

Perchance to Dream



Dance Ireland Conference
A Space to Envision our Collective Future

08-09 December 2016

FOCUS GROUP THREE – YOUTH DANCE AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Facilitated by Sheila Creevey

Dance Ireland's third focus group held during the *Perchance to Dream* conference, Youth Dance as Infrastructure, was led by Sheila Creevey and focused on how to fill the gap in youth dance education in Ireland. Sheila structured the session around a series of topical group discussions, with the end goal of articulating a group plan (composed of three steps) regarding how to move forward. We began with some brief freeform discussion in which a few key themes started to emerge:

- * Establishing infrastructure is a slow process that often involves beginning and beginning again.
- * There is a need to establish pathways to professional dance careers for youth in Ireland.
- * Red tape is particularly at issue when working with young people and can limit what options might be available.
- * It is a constant challenge for makers who are also youth dance facilitators to find and maintain the energy required to sustain their own creative work.
- * Youth dance is essential for the engagement, motivation, and well-being of young people in general, but there is also a critical contingent of young talent who are interested in pursuing careers. The challenge is to get them to commit and take on the journey of getting there.

Following these initial reflections, we briefly discussed how each participant in the session is involved in the youth dance sector in order to ground our discussion in some basic knowledge of the youth dance landscape. Sheila then offered some reflections on the nature of infrastructure by way of introducing our first themed discussion. She described how infrastructure often precedes networks, and how there is a large untapped collaborative potential in Ireland. Sheila then posed the following question as a lead in to our group discussion:

If we could build an infrastructure, where do we start?

The group offered the following possible solutions:

- * It is essential to start by asking questions about how the various organisations, institutions, and groups function in the sector and with what goals.
- * It could be helpful to base the Irish model on another successful project model abroad – perhaps the UK's project model, given that they have been so successful in integrating youth dance into mainstream education from a young age.
- * There was overall agreement, however, that Ireland still lacks central government funding for dance, which is often the reason networks fall apart and infrastructure remains insufficient. It appears crucial, then, to lobby for central governmental support and awareness of this issue. Most participants agreed that the Arts Council was a natural first point of contact.

- * Revenue-funded companies have a difficult time getting funding for youth dance because of funding classification parameters, and many other funding pots are small one-off awards. Participants thus highlighted the need for funding structures to facilitate the creation and maintenance of the necessary infrastructure across different types of dance organisations.

With these basic first steps in mind, the conversation turned to what skills each participant might bring to the process. Our next group discussion thus sought to answer the following question:

What do we have in terms of resources, and what we can share?

- * Revenue-funded companies have space and administrative resources, infrastructure of their own, dancers, etc.
- * Other youth dance groups have access to teachers, networks, choreographic and technical experience, etc.
- * Social workers have expertise in dealing with risk assessments and red tape, as well as the know-how to work across agencies.
- * All participants have access to digital and social media tools.
- * All have social and professional networks they can mutually share.

The group recognised, however, that despite years of investment in the youth dance sector, a sustainable infrastructure remains fleeting. At this point, then, the discussion turned to why. We sought to answer the following question:

What are the barriers to sharing in the above ways?

- * The single greatest limiting factor is time and capacity, as well as money. A lot of people are multi-tasking and doing 'free' work they don't have time to do.
- * Social networks maybe haven't been sufficiently tapped, especially outside routine circles.
- * Red tape remains an issue. It is still very difficult to get programs into schools and to bring collaborators in on an education program.
- * Often what is needed is not so much infrastructural change as policy change to facilitate infrastructural change, as in the case of school programs.
- * The youth dance network could overall be enlivened and expanded to optimise the efficacy of social and professional collaboration.

At this point in the session, Sheila offered some summarising words. She highlighted how there was general agreement that we need an infrastructure but that we have yet to really successfully connect across networks. She also highlighted how there is a cyclical relationship between networks and infrastructure, so that without the infrastructure any networks are unlikely to succeed long term and vice versa. The general consensus, then, seemed to be that it is essential to gain central governmental support for the establishment and maintenance of the infrastructural resources necessary to sustain youth dance. Sheila's final question asked, quite concretely:

What are the next three steps we might need to accomplish in order to create a youth dance infrastructure?

THREE STEPS FORWARD:

Create an advocacy group – Ideally this advocacy group would contain representatives from several backgrounds: from a venue, a professional-practice company, a youth company, an independent arts context, and a supporting institution or organisation.

Identify key message – The key message the group agreed would be the focus was the establishment of distinct, practical pathways to the profession for young people, especially given the absence of dance education/training.

Approach Arts Council – The final step would be to approach a central government body, i.e. the Arts Council, with a feasibility report, study, or proposal advocating for the group's plan of action.

Sheila stressed, however, that the real work is sustaining an infrastructure once it is created. After approaching the Arts Council, and supposing the proposal is successful, it will then be necessary to really tap networks to keep the infrastructure alive. Communicating is key, especially if the infrastructure is going to sustain changing leadership and roles over time, as always naturally occurs. And more likely than not, this will be an ongoing advocacy project, and one that members of the advocacy group would have to be willing to commit a reasonable amount of time and energy to in order for it to be efficacious.

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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