, working other jobs not necessarily related to dance.

As a regional-based artist living in a remote village on the North Coast of NSW I understand their frustration, but how I combat this is to think pro-actively about my dance career by creating opportunities that bring artists to the area. This is evidenced in the annual project in Federal, The Corner Dance Lab, which was a partnership piloted with my collaborator, Gavin Webber (The Farm). This project attracts participation from across the country and abroad.

I also understand that because I have operated throughout my career with a distinct vision for dance, I have been able to stay focused on this vision and therefore wherever I base myself I feel I can action the necessary steps to realise this goal. This also fills in the gaps when I am not working elsewhere.

Something else that really stood out for me as a result of attending the NDF was that as an artist that works across diverse cultures with artists (emerging and established) from across different artistic modalities is that I am constantly surprised and challenged by the environment I work in. I feel more people are slowly beginning to realise there is value in working outside of the stereotypical contemporary dance environment with dancers with non-normative bodies mixing and collaborating with professionally trained dancers.

The challenge for me now is to continue supporting this ‘new wave’ of interest, supporting people to work in a particular context which encourages different aesthetics, but look for new ways to re-invent what it is that I do. The more people that are up-skilled in working with people with disability for example creates healthy competetivity within dance, and at times negatively impacts on my ‘getting the gig’. This challenges me to look beyond Australia for work and in doing this I find that I am invited to other parts of the world to share my knowledge and experience.
In addition to this I also observed that contemporary dance in Australia is generally very mono-cultural and appears to attract only a small fraction of the cultural diverse make up of our modern society. It appeared to me looking around the room that no (or very few) ‘black’ people (by that I mean people with different cultural background) actually dance and the ‘white middle class’ are the success stories, the policy and decision makers, the leaders in our contemporary dance culture.

Having worked in the UK, this is quite a different reality in that yes, there is still a sense of the ‘white privileged’ being supported in dance and there is a much bigger population and more resources of course, but generally speaking there is more celebration and support for diversity in the UK than there is here in Australia and I want to know why?

So as someone that works within a dance culture where diversity is encouraged and promoted, I felt the frustration of my peers who have indigenous background who clearly stated at the NDF that there is little representation of indigenous culture (the planet’s oldest) at events like the National Dance Forum and Dance Massive. When I consider how long I have been fighting for social justice in the arts to include people from diverse background, (people with disability especially) I echo this frustration and without knowing what it must be like for an indigenous artist to not have their voice heard, I completely align with comments such as, “You’re not listening”.

What I propose is that all tertiary institutions, companies, dance makers independent artists, producers, promoters and festivals place HIGH on their priority DIVERSITY & ACCESS and to reflect that within the creative process they engage in, the selection processes and programming of Australian contemporary dance at events like the major Arts festivals and gatherings of creative happening large or small.

I see it as our responsibility to lead this and to engage the NSW dance ‘scene’ from within our major organisations and networks. The ripple effect will infiltrate beyond our personal and/or professional agendas and we will allow NSW to once again become a thriving dance community that stands proud for the collective consciousness that demands equality in the arts and that all voices are heard.

**How has your participation in the NDF benefited you as an artist**

As a NSW regional-based artist, attending the NDF 2015 is a unique opportunity to connect with the broader dance community. It allows me to continue to

- build my networks as an independent artist and the profile for Dance Integrated Australia
- establish new relationships and discussions about current and future works in progress
- learn about the industry as a whole
- taste the delicacies and the intricate successes and challenges other artists experience
- attend the Dance Massive performances and events.

Being one of the panel members of the NDF is a significant opportunity to discuss my thought processes amongst industry peers and colleagues and engage in meaningful conversations, which relate to the vision I have for dance in Australia.

The financial assistance I received from Ausdance NSW and Arts NSW made this possible. Isolated from all the major capitol cities across the country, attending the NDF is critical in enabling me to stay connected to the dance community, to maintain long term and establish new relationships.
This was to be my third National Dance Forum, the first I attended in 2011. This forum was to be my first as a NSW independent dance artist, Artistic Director of Catapult dance and as a regionally based practitioner. I was extremely excited about attending with this new direction at the fore, and participating from a whole new perspective to previous years.

I was interested in meeting other regionally based artists from across Australia and listening to their stories, and experiences working outside of capital cities. I was looking forward to hearing information from them regarding their support mechanisms from: community, the funding bodies and finding any possible support networks that exist between regionally based practitioners. As I was coming to the forum from this new direction, with a focus on youth dance and regional practice, I did not have any pre-conceived expectations regarding the forum, I was just really inspired to meet new people and hear about their experiences.

Due to the many and varied discussions, forums and keynote speakers that I was able to attend. I have limited this to just a few ideas. Although I have a many thoughts that could be later explored.

From Black Box to White Box:
Speakers: Phillip Adams, Atlanta Eke, Alison Currie, Latai Taumoepeau

This forum was of great interest to me. Since moving to Newcastle, NSW I have found more and more interest and opportunities to work in art gallery spaces, and alternate spaces in the city. Up until this point, I have been more focused on creating works in the theatre and black box setting, so I was interested in hearing more from practitioners who have a focus on these types of projects, as I endeavor to pursue this with greater intensity in the future.

The discussion commenced with a historical ‘think tank’ on artists who have ‘broken the mould’ and worked outside of the conventional theatre setting, it was a invigorating to go through this historical process and remember the great artists that have shaped this development of dance.

