

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP 2003

“To Investigate the Choreographic and Performance Processes Undertaken by Leading International Dance Theatre Practitioners”

Maggi Sietsma Smith AM
33 Willem Drive
Draper, Qld. 4520
Ph: 07 3257 4222
Fax: 07 3257 7444

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Signed: Maggi Sietsma Smith

Dated: 16th March 2004

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1. Precis and Acknowledgements

This report includes details of a 2003 Churchill Fellowship Study Tour to France and the United States of America. Specific sites of study included:

- Compagnie Maguy Marin
Centre Choreographic National De Rillieux – la - Pape
(National Choreographic Centre of Rillieux – la - Pape)
- Centre Choreographique National de Montpellier Languedoc
Roussillon, France – Artistic Director Mathilde Monnier
- The Dance Theatre Workshop, New York

My visit to France and New York would certainly not have been possible without:

- The financial assistance of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust
- The artists, directors and managers I met who willingly shared their wealth of knowledge and information
- The support of Expressions Dance Company
- My partner, Abel, whose encouragement and support kept me buoyant throughout the whole process.

2. Executive Summary

Name: Maggi Sietsma Smith

Address: 33 Willem Drive, Draper. Qld. 4520.

Contact: ph – 07 3257 4222
fax – 07 3257 7444

Position/Occupation: Artistic Director, Expressions Dance Company

Fellowship Objective: To investigate the choreographic and performance processes undertaken by leading international dance theatre practitioners, particularly in France and the United States of America

Fellowship Highlights:

1. **Ram Dam** – A venue developed for the creation of new dance works. Viewed a performance and discussed the concept and realisation of such an infrastructure.
2. **Compagnie Maguy Marin, Centre Choreographique National de Rillieux – la - Pape.** Observing rehearsals, discussing new choreographic works with Company artists. Meeting with Maguy Marin and Company General Manager, Antoine Managolou discussing future structural developments for the Company and centre.
3. **Centre Choreographique National de Montpellier Languedoc Roussillon.** Mathilde Monnier the Director/Choreographer and General Manager Jean-Marc Urrea. Observing rehearsals and discussing choreographic timelines, teaching structures and emerging artist initiatives.
4. **Observing and participating in discussions led by American Choreographer Bebe Miller on her new choreographic work 'Landing'.**
5. **Dance Theatre Workshop in New York.**
6. **American Performing Arts Presenters Conference in New York.** Observing the market place and how it functions in comparison to Australia.
7. **"Altogether Different Dance Festival" at the Joyce Theatre.** Watching five different companies perform their works and attending performances by The Martha Graham Company and Stephen Petronia and Dancers.

Major Lessons:

There is a great need and enormous potential in Australia to create infrastructures to support the future development of dance. The Choreographic Centre models in France are a wonderful example of how a well designed centre can encourage artistic growth and nurture emerging artists, support mature artists, present excellent artistic product and successfully integrate with the local community.

- Time to create without pressure
- Political support and encouragement
- Appropriate financial backing
- Concern for the ecological well being of the artistic eco system
- Space, time and financial support for research and development

Are all areas which the French system supports and which at this stage are severely lacking in Australia.

Dissemination:

Report on my findings will be made at QUT Dance Department, July/August 2004.

Propose to write a report Ausdance IT Newsletter

Expressions Dance Partners Newsletter

Implementation:

- Plans to introduce, where possible, a program addressing these issues into Expressions Dance Company schedules
- Plan to develop programs for emerging choreographic artists
- Lobby for increased resources for dance practitioners

3. Programme

Lyon, France

8th December – 19th December

- Ram Dam Choreographic Research Centre
- Performance at Ram Dam
- Cie Maguy Marin Centre Choreographique National de Rillieux-la-Pape

Montpellier, France

**22nd December – 24th December
5th January – 8th January**

- Centre Choreographique National de Montpellier Languedoc Roussillon (CCN)
Cie Mathilde Monnier

New York, USA

10th January – 15th January

- Bebe Miller
- Dance Theatre Workshop
- Performances at Joyce Theatre and City Centre
- Association of American Performing Arts Presenters Conference

4. Background

In Australia the dance culture is exciting, full of innovative ideas and talented people. However, the current funding landscape is bleak and the country's dance companies and independent artists face enormous challenges just to maintain their current levels of practice.

