

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP 2002/2

- **TO STUDY SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR DEVELOPING CHOREOGRAPHERS IN MONTPELLIER**
- **TO OBSERVE CURRENT TEACHING PRACTICES AND CHOREOGRAPHIC TRENDS AT THE DANCE FESTIVALS IN VIENNA AND BERLIN**

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1. PRECIS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report reviews the 2002/3 Fellowship visit to Europe investigating aspects of contemporary dance support and encouragement. Specific areas studied included

- choreographic centres
- festival administration, organisation and support of local artists
- workshops and performances offered as part of dance festivals in Vienna and Berlin.

My visit to Europe and the invaluable experiences I gained would not have been possible without

- the financial assistance of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust
- the generosity and welcome of the people I visited and their willingness to assist in any way possible
- my family Imogen and Michael for their support and encouragement in accompanying me through the whole experience.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Fellowship Objective

To learn about the existing support structures available to developing choreographers through the Montpellier choreographic centre, France and to undertake professional development by attending performances and workshops in the Vienna and Berlin summer dance festivals.

Fellowship Highlights

- Montpellier Choreographic Centre- a haven of support for artistic endeavour. Meetings with Jean-marc Urrea, director of research and residencies at the centre.
- Royaumont Abbey- meeting with Susan Buirge to discuss the dance programs and subsequent tour of the Abbey.
- Impulstanz-Vienna- workshops to gain insight into the processes of Anna Theresa de Keersmaker, Wim Vandekeybus and Benoit laChambre. Contacts made with Gavin Webber and Wendy Huston artists interested to participate in skills exchange in Australia. Performances by Emio Greco, La Ribot and Alain Buffard, Wendy Huston and Elio Gervasi and company.
- Internationales Tanzfest-Berlin- workshops with Dennis O'Connor and Thomas Lehman. Performances by La La La Human Steps, Jon Jasperse, Andrei Lepecki, Michel Laub and company, Anna Theresa de Keersmaker, Wim Vandekeybus and Jonathon Burrows.

Findings

- Dance is generally better supported and held in higher regard in Europe than in Australia.
- Choreographic development requires a long-term commitment of work space, an environment of artistic respect and ongoing financial and artistic support
- The essence of work produced by independent Australian choreographers has the potential to be competitive and interesting to an international market. With a few notable exceptions it rarely has the support required to compete in such a market.
- The technique-based training available for dancers in Australia is exceptional
- The development of outstanding artists must be supported if they are ever to reach their full potential. This is true for emerging, mid-career and mature dance artists.

3. PROGRAM

Montpellier June 1 – 13

- National Choreographic Centre (Jean-Marc Urrea)
- Montpellier Dance Festival

Avignon June 14-18

- Avignon Dance Festival (OFF Festival)

Paris June 19-24

- Abbey de Royaumont (Susan Buirge)

Vienna June 25- August 11

- Impulstanz (Vienna International Dance Festival)
- Repertoire Workshops - Anna Theresa de Keersmaker (ROSAS-Brussels)
and Wim Vandekeybus (ULTIMA VEZ-Brussels)
- Composition Workshop- Benoit la Chambre (Par b.l.eux- Montreal)

Berlin Aug 14-30

- Internationales Tanzfest Berlin
- Technique Classes –Dennis O’Connor (New York)
- Composition Workshop- Thomas Lehmen (Berlin)

4. INTRODUCTION

Background

In early 2001 the Australia Council, in association with Ausdance and the state funding agencies, conducted a National Dance Summit. Following nation-wide discussions with key industry representatives it was recognised that the dance industry was in a 'precarious and vulnerable position'. The lack of an ongoing structure for the development of contemporary dance and dance artists emerged as an area of major concern. Essentially increased competition for limited funds has resulted in:

- the diminution of small (full-time) companies
- fewer opportunities for the development of independent artists
- lack of touring opportunities
- inadequate targeted audience development strategies
- lack of work longevity
- less engagement with technology than expected.¹

In 2002, pending the findings of another national research initiative conducted by Positive Solutions, the Australia Council's Dance Board placed all agencies receiving Triennial funding on hold. Although described as a temporary measure this action has created an environment of insecurity and instability, as it now requires all companies to reapply for funding on a yearly basis. It must be said that the Dance Board has made every effort to try to sustain these agencies through this difficult period but there is simply not enough money to adequately support all sectors of the dance community.