It was apparent from this discussion that the works that have been created in alternative settings, appear to push boundaries, and be more political in their execution. Taking the work outside of conventional spaces provides an environment where artists can stretch themselves, take greater risks and challenge culture and society. What also came out of the discussion was the many different models that can be used in these spaces to create works. The ideas that were discussed were:

“How can a dancing body have a week exhibition full time in a space”
“Do we re-define the thought of image / action in space”
“Works cannot be transposed from the studio setting into a gallery setting – the site is the site of display”
“In a gallery setting – people are not committed to watch – they can navigate the gallery freely”

How as choreographers and dance-makers do we negotiate this – how do we create works in this setting and how does it differ to the making of works in a conventional theatre setting, where audiences are provided seating, clear ‘etiquette’ and context.

I am interested in this discussion, Catapult dance is looking into a number of gallery projects and installation works with various galleries. As a choreographer it is a wonderful challenge to question what is created in the moment, and what is left behind in the space. I am looking forward to experimenting with space and the relationship between the visual vs performance, where every body in the space regardless of being a audience member or performer, become part of the installation – because every body is visible and participating by being in the space.
Everyone becomes conscious and on display, and part of the action. Who is the artist in this context, and what is actually on display?

Contemporary dance happens here: deploying dance in regional settings:

Speakers Jacob Boehme, Britt Guy, Lesley Graham, Julian Louis

I was really looking forward to this discussion as it was clearly focused on the regional dance perspective. I was interested in hearing from the panelists, and their perspectives on creating contemporary dance works in the regions.

The first panelist was Artistic Director of NORPA: Julian Louis (Lismore, NSW). I really enjoyed his discussions revolving authenticity, community ownership and connection to works. This has definitely been my experience thus far in working in regional NSW is that the connection to place, and historical significance is of great importance to the community. Julian reiterated that it is crucial that the work is considered and relevant to engage audiences.

The second speaker was Lesley Graham, Tasmania, her experiences were extremely valuable. Similarly to the environment I am currently in, the visual arts sector is much closer to ‘contemporary art’ than the theatre environment is: and the contemporary dance sector (although this is now growing due to the Flipside Project and Catapult dance) was limited. She stated ‘It is an education for young people and community to be exposed to contemporary dance” and this resonated with me. Her main points were: access, engagement, interaction, artists and connection with the elders in the community.

The regional discussion then took a critical direction that was initiated by Jacob Boehme from Melbourne. He brought to attention the structural imbalance of power between indigenous Australia and ‘white’ Australia, especially at the fore with the closures of Western Australian remote communities. That narrative and story of our land and peoples are everything, and are the shared responsibility of the whole community. It was a turning point in the direction of the forum that ignited much discussion and call to stand together, with a shared focus on indigenous issues across the whole country, and how the arts has the power and capabilities to heal.

YOUTH DANCE PRACTICE

Youth dance practice, did not have a specific discussion or keynote at this National Dance Forum, although in past forums it has definitely had a strong focus. Youth dance found a voice through separate more informal discussions. Ruth Osborne from QL2 in Canberra, fLING Physical Theatre, in Bega and I, at Catapult dance in Newcastle had many discussions on the importance of youth dance in Australia, and aim to set up a network of youth dance practitioners working in NSW, Canberra and across Australia. Our discussion linked in with the major points brought up by Keynote Speaker: Jerril Rechter from Vic Health, in regards to the positive links between dance and mental well-being, social connection, physical fitness and an avenue for personal growth for our young people. Our attention focused on how to attract young people, build on their knowledge and experience of dance, and to keep young people engaged in the arts and community long term. It was fantastic to be able to connect with these amazing practitioners and start discussions regarding setting up a structure for youth dance organisations.

The major benefit of the National Dance Forum is to connect with artists from across Australia, to discuss dance and its many and varied directions. There are way to many thoughts to discuss in such a limited word count. It is always a joy to catch up with friends, colleagues and practitioners that you have just met, and discuss the incredible value that dance has in society, on so many levels. The reach of our sector in the wider community is broad and multi-faceted, and the forum highlights the expansive reach that dance has across society. It is an honour to be a member of the Australian dance community, and it is invigorating to hear the passion and power that this relatively small but vibrant sector has.
Miranda Wheen

Expertly and entertainingly facilitated by Andrew Morrish, the emphasis of the forum seemed to be on allowing space for as many perspectives from the dance community as possible. If any member of the delegation had something to say, there was an avenue for it to be said, or danced, or written. The ‘Open Spaces’ format, wherein participants are invited to drive the content of the forum, seemed an appropriately creative and democratic way to conduct proceedings, despite it taking a little while for everyone to warm into a flow.

Keynote speakers were Lemi Ponifaso, Samoan choreographer and director of New Zealand based company Mau, and Jerril Rechter, CEO of Vic Health. Whilst Lemi wowed the crowd with luxuriously grand statements about art making and performance, Jerril spoke of practical approaches to augmenting participation in dance and health.

