

Dance and borders

Co-Motion: Dance and Borders, the first all-Ireland dance industry and research conference held in Belfast in October 2019, was a cross-border dance initiative by Dance Resource Base and Dance Ireland.

Here, **Orla McGrady** (General Manager, Dance Resource Base), **Dr Aoife McGrath** (Queen's University Belfast), and **Jane Mooney** (Board Member, Dance Resource Base) reflect upon the weekend

Co-motion: Dance and Borders

responded to a critical moment both on the island of Ireland and globally, in which the hardening of international borders raised questions about the operation and experience of borders in dance communities. The conference brought together dance practitioners, researchers, educators, curators, policy makers, industry professionals and supporters from across the island and beyond, to create an inclusive platform for putting thought into motion about how we move together.

Considering the artist as citizen, the conference sought to bring critical attention to complexities of border interrelations in a contemporary moment of precarity and flux. With Brexit looming and its implications for the international border on the island of Ireland still uncertain, dance's fundamental relationship with movement and stasis makes it particularly suited to tackling questions of mobility, migration, and movement across borders. Dance also affords a unique insight into how different kinds of borders operate in the broadest sense across a spectrum of embodied political, aesthetic and socio-cultural understandings. The

conference call posed a series of questions for response: how do dance communities experience and negotiate different kinds of borders? What facilitates or hinders co-motion across them? How might danced 'commotion' create interventions into the stasis of political inaction? At junctures of threatened division, how might dance function as a site of connection, collaboration, and movement? Or conversely, how does dance practice highlight boundaries, limits, fractures, or immobility?

The Co-Motion contributors responded to these provocations in rich and diverse ways. Their individual panel presentations, performances and workshops highlighted some of the most urgent issues for dance communities: the future of dance education in a climate of diminishing support for the arts; the need for inclusivity of all corporealities, especially those on the margins of society; environmental concerns and danced action for change; the impact of trauma on individuals and communities, and possibilities for healing and wellbeing afforded by dance; the need to nurture and support dance networks and >





The Casement Project. Photo: Matthew Thompson

collaborative opportunities; and the power of danced interventions in politically contested borderlands.

The conference aimed not only to strengthen cross-border connections between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but also to forge dance community networks beyond the island. An international mix of guest speakers and panellists contributed keynotes and workshops: Shobana Jeyasingh (Shobana Jeyasingh Dance) spoke movingly about her personal experiences of borders, thresholds and liminality across the breadth of her remarkable career; Fearghus Ó Conchúir (National Dance Company Wales and Arts Council of Ireland) shared findings from his large-scale multi-platform dance project about the border-crossing Irish rebel, British knight and international humanitarian, Roger Casement; and Juan Kruz Diaz de Garaio Esnaola and Luc Dunberry (Sasha Waltz & Guests, Berlin) delivered a keynote workshop based on themes of separation and reunification found in Waltz's seminal work on borders in communities, Zweiland (1997).

Dance development roundtables and panels were curated around central issues including dance and the next generation, tackling borders within the dance industry, connectivity and collaboration (including a workshop on UK touring initiative Surf the Wave), and the contribution and impact of dance to wellbeing and health. The evening programme built supportive connections for dance with local institutions and cultural platforms, including a dinner at Belfast City Hall and international dance performances by (La)Horde (France) and Shobana Jeyasingh Dance at Belfast International Arts Festival.

A key element of the conference was providing dance artists the opportunity to have their work spotlighted. One of the 17 different spotlight presentations and performances was CUCK by Belfast-based choreographer and dance artist Eileen McClory – an entertaining, intimate and intensely raw duet about power, relationships and crossed

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boundaries. The work explores the human condition at its most fragile, and McClory says of her experience of showing the piece at the conference:

“As a choreographer based in Northern Ireland, the topic of borders is ever-present, and so the opportunity to present my work at the Co-Motion conference was an incredible experience. The two days were filled with fascinating keynotes, presentations and panel discussions that raised much-needed conversations to strengthen and link the sector, all the while providing opportunity to create new relationships across the island of Ireland and the UK. CUCK's themes were relevant to those of the conference due to it being centred around the idea of closed physiological borders, which are enabling today's current political climate with the accompanying threat of closed borders and increasing tensions surrounding Brexit and the ongoing lack of government in Northern Ireland. I thoroughly enjoyed the intimate nature of the conference and there was a wonderful atmosphere all around. I was able to connect and present my work to a large number of people from all aspects of the dance community, and the response to the work was fantastic.”

Based in Dublin, choreographer Justine Doswell also presented a new work in progress *The Art of Fugue*, a human-centric reflection on the simple, yet complex, nature of our existence, embracing the paradoxes and at the same time celebrating our interconnectedness, inseparability and union:

“When I saw the open call for

Co-Motion: Dance and Borders it struck a personal chord as well as resonating with my recent choreographic research exploring complex interrelated and interdependent, self-referential structural patterns. I'm interested in what moves us, infinitely drives us to continuously search for meaning and connection. The conference's collective nature, one of solidarity and openness, felt a safe space to share the work I have been developing and I was delighted to be invited. It was truly an honour to be part of this first



Ryan O'Neill and Vasiliki Stasinaki, CUCK, Tinderbox Theatre Company and Off the Rails Dance. Photo: Ciaran Bagnall

ever all-Ireland conference. Its ethos of collaboration and interconnectivity, of how to develop and promote practices for working, supporting and moving forward together, is invaluable in these polarised times of uncertainty. Co-Motion was a rich, insightful and thought-provoking experience for me, an opportunity to listen, learn, reflect and share. The collective energy in the room was invigorating.”

This conference marked a milestone moment for dance on the island of Ireland. It celebrated a rich dance landscape, vibrant dance

communities, and diverse dance interests. Co-Motion was the first ever collaboration and partnership between Dance Resource Base and Dance Ireland (the two leading dance development organisations on the island), Queen’s University Belfast, and the Belfast International Arts Festival. It celebrated a commitment to critical discourses and creative encounters, raising many questions for future discussion. Informed by critical enquiry, Co-Motion presented a platform and opportunity to collectively explore, and interrogate,

key themes surrounding the concept(s) of dance and borders.

Info

www.danceresourcebase.org
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