In response to this uncertain climate of support, a number of the key independent Perth dance artists joined forces to form a new organisation, STRUT. Their idea was to increase negotiating power, share resources, bulk- buy venues, personnel, publicity and to provide a mutual support mechanism for the development of contemporary dance and dance artists. To date this venture has been supported both by the state and federal funding agencies. Following their lead a similar organisation has just been given seed funding in New South Wales and Victoria.

The independent dance artists in Perth have become pro-active for two reasons:

- they face the same difficulties as other dance artists around the country
- the situation is compounded by their relative geographic distance from the east coast.

Consequently the struggle for Western Australian work to be nationally recognised and supported is exacerbated. It is difficult to gain a sense of personal perspective and national context when one cannot view the work of peers on an ongoing and regular basis. The great distance and expense to travel to Perth often means that international artists only visit Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide, even further reducing the Perth artists' opportunity to consider their own practice within a global dance context.

¹ (Australian Dance Summits 2001, p5)

I work in several areas of the Perth dance community, I am a sessional lecturer at the West Australian Academy for the Performing Arts (Edith Cowan University), a practising independent artist and currently Program Manager for STRUT. It is from this perspective that I undertook my Churchill Fellowship.

I travelled to the Montpellier Choreographic Centre to research one example of the kinds of development and support structures available for dance artists and then continued on to performances and workshops in the Avignon, Vienna and Berlin summer dance festivals.

My intention was twofold:

- to gather ideas about how we might improve our situation in Western Australia. How we may be able to create more opportunities for employment of graduates, for development of emerging artists and support for senior artists. To this end I initiated a 'first contact' with various choreographers and program directors to ascertain both their interest and the possibility of some kind of skills exchange with WA dance artists.
- to take time for some personal professional development in the form of workshops and attendance of performances. I intend to integrate this new information into my own work and teaching practices, with a view to making sure that the information I can offer is relevant, current and challenging for both my peers and the students with whom I work.

5. CHOREOGRAPHIC CENTRES

5.1.1 Centre Choreographique Nationale de Montpellier

Housed in the beautifully redesigned interior of Les Ursulines convent, the Montpellier choreographic centre is one of six or seven national institutions dedicated to the development and ongoing support of contemporary dance in France. Most of these centres house a 'resident' dance company and in addition to this run a variety of programs presenting opportunities for other dance artists to be involved or supported by the centre. The programs and types of support offered differ from centre to centre.

In Montpellier, the support for the resident company is significant. They have a secure base in which to develop and rehearse work and the appropriate administrative and production staff to produce and subsequently tour the works. The difference between this situation and similar ones in Australia is that in France, the existing resource, the building, the staff and the director's philosophy if you like, are reutilised to offer programs of support for both independent and young emerging artists. These programs are outside of the company's activities and once in place, are managed almost independently by the choreographic centre. In Montpellier it is policy that the studios are always in use. Available studios are offered free of charge to the many individuals and small groups who work in and around Montpellier. This breadth of

support is coupled with an awareness of the importance of education and audience development. The activities occurring within the centre are inclusive of and open to the general public. The centre also has a sizeable video library documenting the results of projects occurring within the centre and also a range of fully produced and significant works of well-known French and European choreographers. They also publish a monthly broadsheet that documents the current activities of the centre.

Montpellier offers three yearly programs of support outside the activities of the resident company. Although the company's director, Mathilde Monnier has had significant input into the content of these programs, she does not want her own aesthetic to dominate or limit the direction of the individual proposals. All research proposals and applications for residencies are thus assessed by an independent committee. The programs offered are:

- **ex.e.r.ce** pour experience, école, recherche, exercise

This program has been running for 7 years. Its purpose is to provide dance graduates with a significant professional training experience within a semi-sheltered environment. The program also provides both work and development opportunities for independent choreographers. In 2003, sixteen young emerging artists from 10 countries will work with seven practising professional artists. The young artists send a curriculum vitae, photo and then audition in order to be accepted into the program. The program runs for six months during which time each of the choreographers create a work for the dancers and then the entire program of works will be performed. The centre has a budget of 76,000 Euro to deliver this program.

- **residences d'écriture et de recherche chorégraphique**

In the 2002/3 season this program will support six residencies of four weeks each. It appears that the notion of the residency is generally research driven, allowing the choreographer to take time to explore and develop an idea without having to take the work directly into production. Projects are selected by a committee drawn from members inside and outside the centre and are simply chosen on the basis of what they propose. The yearly budget for this program is 91,000 Euro.