Break out panel sessions included:

The academic artist: oxymoron or creative synergy?
Speakers: Shaun McLeod, Julie-Anne Long, Jo Pollitt

Dance Massive Artists panel
Speakers: Martin del Amo, Anouk van Dijk, Clare Watson, Zaimon Vilmanis, Katrina Lazaroff

From black box to white box
Speakers: Phillip Adams, Atlanta Eke, Alison Currie, Latai Taumoepeau

Contemporary dance happens here: deploying dance in regional settings
Speakers: Jacob Boehme, Britt Guy, Lesley Graham, Julian Louis

Dance criticism, writing and discourse
Speakers: Matthew Day, Jordan Beth Vincent, Jana Perkovic, Vicki van Hout

Crossing borders: International collaboration
Speakers: Ade Suharto, Tim Darbyshire, Thomas E Kelly, Paul Selwyn Norton, Pirjetta Mulari

Keynote Panel:

Integrated practice
Speakers: Michelle Ryan, Kate Sulan, Janice Florence, Philip Channells.

From the perspective of a NSW based independent contemporary dancer I was specifically interested in really embodied views on dance, dance training and dance performance. Within the framework of the current situation of independent dancers in NSW, which I see as being quite problematic, I was interested to hear some of the broader National perspectives on the same issues.

One thing Lemi Ponifaso said that stuck with me was that he preferred working with ‘quiet’ performers; ones that did not need to know ‘what’s going on.’ This really intrigued me. My experience of being an independent performer is that more and more dancers are expected to deeply engage with the concepts and subject matter of the work, and make substantial contributions to the ideas and choreography. Whilst I love this way of working, sometimes I feel like there is simply not enough time to work on being a great performer, a dancer.

At this National Dance Forum these same priorities of everything-but-the-dance-itself seemed to be reflected. Whilst there was a huge amount of super interesting, inspiring, ‘brain nourishing’ content, it didn’t help my feeling that currents trends in dance – or at least independent contemporary dance – seem to have somewhat sidelined the act of dancing (the art of dancing?).
Being at the National Dance Forum and Dance Massive, immersed in the dance community of Melbourne (six shows, two master classes, one showing, “a book club for dance,” and countless, countless conversations about dance), gave me a lot to reflect on about the dance community here in NSW, what’s unique about it, and also what it may be missing.
Thomas E.S. Kelly

Before attending the National Dance Forum of 2015 I was unsure what to expect. A first time attendee, the excitement of being at the national dance forum was continually building from the morning I hopped aboard the train to take me out to Footscray Community Arts Centre. Arriving for a pre brief breakfast/lunch/coffee with the other Ausdance NSW delegates, was where I gathered my insight into what the next three days might hold, and this is where I made my decision on how I would conduct myself as an emerging artist, first time participant at NDF, I would of course, over the next three days, observed, listened, learned, talked, danced, facilitated, panel spoke, ate, laughed, joked, met new people, caught up with old friends, discussed, planned for the future and much much more.

I viewed the forum as an opportunity for our industry to come together and discuss the direction we have come from and where we wish to go next. This was facilitated through a variety of panel discussions, one in which I had the opportunity to be apart of, and two keynote discussions. The National Dance Forum is a necessity for the growth of our industry.

Lemi Ponifiaso, choreographer and artistic director of MAU, keynote speaker number one, Samoan man with an outlook on his art in which I admired and have taken onboard myself. Lemi spoke about many things, what is his dance? A performance is a ceremony and you must prepare it like that, like a goat prepared for sacrifice. Art, what does it mean to exist?. All poignant statements from Lemi, which had begun a serious of questions about why and what it is that I do. The statement that resonates with in my head still to this day is when Lemi said that he doesn’t think about cultural aspects when he creates, their already apart of him therefore they already have a presence in his work. This resonates with me because I, as a dancer performance maker, with indigenous heritage, spend a lot of time trying to add in the cultural aspect, when I just need to create because the cultural influence will occur naturally.

Keynote speaker number two was Jerril Rechter from Vic health. Many things I could say about what Jerril had said however I would rather speak about just one. How do we make dancers role models and leaders for our youth in the same way our NRL and AFL stars are? This stayed with me for quite a while to the point where I used this statement and facilitated my own little beanbag discussion.

As mentioned earlier I had the opportunity to talk on a panel the topic, Crossing Borders: International Collaboration. I was joined by some of Australia’s top practitioners as well as a delegate from Finland. The discussion was great, nerves were existent at first but when comfort set in all was good.

This forum was a collection of firsts for me, first National Dance Forum, first time panelist, first time meeting industry peers who I admire greatly. I wasn’t sure what to expect but I was excited for the unknown. When I hopped into the taxi to the airport I still had excitement but for a different reason, excitement for the future and to see what outcomes will come out of the past three days. All that emotion mixed with disappointment though, that it will be another two years until the next National Dance Forum.

I am so glad that I had the opportunity to attend the National Dance Forum 2015, as it has already had an influence on my career for the future and that is an experience that will stay with me for quite a while.
How do we value different people, groups, ideas, styles and approaches to making work and how does reinforcement of any one person, group or idea seem to devalue others? In the context of the National Dance Forum, it seemed to be a key question. What do we talk about? How do we prioritise the concerns of different individuals and groups? How do we determine the value of different issues in order to decide what gets prioritised and therefore what actually gets discussed in the limited time that we have? How does this process of valuing also mean that other things are devalued? How do people feel about how well they are represented or underrepresented in this context?