In stark contrast the levels of assistance given to French artists must be the envy of many in the dance world. The dance infrastructures including the Centre Choreographiques established by the French Government in the 1980's have built a solid platform on which to support on-going creativity. They have also ensured the continued survival and further development of the artform.

Whilst my initial impetus for this Fellowship was to investigate the choreographic and performance processes undertaken by leading French dance theatre practitioners, it soon became obvious that the opportunity to experiment with change and develop different processes at the highest level is only possible when one has the financial and physical resources to do so.

The choreographers I visited in France are both Artistic Directors of a Centre Choreographique National. Both have time to create new works without pressure from funding bodies to deliver 'outputs'. Both are involved in aiding the development of the next generation of dancers and choreographers. And both have appropriate financial backing. In fact Jean-Marc Urrea, the Financial Director of the CCN de Montpellier remarked "I have not had to worry about not having enough money to support the artistic vision of the Artistic Director or the CCN for at least FIVE YEARS!"

So whilst my artistic research vis à vis processes continued I became intrigued and fascinated at how advanced French dance has become and how the whole dance eco-system is flourishing due to these wonderful centres and their enlightened and holistic approach to supporting the artform. This Fellowship gave me not only the opportunity to research other creators' choreographic approaches but also to understand how the economic and social parameters impact on their methods.

5. Lyon, France

5.1 Ram Dam Choreographic Research Centre Performance at Ram Dan

Ram Dam – a creation and resource centre established by French choreographer Maguy Marin.

A few years ago after receiving a handsome financial prize for her choreographic work, Maguy Marin decided to buy an old barn on the outskirts of Lyon. Her intention was to create a practical resource centre where artists could develop their skills and present choreographic attempts where they could make mistakes and not feel the pressure normally associated with presenting works publicly.

She established an association which now runs the venue Ram Dam. Ram Dan currently receives some financial assistance from the local and state governments. The association received funding to renovate the barn and to provide heating and some basic equipment.

Ram Dam offers accommodation for artists in residence and provides the full use of the venue and equipment at no cost allowing artists the opportunity to develop and produce performance projects.

Ram Dam also provides space for work in progress presentations and informal performances by visiting companies, forums and debates. Once a month they present a non curated performance evening where artists who wish to present their work just turn up.

When visiting the venue one evening to view a performance by some artists who had been in residence I found that there was a minimum entry fee of 10 euros but larger 'donations' were accepted. The entrance fee also included a basic meal of meat and vegetables plus a drink. The whole atmosphere was very communal and reminded me of communes in the 70's. The performance had an extremely relaxed atmosphere about it and the questions at the end were incisive revealing a highly educated and knowledgeable dance audience.

5.2 Centre Choreographique National de Rillieux-la-Pape/ Compagnie Maguy Marin

The Centre Choreographique Nationaux throughout France are national institutions. They are permanent structures and most house a 'resident' dance company, in the case of Rillieux-la-Pape it is Compagnie Maguy Marin.

In 1998 Maguy Marin uprooted her company Compagnie Maguy Marin which was based in Creteil, a suburb on the outskirts of Paris, and moved to the volatile high rise ghetto of Rillieux-la-Pape a small town outside Lyon.

Maguy Marin is a woman who is extremely politically engaged. The notion of 'group' is very important to her even in her art and her decision to move her company was a political decision in the sense that she wanted to work in a disadvantaged and marginalised environment.

She believes that the work initiated by the whole team at the CCN of Rillieux-la-Pape is a pathway to experimentation and research. They are of the opinion that the power of the artistic creation can help people to extricate themselves from their tragic feelings of powerlessness to change their destinies. They believe that art can help people to change their way of thinking and help them out of the drudgery of their day to day existence. That people will develop confidence and have courage to move on.

The team at the CCN of Rillieux-la-Pape/Cie Maguy Marin engage in workshops, forums and open rehearsals and they believe that the dialogue which follows represents important moments which modify little by little preconceived ideas and behaviours.

The company tries to connect with the local population and to have dialogue with people from all walks of life and of all ages.

They present workshops in schools from kindergarten right through to the tertiary colleges. They also provide dance classes especially for mothers as well as everyone else not of school age.

In 2003 the CCN financially supported three projects by independent companies to create new work. They also organised presentations of these works in the surrounding towns.

In partnership with the local cinemas they organise movie evenings. The subject matter of the films can be anything which is connected to art and/or politics, these sessions are followed by discussions and debates.