Interestingly I discovered that small (project-based) companies would manage to produce their works by gaining support from several such programs offered by a number of choreographic centres. The artists travel from centre to centre for each further development phase of the work. Some of these works are also co-produced by one or two local (French) festivals, ensuring performance seasons and some initial touring. This is not true for all individuals participating in the residency program, as it is a highly competitive field. Co-production of works, that is gaining support from a number of venues and funding sources seems a common and successful venture.

- **hors series**

This is a series of regular showings of work at the choreographic centre. They may be attached to the ex.e.r.ce or research programs or they may be an outside individual or group who wants to open up a process for public debate or feed back. The idea is to

make the centre a part of the fabric of life in Montpellier, allowing the town's inhabitants to have some sense of ownership and ongoing involvement with the centre. The budget for the 2002/3 series is 38,200 Euro.

The budgets for these programs do not include the running or maintenance of the choreographic centre nor that of Mathilde Monnier's dance company. To make a brief comparison; Australia has one choreographic centre, it is situated in Canberra and the organisation receives federal funding of Aus \$160,000 to deliver its yearly program. Whilst this is a superficial comparison it gives some idea of the difference in scale of support available in the two countries. The provision of some opportunity for a choreographer to develop and hone their skills is paramount for the individual practice. In order to step forward on a national scale, to produce more than one or two 'successful' independent choreographers, it is important for these opportunities to be consistent and there needs to be a commitment to ongoing research and longevity of practice. **Like almost any human endeavour, the skills required improve with regular practice.**

I met twice with the Jean-Marc Urrea (director of research) to discuss in a broad sense what the centre had to offer and more specifically, to try to ascertain what kind of project STRUT could propose to make a link with the centre and subsequently some of the choreographers employed by the Montpellier centre. As STRUT is a relatively new organisation it was clear that whatever was proposed would have to be small scale and in the first instance involved with skills development and research. He was happy for the MCC to be a point of first contact, so that once a project was devised we could disseminate information via the choreographic centre to find choreographers who may be appropriate and interested to participate. I discovered that personal contact was very important in terms of establishing a basic sense of trust and respect, otherwise to quote Susan Buirge whom I later met in Paris, "it is like throwing stones into the ocean". I spent many hours watching videos of emerging and established French choreographers to try to get a sense of what kind of project might be possible and who's work would be both appropriate and challenging for the Perth independent dance community and its audience.

5.1.2 Abbey de Royaumont

The visit to this institution was outside of my original program but occurred because strikes by most of the French performance industry meant that I had some spare time and thus an opportunity to look further into the support available for dancers and choreographers. Once again I discovered an idyllic retreat, this time for dance-makers and musicians. The Abbey was built in the 13th Century and is situated by a lake, in natural bushland, 35 kilometres north of Paris. It is relatively isolated, a tranquil place for contemplation, experimentation and uninterrupted work.

The Abbey is not a national choreographic centre rather it is one step down the ladder of support and thus recognition, it is termed (loosely translated) a 'cultural meeting place'. In this instance it allows the coming together of musicians and dancers/choreographers. The Abbey offers a small dance program that is delivered by Susan Buirge, with the help of two administrators. Susan Buirge's part-time dance company and research group is based in Paris, but is supported by the Abbey to

produce new choreographic works. Her dancers also help deliver parts of the teaching and composition programs at the Abbey.

The Abbey has a range of events and three established yearly programs.

Research

- A research group, renewed every two years, explores the theoretic base and experimental practice of a given question relating to choreographic construction. The results of the research are presented to the public.
- Seminars on current issues facing contemporary dance are held regularly
- An interdisciplinary laboratory, *The Grand Atelier*, allows choreographers to explore new forms with artists from other fields, particularly music and literature.

Training Program

- The Improvisation Workshop: a five- day course with Susan Buirge. In 2004, open to dance teachers from a particular region and working with a musician specialising in improvisation.
- The Composition Workshop: a two- week international workshop for 12 experienced dancers and choreographers, led by Susan Buirge.
- The Repertory Workshop: a two-week workshop for 12 experienced dancers to reconstruct and learn the principles of the work of various choreographers. In 2003, the focus is on work by Trisha Brown (USA) and taught by Shelley Senter, long-time dancer with the Trisha Brown Company.

Creation of New Works

The support for the realisation of new works includes

- The permanent residency of the company of Susan Buirge
- Residencies for reflexion, for choreographers
- The biennial programming of dance in the Musical Season of Royaumont

I spoke at length with Susan Buirge, about the content of the programs and the mechanisms of support that sustain them. She was quite keen to establish some kind of exchange with STRUT and suggested that a young WA dance artist apply to participate in their Composition Workshop. This would be the first step in trying to initiate a more substantial exchange.