This issue of priorities and representation was a primary concern of many or most of the indigenous artists present, questioning whether their concerns were to be adequately represented in the forum, which was also a reflection on the programming of Dance Massive. This led to some intense and emotional conversation on the second day of the forum, and ultimately ended in a commitment to listen and work together on addressing greater representation.

The question of representation also emerged for other groups in other ways, in conversations about the lack of professional performance opportunities for older dancers, and in other groups feeling marginalised in cultural conversation due to being located in regional areas or working with youth.

It’s interesting reflecting on how people represented themselves and their ideas, as a series of speakers spoke about their work and why their work was important, in a way that seemed to propose that their way was the right way, that they knew what was most important. This way of speaking about the value of certain types of work seemed to be pushing a particular agenda and seemed to devalue other ideas and ways of working. This is not necessarily a good way to foster or celebrate diversity, as it designates work outside those values as lacking and therefore lesser.

It seems much better to me when people talk from personal experience without any suggestion or implication that their way is the way forward or the best approach or the only way. If this is a creative industry, shouldn’t any ideal vision of where we could be include space for people to be working in many different ways and finding their own creative solutions to different issues? Otherwise we are just passing around the same models between artists and between organisations.

The last day of the forum was the most successful for me, combining an open space session for anyone to raise any issue they wanted to discuss, with anyone who wanted to talk or hear about it attending the conversation, combined with personal interviews in which any participant could propose to interview any other participant they were interested in talking to or hearing from.

These sessions were great, for the reasons that nothing was put in any hierarchy of being more valuable than anything else, people were able to propose and discuss topics they were interested in discussing that day in an immediate sense, and the interviews gave people the chance to speak in a more intimate setting about their personal experiences and ideas. It also created a way to acknowledge the presence of many influential people who attended the forum and to create the opportunity for their knowledge and experiences to be shared with other attendees in a way that was less formal than a keynote session, and that didn’t place their ideas
Highlight
Lemi Ponifasio was the first Keynote Speaker at the National Dance Forum 2015, and his sharing’s struck many chords with me and will continue to be striking for quite some time.

Lemi is the founder and director of MAU, New Zealand’s most prolific international contemporary Dance and Theatre Company. Lemi speaks with weighted knowledge and accuracy of his own experiences and practice; however in all that he shares there is a creative intuition and holistic through line that is framed within normality. He was both captivating and challenging in his provocations, I could feel the energy shift in the room when he shared some of his analogies about the stage, making art and the role of the performer. It was very mesmerizing to me to be sitting under his leadership and artistic vision. I wrote many notes frantically and hope to share some of my take home gems.

“I have questions”, said every artist repeatedly.

What is my dance?
What does my body say?
What can I say today?
What if there is no tomorrow?
Are you demonstrating difference or commonality?

These questions struck me deeply as these questions are of direct interest to my creative process, artistic practice and also my human development. As I re-read through my notes I found several quotes from Lemi that are quite profound yet still accessible to all. These are the highlights that continue to resonate.

Quotes from Lemi Ponifasio:

To create art is a declaration
Art enables transformations in your own life and in others
Art is a place to find common unity
Dance must be the morality of your own soul
Making yourself quiet so you can hear what your soul is saying
Everything we have is today
The dancer is a ceremonial body
The poet has to stare at the void and trust
We use dance to live life intensely
Our body is our country
Our job is to do the best that we can
I try to avoid ‘culture’ and deal with people as human beings
Truth is a process of searching it is not a destination
Keeping it simple and being specific is a discipline I have been practicing since training in the Sanford Meisner acting technique. A large part of this process is learning how to ‘live truthfully’ within ‘imaginary circumstances’. I continue to apply this technique to my own dance theatre practice and it continues to unfold in many different forms. Over time it has become less of a technique and more of an ongoing question of the ‘how to’. How do we live truthfully? How do we find and express our persona investment at the task at hand? In my area of practice I work with a broad range of people with diverse life experiences, many who have often overcome obstacles and barriers in order to be taken seriously and respected for who they are. Lemi’s philosophy directly relates to my field as it is about focusing more on the ‘being’ and less on the ‘human’. The ‘being’ can transcend what is natural and physical and there becomes magical and more powerful.

As I set out as a new Artistic Director and founder of Murmuration Dance Theatre my beliefs are very much aligned with Lemi’s. In particular his approach regarding working relationship and collaborations resonated with me. Placing the importance on lifelong relationships, a ‘partnership mentality’ versus a ‘gig mentality’. Working in collaboration is a commitment to improving how we see and hear our world and how we then affect others. To share this kind of ‘self’ is very sacred, yet when done in unison it can be a powerful and productive tool.

He spoke a lot about being present and truthful, learning how to exist completely in the present and the embodiment of existence. I found his knowledge to be complex, simple, specific and insightful all at the same time. I felt challenged to ‘trust’ and ‘to be’ I felt encouraged to pursue my truth and my story and encouraged to empower others. Our deepest truths are our greatest stories, this is particularly timely for me as my current research is about exploring our innermost feelings in relation to the unseen chemical makeup of human tears and how this tears are expressed through our joy, grief, frustration and laughter.

Lemi considers the lighting design to be intrinsic to his process yet it was interesting to hear that he is actually colour blind. Through the video he showed us of his last work, I was taken back by his dramatic and delineated lighting affects, (very much to my personal taste). He makes bold choices with large amounts of the stage in darkness; he considers empty space and uses minimal white light. These choices whilst artistic and theatrical are also part of his disability, once again demonstrating the power of knowing your own truth.