Through all this work with schools, teachers, teenagers, housewives, etc. who never usually go to the theatre, the company helps people to reconnect with their bodies, their voices and to expand their horizons.

The company also opens rehearsals to help people acquaint themselves with what the company actually does. Of course they also present performances of their own works as well as introducing the town to work by other companies and other artforms such as cinema.

Whilst the CCN and artists from the Cie Maguy Marin do engage extensively with the local Rillieux-la-Pape population, it should be noted that Cie Maguy Marin itself is primarily a creation company which financially needs to perform and tour a lot. Moving Compagnie Maguy Marin into Rillieux-la-Pape from Creteil has meant that they have moved into a far more difficult and complex social environment which ultimately has had an impact on Maguy's artistic work. She freely admits that her work has become more and more bleak. For example, her most recent work, ***Les Applaudissements ne se Mangent Pas***, is a metaphor for a society which devours its own members.

Time: The luxury of time to create is something Maguy Marin has in abundance. No four to six week rehearsal periods for her. She can structure her creative development periods as she likes. Although the company does tour a great deal she has the freedom to take between six to eighteen months to develop a new piece.

Her process is workshop/improvisation based and her latest work ***Les Applaudissements ne se Mangent Pas*** was based on a book written by a Latin American author.

An example of her improvisation. She selected 900 groups of words from the written text, the dancers improvised on each group and with the movement material they came up with, she placed it at five second intervals and then took the words out and kept the moving text.

Maguy is definitely a social activist in dance. All her ideas are concerned with improving and/or showing the world how dangerous society is becoming. As a result her work is increasingly more sparse in terms of sets, etc. and much darker with less humour.

6. Montpellier, France

Due to rolling strikes and stop-work meetings by most French performers during December/January, I was unable to spend time with Angelin Preljocaj as originally intended. However, I was able to have the opportunity to spend more time studying the support structures and practices of Mathilde Monnier who is Artistic Director of the Centre Choreographique National de Montpellier.

6.1 Centre Choreographique National de Montpellier (CCN)

6.1.1 The CCN is housed in an old convent which has been specifically renovated for dance. It has three dance studios, meeting rooms, offices and library. It accommodates the resident dance company Cie Mathilde Monnier but also runs activities and programs outside the confines of the company.

Whilst the concept of creation is evident to most people, the concept of artistic research is not well understood, less evident and receives little encouragement and support.

Alongside the challenges of performance there exists, in what could be more pressing now than ever before, crucial questions relating to the creative practice. What is a process? How do you develop it? Can the audience read the framework of an artistic experiment and its intrinsic qualities?

The CCN of Montpellier decided that the creation company in the Centre Choreographique i.e. Cie Mathilde Monnier, must not be dominant. Instead, the Centre must be open to share resources and help develop young emerging choreographers and dancers and try to connect with the local populace. The CCN of Montpellier therefore continually remodels its approach by questioning what constitutes the choreographic process.

Currently these are:

- Research
- Visibility
- Its sharing
- Presentation

From these four major areas Mathilde Monnier and others have developed four pathways for the Centre outside the activities of the Cie Mathilde Monnier, which is a creation company that presents works locally, nationally and internationally.

6.1.2 ex.e.r.ce

Training of contemporary dancers.
Artistic Director – Mathilde Monnier

Based at Centre Choreographique National de Rillieux – la – Pape, **ex.e.r.ce** is a structure where selected young dancers from all over the world are invited to participate in a form of training which will confront them with the realities of the profession.

ex.e.r.ce is not a dance school. It is not attached in any way to government training institutions or private colleges. It is a form of transitional training offered to a dozen or so fortunate young dancers who want to become professionals. The director and teachers believe there are many ways in which one can learn to become a proficient professional dancer and they change the course annually in function with the needs of the selected students.

Of course, technique classes are given. However, **ex.e.r.ce** also tries to provide a wide range of meetings both practical and theoretical with artists and their oeuvres. Students are trained for example in feldenkrais, song, voice and improvisation, film work, lighting, research methods, etc. Of course the students also work at times with the Company in their daily classes.

The students are not charged any fees and come from all over the world to participate.

6.1.3 Hors Series

Regular informal performances with independent and **ex.e.r.ce** choreographers/dancers experimenting in front of an audience. Exchange and dialogue between the audience and artists is compulsory. The works are site specific utilising any area of the centre not just the studios or the theatre. It can also involve other artistic mediums.

