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Model city

Helen Cundy describes the challenges and delights of managing an international collaboration between French artists and the Woking community

Woking is a dormitory town half an hour outside London with a mixed population. It contains some of the wealthiest and poorest areas in Surrey. Although it's a small town centre it extends over a large area with distinct neighbourhoods. The transient, partly absent and diverse communities contribute to Woking's lack of a clear sense of identity.

When Woking Dance Festival asked me to project manage a large-scale international community dance project during its 2010 season I jumped at the opportunity without knowing the journey I'd be going on. City Maquette is a performance project devised by the French choreographer Mathilde Monnier, whose work has been performed worldwide to critical acclaim. As the director of the Centre Choregraphique National de Montpellier since 1994 she has collaborated with musicians, writers and philosophers as well as a plethora of dance artists. In 2007 the Berlin

Philharmonic Orchestra invited her to choreograph Heiner Goebbels' opera *Surrogate Cities*. Goebbels describes that work as a 'an attempt to approach the phenomenon of the city from various sides, to tell stories of cities, expose oneself to them, observe them... to try and read the city as a text.' Based on these ideas Monnier concocted a performance for 130 professional and non-professional dancers.

In order to try out some ideas for the full production she created a smaller version, or 'maquette,' in Montpellier with 60 performers, lasting about an hour. (Editor's note: according to Wikipedia a maquette is the French word for scale model refers to a small rough draft of an unfinished architectural work or sculpture.) Thus was born City Maquette, a performance developed and produced in Montpellier, Evry, Reims, Paris and now Woking.

One of the aims of Woking Dance

Festival is to provide high-quality, inspiring experiences that resonate with local people. It has a reputation for producing innovative projects like Carol Brown's *Glow*, a site-specific piece for 40 community dancers staged in 2007 at a Woking gallery called The Lightbox. In line with the festival's aims the director, Mary Brady, programmed City Maquette because of its inherent quality of innovation and the artistic challenge it represented. It was also an opportunity to provide a framework for people of all ages and backgrounds to become involved and collectively explore notions of place and identity.

City Maquette is clearly structured, with sections that have a particular story or carry a certain feeling about cities. What makes the performance unique every time is that the individual residents of each place where it's presented bring their movement, experience and ideas to it, and so reflect that place. This is one of the



Participants in City Maquette. Choreographer: Mathilde Monnier, assisted by Florian Bilbao & Anne Lopez. All photos: Andrew Spiers.

aspects that most intrigues Florian Bilbao and Anne Lopez, Monnier's choreographic assistants on the project and the people who directly delivered it. 'We don't want to do the same thing in every city and with each group,' says Florian. 'We want the dancers to bring themselves into the piece. That makes it more interesting for us too.'

Typically Florian and Anne work with four different community groups for four weeks to create the performance, only bringing everyone together during the final week when Mathilde Monnier joins the process. Recruiting participants for them in Woking was not straightforward. Being a biennial event it's difficult for the festival to build and maintain links with a large number of community groups. Asking people to trust us, and to lend time to a project that was completely new and run by a company they didn't know, was hard work. Our approach was to extend the opportunity to participate to anyone. We wanted to be inclusive but also, on an artistic front, lure non-dancers whom we thought might bring fresh perspectives and truly represent a cross-section of the community. It soon became clear, however, that there was a cultural difference between our approach to community and participatory dance and that of

the French. With a clear artistic vision and limited creation time Monnier's company had definite ideas about the types of participants the project needed. It was only after much discussion that each partner began to understand the other's agenda. From there we found a way forward.

The company had asked for five hours of rehearsals a week with each group. They'd achieved it in France. In Woking, however, it was a sticking point for all of the groups. Whether this is a cultural difference due to the time of year we were working on City Maquette (January and February, when students had exams and older people didn't want to leave the house because of the cold, or were ill), or not valuing the opportunity or prioritising it above other commitments, I can't say. For the young people involved the time required caused significant difficulties. We worked principally with an all-female youth dance group but brought in two young male hip hop practitioners. This altered the group dynamics favourably, shifting the young women out of their accepted positions within that group and making them approach the project more seriously as the hip hop dancers were doing.