I will hold onto these notes and have already let them wash of my journey as an artist and maker. Needless to say I now have ‘Visit MAU, somehow, some way’ on my bucket list.

Overview
To be selected as an artist representative of Ausdance NSW and NSW dance community was a real honour, I am very grateful for the support of Arts NSW in facilitating this opportunity. It was wonderful to connect with my NSW peers, some that I know well and others that I met for the first time. It was a great opportunity to be able to sit back, listen, observe and digest a national pool of insights and experiences. The Forum allowed plenty of room for feedback, discussion, mind work shopping and discourse, most of which I am still digesting.

Attending the Forum also enabled me to grasp a current and deeper view of the Australian dance ecology, both our strengths and our weaknesses. One thing is for sure; we are a fiery, passionate, dedicated community. We continue to push boundaries within Australia’s culture and leave imprints internationally. We have achieved so much yet there is still a long way to go. A very genuine and systemic conversation that continues to arise is the lack of representation of our indigenous artists in the professional sector. I understand this is a complex issue yet one that we must truly grasp and advocate for progress if we are to truly move forward as a united community. Perhaps if we all take a page out of Lemi’s book and simply look past culture and into the person, revolutionary changes can be achieved.
Gabrielle Rose

I came to the National Dance Forum as a dancer, maker and artist who is now working regionally and predominantly with young people. My expectations coming to the forum were for robust discussion, hearing a diversity of voices. To be inspired by great ideas and learning. And having opportunity for social connection and networking.

The National Dance Forum satisfied many of these expectations, and living far away from major metropolitan centres impacts my capacity to connect with current conversations in the sector and I was grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the discussion.

My reflection on the forum is considering the conversation from a Regional dance perspective.

Living and working regionally is about people. It’s the people who you run into; at the supermarket, the old man at the post office, the kids you teach, their parents, their parent’s parents. It’s the business people, the educators, the politicians, the students, the hippies, the retirees, the school leavers, the surfers, the mothers group, they all play a part in your practice and as such your work. They are your audience, they are the cast, they might be the inspiration for your work. It is with these people that community engagement actually happens.

I came away from the NDF with a refreshed definition of Regional Arts Practice thanks to Brit Guy speaking on the Regional Perspective and Practice panel:

REGIONAL ARTS PRACTICE = MAKING WORK WITH THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU, NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE.

We all participate in regional arts practice, just some of us do it in closer proximity than others. When considering work placed further away from a metropolitan hub the quality of work doesn’t change. The calibre of the artist doesn’t change. What changes is accessibility - the capacity for people from outside your region, beyond the local critical mass to experience your work; the funding bodies, dance advocates, critics and a broader dance community can’t always make the show due to the tyranny of distance or REX airline prices. It can be worth the trip. But instead of a trip we jump online, combating the challenge of distance and accessibility with a screen and living online.

Visibility online is a huge pressure on Regional Arts practitioners. We need to put ourselves and our work on that platform to ensure people are in the loop. Websites, blogs, videos, images, social media are a powerful currency yet only serve as a stepping stone towards the real experience. This being said, the internet also provides exciting opportunity for networks and projects that connect us throughout the country and even internationally. It can also be a new medium in which to play with our perceptions of dance.

I left the NDF feeling out many questions such as, how can dance truly be accessible from the cradle to the grave? How can it give space to the many different approaches, opinions, values, aesthetics, purposes and pleasures that exist inside an art form that we love so much we want to work with it for such vast amounts of our lives. Like a ‘sector’, a ‘community’, or a great fruit salad – it’s the diversity of flavours that makes it work. How can/do we live together in our difference? Are we awake to changes around us and does our work reflect the burning questions of our locality, people and the time?
As Jeril Rechter stated in her Key Note conversation, the arts, in particular dance, can build social connection and it holds the potential for change. We need role models, we need innovation, we need perceptions to shift and we may need to redefine the offer. How do we engage with the people in front of us? That might be an incredibly gifted and highly trained professional artist, it could be the child who aspires for that, it might be a person with a visible or non visible disability, or it could be the adult who wants to get fit and try something other than the gym. Do they all have a place? Do they all deserve the opportunity to move? Can we be leaders in creating access and opportunities for all?

Going forward I want to acknowledge and honour those who have gone before me, learn, create new pathways and perceptions for the future. I want it to be real. I want it to be actions, not just lots of words. I want increased advocacy for regional and youth practice. I want this to be a bigger part of the conversation. With beautiful irony, the tyranny of distance can bring people closer together. As artists working in the regions we chose to invest in the people and places around us, and as highlighted throughout the NDF, the values and actions I want to practice with my community are:

CONNECT – CONVERSE – LISTEN – RESPECT – ENGAGE - CREATE
I expected a collective unconscious would be present. In other years there seemed to be a shared desire to look back and forwards together, to re-imagine the future of contemporary dance in the sector. I don’t feel it was present this time; something was different.

I was keen to see what had changed in the presentation of the Forum. For example the layout of the room was fun and more relaxed which is where we were encouraged to dialogue more and dance. The panels seemed not to serve so well, they almost seemed out of place this time.

We were encouraged to talk a lot, which I was excited by initially, but it was unclear what to talk about – I felt it needed more direction. In other years there were guided group topics, this time it was participant led.