6.1.4 Invited Choreographer

One choreographic artist is invited to spend a year with the resident company and share his/her work practice with the artists of Cie Mathilde Monnier. In some cases the choreographer might also bring to CCN the artists of his/her company for certain periods of time.

6.1.5 Residences d'écriture et de Recherche Choreographique (ReRc)

This short-term residency program allows a group of artists, a company or a choreographer to experiment and create a dance work without the pressure of having to produce a final outcome during the residency period. CCN provides studios and theatre space, technical assistance and accommodation for up to nine people. They facilitate up to 6 residencies a year which can be between one and four weeks each. This type of program allows a period of creative development and research time which is normally not affordable within the traditional funding structures.

6.2 Cie Mathilde Monnier CCN

Choreographic Timelines/Process

Each new choreographic venture will dictate its own needs and therefore process. However, a certain pattern does develop and Mathilde Monnier's process at times is structured in this way.

The first few weeks of her work consist of accumulating material and then a few weeks later experimenting with that material and then finally the moment where decisions and choices are made from all the 'findings' and the work takes form.

What seems to interest Mathilde is how to show on stage the intimate and personal histories of each artist. How to find the personal truths. In relation, of course, to the theme of the work currently in rehearsal.

She waits patiently to make sure her artists are comfortable and ready to reveal their intimacies and then zooms in or hones in on these moments. Always, of course, with their permission.

The selection of 'moments' is intuitive. Sometimes just a gesture is 'right'. Sometimes more movement is needed. Often the dancers are totally unaware as to why certain choices are made but Mathilde's outside eye sees things they don't.

The rehearsals are organised in what could be perceived as an extremely fragmented way. However, they become in fact a rich resource for Mathilde to 'mine'. Mathilde prepares the improvisational tasks in advance and presents them to the dancers during the rehearsal period. These improvisations range from writing texts to manipulating accessories, props, costumes, etc. as well as inventing movement ideas.

What I found of great interest when talking to Mathilde and Jean-Marc was how Mathilde organises her working time. For example for the piece she is currently working on she has structured a 3-4 week choreographic development time with the dancers, followed by a month

of reflection and discussion with the scenic designer. Then creation time again with the dancers then time with the scenic elements and the dancers before finally moving into the theatre for the final production.

This is done over a period of many months, a luxury by Australian standards. This allows her to solve questions she might have in relation to the set, choreography, lighting, text, etc. This amount of time for reflection ensures that she has every opportunity to find the best and most appropriate solutions.

7. New York, USA

The funding situation for Dance in the USA is, to say the least, precarious. Many organisations and individuals find themselves at the mercy of sponsorship. Intense competition for sponsors and the limited funding available means that very few independent choreographers can be consistently supported.

In order to survive many turn to teaching in academic institutions and maintain their professional artistic practice as an adjunct to their teaching duties.

7.1 Bebe Miller is a notable choreographer that combines her artistic practice and research with teaching at a university. In fact the university provides Bebe with the opportunity to engage with highly sophisticated and audio visual media such as motion capture, something that would be completely out of her reach financially if she remained an independent choreographer.

As a result of her teaching practice Bebe has devised a choreographic process and timeline which gives her plenty of time to develop and research her new works. Her current piece "**Landing**" was started in 2003 and she intends to premiere it in November 2005.

She meets with her co-collaborators/dancers for 2-4 week residencies several times a year. They gather, work together, present work in progress showings and then disperse. This suits Bebe as she likes to have time to reflect on the piece and to research and experiment with motion capture using the facilities available to her at the university.

7.2 Dance Theatre Workshop

Dance Theatre Workshop is an organisation dedicated to nurturing dance artists. Housed in a newly refurbished building it has a 200-seat theatre, workshop areas, a coffee shop, administrative offices and meeting rooms. I was interested to see how such an organisation functions and how we might integrate some of their ideas into existing infrastructure in Queensland.

Politically, dance in the USA has a low priority and the funding situation is appalling. However, there is a great philanthropic culture and most organisations survive on the generosity of others. Since its inception in 1965 the Dance Theatre Workshop has worked towards raising sponsorship and practical support for artists and now boasts numerous

programs from family programs dedicated to 5-12 year olds to international exchange programs. The highly effective network developed by the Dance Theatre Workshop is remarkable and Dance Theatre Workshop is now one of the country's most influential performing arts centres. Literally hundreds of America's most influential dance artists found an early artistic home at Dance Theatre Workshop.