6. FESTIVALS (WORKSHOPS/PERFORMANCES)

6.1.1 Montpellier/Avignon

I arrived in Montpellier to discover that the Dance Festival had been cancelled, only the day before my arrival in France. Amidst a situation of cultural and political turmoil, the Avignon festival was cancelled some ten days later as were almost all performance activities throughout the country. Strikes by the “intermettents” of the performance industry regarding their ongoing level of government subsidy forced the festivals to cancel performances as the strikes involved performing artists, stage support crew and many of the visiting companies also declined to perform in support of the industrial action taken by the French. Interestingly whilst the Montpellier

festival was cancelled, it continued to acknowledge support of the artists in their actions.

“Intermettent” is a name for all part-time workers in the arts industries. Artists must work a certain number of hours per year to qualify for this status and they can then receive a kind of cultural stipend that is intended to sustain them through periods of non-employment. This makes possible a regime of research and continuance of work practices, rather than becoming a part-time artist, part-time labourer (waitress, sales assistant, gardener etc.) in order to survive. In terms of recognition of the validity of artists’ work and existence, this support payment is extremely significant. Such a system does not exist in Australia, Britain or the United States. If you are a part-time artist it is ‘de rigueur’ that you have at least one other part-time job.

The situation highlighted for me some very important differences in the cultural politics of France and Australia. This is extremely significant in terms of the kinds of support and recognition available to the Arts and how we might proceed to develop a sense of national commitment to and respect for those people who strive to contribute to the artistic and cultural fabric of our society.

6.1.2 Vienna

Impulstanz is a month-long international festival of dance workshops and performances. I spent two weeks in Vienna attending three, week –long workshops and numerous performances and dance films. The workshops I attended were focussed on several different approaches to choreographic construction:

- One of the many mathematical structures used by Anna Theresa de Keersmaker (ROSAS) to create and manipulate movement and to determine spatial design. This workshop was taught by ex-company member Mark Lorimer (Eng)
- A repertoire session-learning a section of work by Wim Vandekeybus (ULTIMA VEZ). His work is dance –theatre, highly physical and has a strong and demanding regime of floor-based movements. Guest artist and company member Gavin Webber taught this workshop. (Aus)
- An internal, exploratory/improvisation based process used by Benoit laChambre (Par b.l.eux) to create a personalised and individual movement score. Applicable to any form of movement practice or discipline.

The dance films I saw were from Austria, Estonia, Britain and Japan. The performances included artists from Austria, Italy, France, United States, Czech Republic and England. The workshops were both illuminating and challenging on several levels whilst the different performances provided a breadth of artistic endeavour from pure dance, to dance and technology, to dance theatre. What was overwhelmingly clear was the level of support and commitment required to produce and present these works at an International Festival. The attitude is however, not of ‘make or break’ but simply that this is the next work of a particular artist. It may be criticised or revered but appreciated nonetheless. This was for me, quite a startling difference to what is often experienced by artists in Australia.

6.1.3 Berlin

The Internationales Tanzfest in Berlin is perhaps a smaller and more newly established event than that of Vienna but it nevertheless presented a very interesting

program. Here I also spent two weeks attending workshops and performances. The workshops had yet again a different focus:

- A technique class centred on internal awareness and breathing as a source for all movement. The ideas for these classes taught by Dennis O'Connor (New York) were drawn from Chinese medicine, Taoist philosophy, Yoga practice and a significant history of dancing. In many senses this work is applicable to all levels of experience, from students to professional dancers.
- A composition workshop based on a methodology of communication. Looking at one specific structure that allows a group of performers to transmit information to the audience via structured improvisation. This particular methodology was developed and taught by Thomas Lehman, a Berlin-based choreographer.

In Berlin I saw performances presented by artists from Spain, Germany, Canada, Belgium, New York, Rio de Janeiro and Great Britain. A number of smaller locally based project performances were also shown during the festival. Although they were not officially programmed they made good use of the daily news broadsheets to advertise their performances. Particularly impressive was the level of informed critical debate surrounding the performances. This was perhaps influenced by the inclusion of a number of performance/lectures and a workshop led by New York academic, Andre Lepecki.

6.1.4 Perth

The information that I have gathered from attending the workshops and watching performances is in a sense personal and specific to my particular artistic and creative interests. It is perhaps not relevant to describe these insights or inspirations but more important to state that following my return to Perth I am in the process of sifting through this wealth of information and where appropriate allowing it to infuse my various teaching and choreographic practices.