I was keen to meet the other Ausdance NSW delegates and understand how we might connect in the context of the forum and with Michelle too, perhaps one on one.

**Developments that came out of the discussions/events**

Inspired talks by Lemi brought us together and Andrew Morrish who manoeuvred all sessions with grace and humour, even his bad jokes were terrifically perfect.

The Indigenous business was a development that had not happened before. The forum became polarised that afternoon and the purpose seemed unclear at times, however, it was an important opportunity to reconcile issues and heal. It was not discussed the next day, which was disappointing. No one is at fault but learning to dialogue right then and there would have been an important action to take so no one walks away feeling dismissed.

Last time there was a talking circle on dramaturgy led by Rachael Swain, which was terrific fun and opened up room for everyone to contribute. I missed the talking circles and this could have been useful in this instance.

**Applications of the outcomes/developments for the NSW Dance Community**

NDF 2015 was unlike the other years that had a real focus and intention. The closing speech and last session in previous years were inspiring we all walked out with purpose and positivity. This forum was a little unhinged in that respect, I am not sure what the outcomes are.

**Suggestions:**
Ausdance NSW holds its own one-day forum once a year – (not with the AGM) for artists and arts works to collectively imagine and shape our state.

NDF and Dance Massive in different states every two years and showcase works of artists in those states (predominantly) as it did for Victoria the last 3 times.

**General Observations**
There seemed to be more emerging artists and hearing their voices was fresh and exciting, but senior dancers were less and that for me is a loss – they contextualise us all, and provide a continuum of place and history for Australian dance.
International and national delegates attended, they got to know more about sector than just seeing shows and showcases and the buying and selling of dance works.

It felt like many people were there to network with Dance Massive delegates but less so for the Forum. There one day and gone the next, I often thought ‘oh I’ll catch so-and-so tomorrow’ but then never did.

People were more open to networking or perhaps I am getting better at it. 😊

*How has your participation in the NDF benefited you as an artist*

I used the opportunity of being in Melbourne to hold a workshop on the Monday at Cecil St Studios after the Forum, to introduce my practice to Melbourne dancers and catch up with local arts organisations about future workshop and presentation opportunities.

I would like to connect with Michelle Silby and Andy Howitt, Ausdance VIC about developing this workshop as a series that I can take around the country hosted by either the Ausdance offices or key dance organisation in each city.

Ann McClean, Ausdance Qld is supportive of my aspirations to create a national intercultural dance company and has set up meetings with an arts coach consultant so I can gain some guidance. Ann will be looking at my company Business Plan to support moving forward with that.

I was able to reconnect with Melbourne arts programmers from Dance House, Malthouse, Footscray Arts Centre and Cultural Infusion and many dancers and artistic directors and meet international delegates from Dance Massive, which was an invaluable opportunity for getting my work known and an understanding of the international marketplace.
The Academic Artist – Oxymoron or Creative Synergy?
Panel Sessions – Chair (Cheryl Stock)
Speakers: (Julie-Anne Long, Shaun McLeod, Jo Pollitt)

Each one of the Panel Speakers reviewed their professional experiences and their academic. Referencing the change in the education system, reviewing that their was little academic positions available, and there was full-time dance work from transitions from higher education into the professional sector. Cheryl Stock states,

- “How do you make change in a context of 100 of years of academic background with dance that has it’s own 100 of years of practice”.
- “The idea of translating one language (academic) with another language (dance) is a constant dialogue”.
- “How does research reach the dance academy? So much research has been done, but there is a disconnect?”
- “Performing is thought”
- “Things have changed in the academic context because artist have changed it”.

Rachael
- “Aboriginal Arts and Culture is in a time of emergency at the moment. There needs to be work done in practice led research to allow Aboriginal people to have access to the sector. There also needs to be work done on the assessment level as this is different information”.

Contemporary dance happens here: deploying dance in regional settings
Panel Sessions – Chair (Annette Carmichael)
Speakers: (Jacob Boehme, Lesley Graham, Britt Guy, Julian Louis)

Julian Louis
- We are fascinated about the culture and stories of where we work. This gives a glimpse into our history, a locations history, a personal history.
- It’s valuable to create ownership of a work in a community.

Lesley Graham
- Why are people in the arts going to the large cities?
- A politician once states that “every Tasmanian person should get a ticket and get out of Tasmania”. I sort of agree but I think it should be a return ticket so that they can go beyond, learn then come back and contribute.
- Arts in Tasmania tend to have a visual arts and musical theatre interest.
- It’s important that people in our community are encouraged to practice their art with their fellow community rather then hire someone who comes in and doesn’t know anything about the community comes in. We need a regional community and funding bodies to respect skills in the context of the regional community.
- Internet has allowed regional community to connect with what is going in mainstream arts and around the world
Throughout my career I was being asked a question but was not an equal partnership.
Is diversity bringing about homogenised.
“We have 30 independent Indigenous choreographers that have bodies of work. In 2010 Marilyn Miller, who set up the training pathways which has become our peak Indigenous dance body, BlakDance released that we have 100,000 Aboriginal dance groups in this country”.
“We have 112 Indigenous Festivals; we have 21 Indigenous performing arts producers; and five well-known Indigenous presenters and only one Indigenous dance work being shown in Dance Massive”.
“We have three panel members out of a possible 33 panellists who identify as Indigenous speaking to you. And one Indigenous curator on the [Forum’s curatorial] pane, as well as no acknowledgement of a 40,000-plus year old lineage of dance history”.
“It was my elders that guided me to where I was supposed to be in dance; I had never danced before in my life, at the age of 20. Previously in my teens, my early teens, I’ve been sat down by my father and my aunties, who said, very straight, directly, “Right, you’re the fair one, you pass. Your job is to go out there, get all the education you can and come back and share it with your community. That’s your responsibility”.
“So for me, my practice in not a choice, arts is not a choice; it’s a responsibility. Particularly as guardians and keeps of our stories and cultures”.