7.3 Performances City Centre

- Martha Graham Company
- Stephen Petronio Company

Both these companies gave highly polished and impressive performances.

- Joyce Theatre
- Altogether Different Dance Festival

Six works of 25 minutes each by 6 different companies all on the one program. These performances showed how lack of consistent and strategic funding can weaken the standards both technically and artistically.

7.4 American Performing Arts Presenters Conference (APAP)

I attended the annual APAP Conference, the most significant Conference of its kind in the whole of North America. APAP is basically a market place where buyers and sellers of performing arts meet. Spotlight performances, lectures, display booths and industry seminars are held and this year over 3½ thousand people from around the world attended. To say I found it rather overwhelming would be an understatement. However, it was extremely stimulating and is no doubt a catalyst in opening up new ventures and horizons. A strategic approach to marketing Australian dance would be to attend this and other conferences of its kind in order to develop future touring opportunities.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The political and financial support for dance in Australia is vastly different from that in France. In fact the current level of support and funding for dance activities in this country has created a critical situation for most small to medium sized contemporary dance organisations. As a result choreographic development, the very life blood of our artform proceeds in an ad hoc fashion in an environment where the role of the artist is undervalued as our political masters prescribe to a society ruled by economic rationalism.

In Australia it seems that money rather than creativity is the priority and the resulting art is mass-produced entertainment. This state of affairs naturally can influence the choreographer to the extent that he/she makes 'acceptable' dances. This, in turn, of course may result in limiting his/her creative potential (Wolff, 1982).

In complete contrast to their French counterparts most Australian companies operate on minute budgets allowing a restricted time frame for creating work. It is clear that the Australian choreographers of today, whilst enormously talented, are affected by the political and cultural context that currently exist.

The American Government support for dance is so poor that artists rely heavily on business sponsorship which, in my opinion, has led to work which is mundane and does not take risks. The U.S. used to lead the world in modern dance but as the funding has eroded so too has the ability of the artists to undertake research resulting in a loss of technique and innovation.

In order to foster a healthy contemporary dance industry in Australia we need to modify the current cultural and political attitude to dance. This has to be done through changing our political leaders' attitudes to the arts. Former political leaders such as Don Dunstan, Gough Whitlam and Jeff Kennett made a big difference through their philosophical and financial commitment to arts practice in this country. More dialogue is needed to ensure that values and attitudes are continually questioned and to convince our governments that they must recognise the importance and relevance of the arts to people's lives.

Recommendations

- All levels of government should be encouraged to value the arts and recognise the importance of the arts in shaping our ideas about ourselves and our society.
- Governments should also be encouraged to take pride in our 'arts' heroes just as they do in our sporting ones.
- Local and national print and electronic media should be encouraged to present more arts news.

- A national arts advocacy body could be established to develop strategic initiatives for the promotion of art and therefore dance.
- The funding bodies need to look at funding the current established dance companies to succeed. This means, of course, more funds. Then these organisations could look at creating programs along the lines of French CCN's to assist emerging choreographers and small project companies.
- Federal and State Governments need to develop additional support mechanisms to facilitate touring both nationally and internationally.
- Companies are currently being asked to assist tertiary institutions with secondments and work placements and receiving no financial support to do so. Perhaps long term training partnerships for emerging artists could be fostered between the tertiary institutions and the companies. However, the Education Departments would need to find financial support for this.

The professional dance industry in Australia is severely under resourced. The wealth of emerging talent we have in this country is unable to be supported or even encouraged. The competition for funds to undertake projects is fierce and very few dance graduates survive beyond the first two years out of university. Australian dancers and choreographers are enormously talented, intensely committed and strong of spirit. However, without on-going financial support choreographers and dancers cannot develop and artistically their work practice becomes shoddy and banal.

The changes required to re-invigorate dance in Australia are many and varied. To do so requires a significant commitment by our government leaders both financially and philosophically. It happened in France in the 1980's and the French dance artists/companies are today leading the world in all areas of dance.

I sincerely hope it will happen here too in the not too distant future.

9. Bibliography

Wolff, J. *The Social Production of Art*. (London: Macmillan 1982)

