

Perchance to Dream



Dance Ireland Conference
A Space to Envision our Collective Future
08-09 December 2016

FOCUS GROUP ONE – AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Facilitated by Fearghus Ó Conchúir and Una Carmody

The first Focus Group of Dance Ireland's *Perchance to Dream* conference, entitled Audience Engagement, and moderated by Fearghus Ó Conchúir and Una Carmody, explored how to promote public attendance and participation in the dance sector. The session was attended by a diverse crowd of dancers, choreographers, funders, program organisers, and other interested members of the dance community – each with different investments in how to attract and maintain regular attendance in various performance contexts. The session focused on identifying successful approaches, what needs exist in the sector, and how they might be addressed by dance artists and their collaborators.

In order to ground the discussion, Una, Audience Advisor for the Arts Council, started by providing an in depth overview of the current state of audience participation. Her overview was based largely on statistics gathered in the 2015/16 annual TGI Report, in which 2.5 thousand people were surveyed about their arts sector attendance. The report offered insight into genre attendance, age-related attendance, and overall motivations for participation in arts sector events. Included below are some points of the key points Una raised for the group's consideration:

- * The survey breaks dance down into three genres: ballet, contemporary, and traditional/folk dance. Of those surveyed, 10% have been to something, 5% to ballet, and 5% to contemporary.
- * People overall infrequently attend dance in particular.
- * Dance has the single largest female bias in attendance of any art form (49% female, 48% male).
- * In dance attendance, there is a slight bias toward older people age 44+, and there are more frequent attendees than in other arts.
- * Contemporary dance has the single highest profile of young people aged 15-24 in the arts sector.
- * Around ages 34-44 there is a drop off in arts attendance, though audience members often return later.
- * Younger people report much lower levels of satisfaction with arts information, likely because they get their information online. There is an online informational and promotional deficit that needs to be addressed.
- * The number of people in Ireland who only go to one type of arts performance is minute. A lot of people attend dance, cinema, theatre and music, though there is a correlation between people who attend dance and who attend jazz. Theatre is the most attended of the art forms (more than a million people go at least once a year), and the number of people who attend exclusively dance is extremely small.

- * People are not particularly concerned with how art pieces/performances are delivered (e.g. gallery, theatre space, etc.).
- * Overall, dance seems to be in a bit of a closed loop when it comes to attendees. There are few genre converts and people remain hesitant to take risks when it comes to seeing new material.
- * It is also clear from the data that people attend dance performances more for the social experience than for the content. Many even described the intervals, and the opportunity to socialise with friends at a dance event, as the highlight of seeing a show.
- * The fourth highest attendance barrier for people was 'no one to go with'. People also felt intimidated by social pressures to recommend good work.
- * From a marketing standpoint, this could be at least in part because a lot of dance advertising describes rather than characterises the work. Advertising that focuses on characterising the kind of experience people will have – rather than simply describing the show and its production – tends to be more successful (e.g. To tell people a show is profound, funny, etc. generally accomplishes more than to tell them 'this is show x, choreographed by x, which won x award,' etc.).
- * In relation to online media, and attendees' interaction with promotional material, people prefer platforms that make use of video footage and other multimedia resources. People also overwhelmingly access websites on their phone rather than a computer, so creating promotional material that is compatible with that format is essential.
- * Social media – Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram – are key. Creating strong visual content can be a really powerful platform for reaching audiences.

Una's very helpful data review was followed by some brief group discussion, during which time Una was asked for clarification and to elaborate on certain aspects of the report. The session then broke into two smaller groups in order to facilitate smaller-scale discussion. Participants shared their challenges and successes in relation to audience engagement and the promotion of work, and then collated productive ideas to share with the larger group. The following is a list of the challenges most frequently raised amongst focus group participants, as well as some solutions they hoped dance artists and their collaborators might be aware of:

Challenge:

Attendees do not always feel shows provide a social space they recognise, feel a part of, or can enjoy the experience of being in. This is often because of a disconnect between the art itself and potential interested audiences, old and new.

Solutions:

- * One participant shared her successes working in community outreach programs and described how getting community members involved in the actual production of dance pieces can be an excellent way of creating audiences. Their families and friends will often attend shows they might not otherwise see if they know someone in the production. For audience members who might otherwise feel intimidated by the language of dance, creating that social connection with the work can be a very effective point of contact between new audiences and new material.
- * Another participant discussed how crucial she felt it was to meet your audience where they are, especially with promotional material and the social media channels you invest in. To understand where your audience exists, online and geographically, is essential.