These forums are frequently about talking about topics, rather then topics that are part of the community that we are in.

Things to think about for questions:
Roy is right? Is there a right? There are questions?
Why don’t you work with the excellence in the community that you are working with? Rather then outsourcing.

Journal Review

During the end of Panel of Regional Arts Andrew Morrish came into the space while people of the audience were asking questions on Jacob’s discussion. He asked Jacob and the Chair, Annette Carmichael if the whole group would be interested in sharing a Creative Response to Jacob’s points. Annette agreed. After Andrew left Annette asked us (the audience) to move the chairs to the side to start work on the Creative Response Andrew had suggested for the end of day Open Session.

This Creative Response was performed at the Open Session. After the performance of it Jacob quoted what he stated at the Regional Discussion.

“We have 30 independent Indigenous choreographers that have bodies of work. In 2010 Marilyn Miller, who set up the training pathways which has become our peak Indigenous dance body, BlakDance released that we have 100,000 Aboriginal dance groups in this country.

We have 112 Indigenous Festivals; we have 21 Indigenous performing arts producers; and five well-known Indigenous presenters and only one Indigenous dance work being shown in Dance Massive.

We have three panel members out of a possible 33 panellists who identify as Indigenous speaking to you. And one Indigenous curator on the [Forum’s curatorial] pane, as well as no acknowledgement of a 40,000-plus year old lineage of dance history.”
After which Uncle Larry spoke stating that he felt there was lack of Indigenous Representation at the National Dance Forum. He also shared personal stories about the land and his personal life. Monica Steven’s (founding member of Bangarra Dance Theatre) talked next. She stated she had attended sessions like the Forum since the 1980’s and there has been little change on the diversity of the discussions. She also stressed the lack of representations of Indigenous voices at the Forum. An older lady spoke next (non-Indigenous person) stating that she hadn’t worked with Aboriginals until she was in her 40’s. She felt that the experience of working with Aboriginal People was “Life changing, and that you are robbing yourself if you are not listening to these [Aboriginal] People”.

Questions started to flow from other members of the National Dance Forum and it became a little emotional as Indigenous and non-Indigenous People shared their personal stories. Andrew asked if we should move the conversation onto other parts of the Forum’s discussions but all members seemed united in wanting to discuss this topic. Nearer to the end of the Open Session Andrew united as suggesting entering the white space for a group hug.

At the conclusion of the Session Uncle Larry offered a optional Smoking Ceremony, most candidates followed after for Ceremony. It was an amazing day and felt that the discussions stayed open and honest. Learnt a lot!

Integrated Practice

Panel Sessions – Chair (Andrew Morrish)
Speakers: (Philip Channells, Janice Florence, Michelle Ryan, Kate Sulan)

Questions:
- If you have a question, ask!
- Arts Access Australia – Training Resources for people with disability.
- Life is life, people are best at what they do, and you can learn from that.
- Give people in disabilities the chance to challenge themselves and they will adjust it for themselves.

Open Session Group Discussions [Jacob Boehem & Ian RT Colless]

I was asked my Andrew Morrish to interview Jacob Boehem. The focus of our discussion was centralized around the National Dance Forum ‘Wrap Up’ yesterday. I recorded this (*refer to NDF Jacob Boehem Interview).

Open Session Group Discussions [Mel Smith interviewed by Dianna Mel]

“I believe that my talker and chair are part of my body and my movement”.
“The NDF has allowed me to create opportunity” – “I am moving the way I can and that inspires me to be who I am”
Dianna Mel – “Working with Mel has allowed me to find ways to a different vertortist. There is a different sense of time and space when working with mel”.
Mel - “If I give myself the time that I need, I can work with my body more creatively. I focus on the moment of being slow, I can show my movement in that way. & when we did our fringe show we did a 50 minute show and that was amazing for me. There was enough time for her to get in it as it was 50mins.
Dianna – “It takes Mel 5 mins to get out of the chair, so the 50mins allowed her the time and chance to perform as the work is 50mins”.
Mel - “I would rather people would ask her what her disability is before they assume it. Most people think I cant do anything, people get the wrong idea who I really am. She would prefer people to ask me if they are not sure, and that the same as her communication or Penny (the speaking devise)”
Dianna Question “What have you learned about the contemporary dance world at the National Dance Forum”
Mel – “There is a lot out there to learn from in Melbourne and internationally. I have taken in a lot but there is always more to learn.
Dianna Question “What does dance mean to you?”
Mel – “Its made her the person that she is and more mobile, more independent and I love it!”
Group Discussion about the Forum or the Open Session

Journal Review

I attended all Open Session Discussions; the two that stood out for me were Mel Smith’s (dancers with disabilities) and Zaimon Vilmanis (how to maintain legacy).

