

***Perchance to Dream***  
**Dance Ireland's First Conference**  
08-09 December



Comhairle Cathrach  
Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City Council

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# The use of Hesychastic Prayer in Choreography

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A PhD Research Presentation

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# Inspiration

- ▶ **‘Early stages of human evolution possess an intuitive perception of reality, including a clairvoyant perception of spiritual realities. Humanity has progressively evolved an increasing reliance on intellectual faculties and a corresponding loss of intuitive or clairvoyant experiences, which have become atavistic. The increasing intellectualization of consciousness, initially a progressive direction of evolution, has led to an excessive reliance on abstraction and a loss of contact with both natural and spiritual realities. However, to go further requires new capacities that combine the clarity of intellectual thought with the imagination, and beyond this with consciously achieved inspiration and intuitive insights.’ (McDermott: 229)**

**Creativity is a valuable bridge between  
spiritual and material realities.**

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# The Hesychasm

- ▶ From the Greek word ἡσυχασμός, hesychasmos, from ἡσυχία, hesychia, "stillness, rest, quiet, silence"
- ▶ Is a mystical tradition of prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Descriptions can be found in ecclesiastic texts from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century and in a collection of Pateric Texts called 'Filokalia' (18th century). St.Gregory Palamas developed a dogmatic theology around the practice.
- ▶ The term 'Hesychasm' is also used to describe the 'Hesychastic movement' of 14<sup>th</sup> century in Byzantium.

# The prayer of the heart

- Referred as 'Christian Yoga', is a unique form of mysticism with origins to the first Christian monks (Dessert Fathers).
- During this practice the person praying is sitting on their knees, with their eyes at the center of their body, repeating the words: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner" while holding a 'komposkini' (type of rosary), counting the repetitions and moving slightly the upper body in a cyclical way.
- The Hesychast is to bring his mind into his heart so as to practice both the Jesus Prayer and sobriety with his mind in his heart. He has to stay away of all other tempting thoughts.



(Picture of praying monk and  
photo of komposkini)



# Other Practices in Monastic life:

- ▶ Use Solar Time
- ▶ Live in commune
- ▶ Have no belongings
- ▶ Have no communication with the outer world
- ▶ Practice Silence
- ▶ Fast (from specific kinds of food)
- ▶ Eat once or twice per day
- ▶ Sleep twice a day for 3-4 hours each time
- ▶ Pray and take part in the liturgy in the night and during the day



**Restriction and prayer are the key to entering a spiritual world.**

# The practice of Michael Chekhov (1891-1955)

- ▶ Russian-American actor, director and theatre practitioner.
- ▶ Konstantin Stanislavski's student
- ▶ Developed a theatre technique involving meditation which would lead the actor to the realization of their 'Higher Ego' (state of creative inspiration)
- ▶ His technique was based on the Prayer of the Heart.
- ▶ Some of his students: Marilyn Monroe and Clint Eastwood.



# Research

- ▶ Involves researching theories about rituals, and especially religious rituals, and their use in arts.
- ▶ Research about other choreographers and theatre practitioners who are working with rituals and if possible observe their work.
- ▶ Visit a monastery in Greece to observe the practices and take interviews from the monks.
- ▶ Practical part of the research: I would like to work with a group of dancers applying the Hesychastic practices and investigate the influence that they might have on the creation of choreography. Produce a performance as an end product.
- ▶ Interview the dancers and try to make sense their experience.
- ▶ Do a Dance Analysis on the created piece and evaluate.

# Work with the dancers:

- ▶ Preparation for rehearsals (rituals)
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Stillness
- ▶ Repetition of movement
- ▶ Exhaustion
- ▶ Trance

## **Contribution to knowledge**

- ▶ **This experience could be cathartic for the dancers and could even help them to keep their focus, produce original for them material and enter the state of creativity more easily.**
- ▶ **The results of this research could add valuable information about the positive effects of the use of rituals in dance.**
- ▶ **Could constitute a tool for dancers and choreographers.**

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# **Curating the Alternative:** **Perspectives on Cosmopolitan Development** **and the Dance Sector**

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# Envisioning the Future of [Irish] Choreography



*Class at Dance House with Rob Heaslip, HATCH Residency*

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# Vision and Choreography

- ▶ **Institutional / organisational visions**
  - ▶ Funders, festivals, curators, venues, developers, art sector professionals
- ▶ **Choreographic visions**
  - ▶ Artistic directors, independent and non-independent makers / choreographers
- ▶ **Artistic visions**
  - ▶ Dancers, sound artists, collaborators

# The Questions

- ▶ **How do institutions both constrain and facilitate artists' productivity and creative potential?**
- ▶ **How can institutions and artists best facilitate a thriving creative sector of high national and international quality?**

# Project- vs. Revenue-Funded Work

- ▶ **PROBLEM**: choreographers and dancers alike working on a mostly project-funded basis → employment precarity
  - ▶ Creative freedom vs. infrastructural support
  - ▶ Funding disparities
  - ▶ Self-management pressure and the multi-tasking maker
  - ▶ Impaired visibility in the sector for independent artists and small-scale choreographers
- ▶ **IDEAL**: institutions focus on filling the gap between the project- and revenue-funded sectors (i.e. Space to Create, Fringe Lab, etc.)

# Making Audiences for Dance

- ▶ **PROBLEM**: absence of an established dance audience in Ireland
  - ▶ Tensions between establishing national and international visibility
  - ▶ Lack of homegrown channels for “exporting” Irish work
  - ▶ Historic lack of permanent and revenue-funded Irish institutions to cultivate talent
  - ▶ Relative youth of dance sector in particular
- ▶ **IDEAL**: funding bodies and institutions invest in work that resonates on both national and international scales and create channels for working abroad (i.e. new BA program, existing funding channels, etc.)

# Infrastructure vs. Social Networks

- ▶ **PROBLEM**: infrastructure often precedes networks
  - ▶ Lack of knowledge about the resources available
  - ▶ Very active social community but untapped networking/collaborative potential
  - ▶ Issues of access and the economy of space
- ▶ **IDEAL**: more investment in filling infrastructure with points of contact with makers/choreographers, artists making more use of existing channels (i.e. Elevenses at Fringe Lab, social media and online networking, etc.)

# Pushing the Fringe...

- ▶ **Ultimately working toward providing enough support for makers and artists that they can begin to think beyond budgets, spreadsheets, logistics, etc. and focus more on the process of making new material**
- ▶ **Ideally creating audiences, venues and social networks in which to facilitate innovative Irish choreography and dance at national and international scales**

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