- * Another participant described how much influence the venue can have in whether an audience feels engaged. To pursue spaces that facilitate the kind of participation you want for your attendees is often the first step in creating the kind of social experience they are after.

Challenge:

The small-scale and/or independent artist is often saddled with the multiple tasks of creating, promoting, and executing their work. However, many artists feel drained enough by this process that the quality of their work is affected. Many also describe feeling overwhelmed by the constantly evolving skills one has to acquire to effectively self-promote in a digital media world.

Solutions:

- * Several group members agreed that any events, resources, or networks that can facilitate skills sharing are always helpful. Several artists described how successful collaboration across art forms and/or skill types can mean both that more artists and/or professionals are involved in the execution of a piece of work, but also that each collaborator can focus on the work they do best. For many, the main barrier to achieving this was simply knowing who to look for, and where. All agreed that events like this conference are essential starting points for building those networks, contacts, and potential collaborative relationships.
- * Many participants also described how useful it would be to have some kind of shared personnel, ideally with marketing expertise, available to consult regarding effective promotion strategies.
- * Many hoped to find a way to facilitate ongoing workshops in skills development, especially in how dancers, choreographers, and makers can establish and maintain an effective presence online. Other important skills frequently highlighted were copywriting and general advertisement.

Challenge:

Establishing an enthusiastic dance audience long-term will require providing high quality dance education in Ireland, especially for young people. Yet there remain significant gaps in youth dance education that won't likely be filled immediately or without significant institutional investment.

Solutions:

- * Participants agreed that in the meantime, community engagement projects and events – programs, festivals, and workshops – continue to be a successful way of getting young people involved in the dance sector. One participant also highlighted how having experiences with high quality community dance from a young age often means that even if those young people do not continue on to dance professionally, they have an understanding of dance that translates well to lifelong appreciation.
- * All agreed the establishment of the BA program at University of Limerick is an absolutely vital step, as it provides a high quality venue and program to attract and maintain dance talent in Ireland.

Challenge:

Several people noted that robust dance criticism still doesn't exist in Ireland. As one participant pointed out, this has a huge impact on the audience's relationship with dance, as it creates a vacuum in critical thought and conversation about quality.

Solutions:

- * Dance critics have been commissioned to do work before, and several participants agreed that this would be a productive consistent investment.
- * One participant suggested that future commissions be geared toward a younger generation of dance critics and commentators in order lay the groundwork for a long-term art criticism presence in the dance sector.
- * All agreed that this role need not be taken up strictly by academic writers, but would be equally well suited to those with a good critical knowledge of dance and an acumen for communicating that to a broader audience.

Challenge:

There is currently no single dance space that serves as a well-recognised public venue in which to see dance productions – the way the Gate or the Abbey function for theatre. Audiences therefore have a more fragmented series of venues available in which they might expect to encounter dance.

Solutions:

- * Even just a dedicated black box space for the dance sector, available for relatively low cost, would improve the situation.
- * Several participants also highlighted how useful it would be to have personnel to help them liaise with venues in order to optimise promotion pre-show and create the best possible performance experience for audience members.
- * Venues are themselves institutions, as one participant said, and audience members interacting consistently with one or several dance institutions could help solidify a group of more dedicated dance followers.

Challenge:

Not all roles can be filled by organisations. It's also about finding connections with collaborators in the sector. Yet many participants in the group also felt there weren't sufficient networks in place through which to contact and collaborate with other members of the sector.

Solutions:

- * All felt that events like *Perchance to Dream* are key to fostering those kinds of opportunities, and all were enthusiastic about participating in any kind of future workshops, training sessions, or other opportunities that might exist in institutions like Dance Ireland. It was agreed that having opportunities to interact not just with other dance artists, but with marketing specialists, funders, venue organisers, etc. would be ideal.
- * One participant suggested that artists also make use of media connections with universities in Ireland. Students are often available to do much of the media work that might aid in increasing promotion and audience engagement.
- * The single most emphasised aspect of the workshop was perhaps the need for a central marketing resource, available to artists either on an ad hoc or routine basis, for the purposes of consultation. Most group members felt daunted by the task of mastering the many facets of media, promotion, advertisement, marketing, etc. and felt they would benefit greatly from having some guidance.

This document was written by and prepared for Dance Ireland by Natalie Morningstar, PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, and visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology at Trinity College Dublin, based upon her participation in and observation of the focus group on the day.

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