Mel inspired me a lot, she has such limited movement possibilities in her body but her patience and persistence is not limited at all. It seems as if she works with her disability rather then against it.

“If I give myself the time that I need, I can work with my body more creatively. I focus on the moment of being slow, I can show my movement in that way. & when we did our fringe show we did a 50 minute show and that was amazing for me. There was enough time for her to get in it as it was 50mins” (M. Smith, 2015. Personal Interview).

What struck me was how her sense of time and space is different to many. She uses her time and space as muse to create and choreograph, rather then feeling she needs to fit the time and space of mainstream dance. When I heard her talk she takes you into her time and space, when you listen the duration of her sentences are much longer then abled bodies. I enjoyed listening to her as it helped me develop a more detailed understand to her experience of time and space. She inspired me on many levels and her love and enthusiasm left a imprint on me. I have always had an interest of dancers with disabilities as I feel the dance community has a lot to learn from them. I believe we limit comes innovation. Particularly if you pay attention to what limits one has. However people with disability are very conscious of their personal limits; I am assuming this is a result of being in an abled body world. As dancers or choreographers are frequently pushing the body beyond its limit, a process that many of them do, I feel this is the same with people living with disability.

Zaimon Vilmanis’s Open Session brought up many questions; he opened it up to a group discussion. He would introduce topics and the group would discuss them. One of his questions focused on maintenance of styles and techniques in the future. Suggesting that their are many dance makers that either [1] don’t continue skills/techniques they have acquired from their training/work or [2], dancers may appropriate or replicate a dance phrase or technique without referencing who it comes from. I am glad he brought this up as the US dance sector frequently make reference to a style, phrase or technique a dancer maker might be using in class i.e: “This is a Cunningham Spinal Exercise” or “This is a Horton Lateral T exercise”. This is valuable as these styles and techniques are subjective, yes they have a source and in transfer comes bias, its always useful to know where or whom the information the dancer is getting comes from. Knowing its origin can only assist the style or technique.
This year’s National Dance Forum was an important platform for dance colleagues around the country to come together and participate in an intense few days of exchanging, reconnecting, listening and proposing new directions for the future of our artform. For myself, attending the forum was a much more emotionally charged experience than I had anticipated it to be. This experience has encouraged me to reflect upon the value of two things in particular, critical discourse and empathy, and their roles in dance. I have come to realise that criticality and empathy aren’t necessarily oppositional, as they both involve consideration of situations from different perspectives.

Dance is unique in its attachment to the body, and as dance artists, we are constantly dealing with the reality of our bodies and ourselves in relation to dance. It’s always going to be a deeply subjective relationship we have to dance, and perhaps this is why we need to keep developing ways to think and write critically, in order to gain some distance to the work. And yet because of this closeness between the artform and ourselves, it is also important to be responsive to other people’s experiences and personal attitudes towards dance.

Over the course of the forum, I attended several sessions that produced meaningful follow-up conversations with colleagues. A session on Dance Criticism, Writing and Discourse, with a fantastic panel including Matthew Day, Jana Perkovic, Vicki Van Hout and Jordan Beth Vincent, contained great provocations and observations regarding writing on dance. In reference to Deborah Hay, Matthew spoke about the necessity for artists to represent their own works in writing. Jana encouraged us to ask what forms of writing on dance could be most useful, pointing out the limitations of the conventional review of a single work. She offered plenty of alternative models, for example, articles that compare multiple works by a single artist. Vicki spoke of the potential repercussions that reviews can have on the artists’ relationship to their own community. Jordan discussed the legacy of the written review as contributing to the history of an artist. The session highlighted the extent to which written discourse can affect and inform how we engage with work, both as makers and as spectators. This has encouraged me think about the role that empathy plays in critical discourse, and when it’s appropriate to approach the writing of a work empathetically. It also pointed to the value in challenging conventional modes of writing, by stimulating and supporting a range of written approaches to dance, as well of course developing more avenues for these writings to reach audiences.

The ‘Breakout’ sessions in the afternoons of the forum proved to be an important part of the event, giving space over to participants to discuss relevant topics that may or may not be being addressed in the curated sessions. Choreographer Jacob Boehme initiated a protest that challenged and critiqued dance platforms in Australia for a continued underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their works. The discussion urged us all to consider our responsibilities to our dance community, and to expand beyond the limitations of our personal viewpoints. It was also a powerful reminder that dance does not exist in isolation to political and social contexts and histories. There is a parallel discussion unfolding at the moment in relation to the lack of Indigenous Australian artists representing Australia in our national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. (For more information, see [http://dailyreview.crikey.com.au/the-2015-venice-biennale-and-the-myopia-of-australias-arts-leaders/23465](http://dailyreview.crikey.com.au/the-2015-venice-biennale-and-the-myopia-of-australias-arts-leaders/23465))

In considering the forum’s focus on “transforming the form”, for me the forum has emphasized how essential it is to continue conversations across our dance community, as a means for challenging our habitual viewpoints and listening to one another’s perspectives.
Forum partners Ausdance National and the Australia Council for the Arts presented the third National Dance Forum (NDF 2015) from 19-21 March 2015 at Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne, Victoria

Producers: Kath Papas & Kristy Eyre