My experiences overseas has reinforced my belief of the enormous potential of the dancers and choreographers in this country and also reminded me of the uniqueness of what we have to offer culturally, emotionally and philosophically. My position with STRUT will allow me to continue to develop professional relationships and discussions with various contacts I have made and to follow up on the opportunities suggested for some of the emerging dance artists of WA. This will be the first step in trying to initiate an international exchange.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Choreographic development, like any artistic pursuit requires intense personal commitment and dedication. It also involves a high degree of discipline, persistence, fortitude of spirit, an enquiring mind and a robust and reasonably responsive body. Encouragement, informed criticism and debate help to question, shape and refine a choreographer's ongoing process and progress. Without financial support this process and the very notion of an ongoing development of practice, is stunted. Artistically, this has repercussions at all levels from community-based work, to local productions, to the few works that we proudly export overseas.

In the early 1980's the French government committed significant sums of money to create opportunities for greater development and support for French dancers and choreographers. They built theatres in the regions and outer suburbs of Paris, thus creating homes for struggling companies and a support network for a number of independent artists. This decentralisation meant that dance was very accessible to the average person living either in Paris, its environs or a more remote regional centre. This facilitated a larger and healthier touring circuit and subsequently facilitated residencies with international artists in the various regional centres. This not only sustained the practice of the visiting artists (eg. Trisha Brown Company, USA) it also introduced the possibility for more skills exchange to occur on both a professional and a community level. This has had an enormous impact on the kind of work now produced in France and the ongoing international success of French dance artists and companies.

The situation in Australia is vastly different from that in Europe. The population is smaller, spread much further apart and has a completely different cultural heritage and thus sensibility. I have already stated that a national review is in process to try to address the difficulties currently faced by all sectors of the dance community. In these circumstances it would be naive to suggest there is any one simple solution. It is possible that the entire structure and nature of the funding processes will be modified.

In response to this situation I would however like to cite particular examples where an individual of significant political or cultural influence has made a moral, philosophical and financial commitment to the arts in Australia. This type of individual vision combined with political will has made a visible, quantifiable difference;

- Don Dunstan's unwavering support for the arts and the Adelaide International Arts Festival
- Jeff Kennett offering of "a million dollars" for a new Victorian contemporary dance company resulted in the establishment of Chunky Move- now nationally and internationally acclaimed
- Robyn Archer's 2003 Melbourne Festival program includes and supports a large local dance platform creating incentive, opportunity and profile for some of the best of Australia's independent dance artists.

Taking a lead from the French, several strategies could be implemented to make a difference:

- Established dance companies could be given more incentive to offer support to local choreographers in programs outside their normal operations. They would obviously require more funds to do this.
- A co-ordinated program of development could also be established through the tertiary institutions. A greater public recognition of the work produced there would facilitate this.
- Venues could be subsidised to 'buy' the dance work rather than the artist using grant money to pay to hire the theatre. More long-term partnerships could be forged between the artists and the presenters.
- All established and subsidised dance spaces should be constantly in use, not lying empty while the resident company is on tour or while the University is on summer holidays.
- Festival directors could be encouraged create a platform, presenting the work within an appropriate context.
- The general community could be encouraged to take pride in supporting local artists in the same way they support sports men and women. A strategic initiative for promotion and publicity would help support this kind of dance advocacy.
- Some kind of additional support is also required to facilitate touring. Subsidised airfares and freight costs would alleviate some of the difficulties of traversing the vast distances of this country.

Any of these relatively small changes require greater financial support than is currently available. Choreographic development in Australia proceeds unsteadily in an environment of economic rationalism within structures that are often necessarily short term and outcome driven. Intense competition for limited funds means that very few (one or two) independent choreographers can be supported on a consistent basis. Australian tertiary training institutions produce a wealth of talent in terms of young dancers and developing choreographers. The professional dance industry is not sufficiently resourced to take full advantage of this emerging talent. As a result many young dancer/choreographers become disillusioned, give up or leave the country. To make a significant difference to this situation the leaders of our federal and state governments must recognise in financial terms the importance and relevance of the arts to the general cultural and social fabric of the Australian community.

On a smaller scale it would seem that STRUT and organisations which follow this model should continue to use their strength of numbers to increase their negotiating power and to fully utilise their available resources of administration, publicity and infrastructure support. Projects that forge links nationally and internationally will help to increase recognition for the achievements of Australian artists and strengthen the argument for increased funding and consistency of support.