Another group consisted of year 5 & 6 pupils from a deprived area of

Woking. For many of the children, and certainly their parents, English was not the first language. This led to some confusion, including one girl who told me she'd gotten her suitcase packed and was ready to go to France to perform! Preconceptions about dance also led to such comments as, 'So when are we going to start dancing?'

One section of the piece was about war and conflict. Here the movement quality needed to be strong and almost militaristic. Recruiting a group of martial artists proved to be problematic. 'Martial arts isn't dance' was one of the responses I remember hearing. Luckily the leader of Woking Wutan immediately saw the crossover potential and was very enthusiastic about getting involved. But here, too, issues about artistic requirements versus time commitment arose. In this group those prepared to commit to the rehearsal schedule were older, mainly female and experienced mostly in tai chi - not the sort of performers the company wanted at all. And so our search continued. We were delighted to find a local group of young, male martial arts instructors who joined a woman and two men from the original group.

The fourth group was composed of senior citizens. The DeVyne dancers developed from a project that Woking >



Participants in City Maquette. Choreographer: Mathilde Monnier, assisted by Florian Bilbao & Anne Lopez. Photo: Andrew Spiers.

Dance Festival initiated a few years ago. This troupe of mature female dancers has since worked with several contemporary choreographers including Charlie Morrissey, Adele Thompson, Maresa von Stockert and Lea Anderson. Again, there was a problem: City Maquette required men too, and preferably some who could waltz or foxtrot. We tried posters, flyers and word of mouth but without much success. Being a firm believer that if you're not prepared to give someone else's activity a go why should they try yours, I donned dancing shoes and ventured to a tea dance. The effort was not in vain. We gained a man! And once we had one, a couple of others came out of the woodwork.

Monnier's company was surprised that a cast of locals was not more easily found. On the other hand, in talking to Florian it became clear that dance companies in France don't provide the opportunities to participate in community performance projects that Britain does. As another French dancer explained, 'It's black and white: you're either a professional dancer or you're not.'

Observing the rehearsals was fascinating. Much of the work was improvisational or task-based. As a member of the youth group put it, 'We weren't taught any movement, but we were guided. Florian got us to try out different ideas and then selected those that worked. It was sort of a structured freedom.' The martial artists were asked to improvise using their movement vocabulary not in the usual sequential order but reacting to the

music and each other. This was beautiful to see and, as one of them remarked, 'very liberating.' Participants were treated like a professional company throughout the process. 'They molded us,' said another community dancer.

Seeing relationships grow, confidence build and the standard of performance develop during the rehearsal period was gratifying. The children's focus and complete belief in their own endeavours was admirable, while in their discipline and self-assurance the young people's group was almost unrecognizable from what it was at the start of the project. The vast improvement in the movement quality of all the participants, and the pleasure they derived from the work, was equally heartening. As one of the martial artists said, 'I already know how to use my body. What I've learned from this is how to keep the movement going, extending it in order to make everything more fluid.' Three weeks after it was all over one of the older dancers was still bubbling with enthusiasm. 'I think about City Maquette every day,' she told me, 'and with such a warm feeling. We had fun, didn't we?'

To watch the final performance was poignant and striking: 60 performers onstage, each group with a distinct part but performing together. Their excitement was palpable. But speaking objectively as a project manager working in community arts, City Maquette raised questions for me about how we approach such work. Having a clear understanding of each other's objectives from the start, and

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ensuring that this will be a collaborative process, seems fundamental to any partnership. Monnier's company sought very specific types of performers. Would it have been better to audition participants? Would that have garnered people who were sufficiently committed, and enabled the company to choose the performers? Does this limit the type of performers involved, or is it more important that they fit the artistic vision? In our desire to be inclusive, do we overlook those who have an established interest in participating and developing their skills?

The groups we had in Woking struggled to pull together. Ironically, those that entailed the most compromises were the ones that ultimately showed the most improvement, and whose performances were the most interesting, perhaps because they had posed a greater challenge to the choreographers. For many local people the project was a new way of working that changed their perceptions of what dance is and can be. (One of the older dancers couldn't understand how she could dance and not need to count steps to the beat of the music.) There was afterwards a clear sense of achievement emanating from all the participants. There's no doubt that City Maquette exerted an impact on them that will linger for a long time.

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