

Don't stop being an artist

Based in Scotland, dance artist **Sara Kemal** travels into Europe to consider ways to sustain a career and define her professional identity by exploring her roots, her core artistic values and climate change

My experience of working in dance

so far has been rich and multifaceted. Like many artists, I have an expansive practice which for me, encompasses creating, facilitating, performing and more recently, producing dance. My work is predominantly rooted in a community and participatory setting and my interests stem from the power that dance has to connect with people and transcend barriers and borders.

I am a member of The Work Room, a Glasgow based, artist led, organisation whose members are artists based across Scotland working in dance, movement and choreography. The mission of the organisation is to empower artists to lead in their practice, enabling them to make high quality, pioneering dance for diverse contexts at home and internationally.

As part of this, The Work Room regularly supports artists to attend international opportunities. For the past year, I have been working with the organisation supported by the Federation of Scottish Theatre (1) to develop my international experience and to explore how my embodied experience as an artist can inform my work as a producer. In October this year, I travelled to Turku, Finland with four other artists (2) to attend STRE-TCH, an event co-hosted by Dance Info Finland and Regional Dance Centre of Western Finland as part of the Keđja network's Encounters programme (3). Encounters are annual events open to anyone working in or studying contemporary dance. They

are a chance to meet new people, exchange ideas, see work and engage in discussions (the next encounter will be in Gothenburg in August 2020).

The focus of STRE-TCH was 'expanding professionalism' and conversations centred around questions of sustainability in dance: what does it mean to work sustainably as an artist? How can we work internationally in times of climate change? How can we use artistic processes to expand beyond the form?

Reflecting on my own experience, working sustainably in dance has meant that I have worked in a range of contexts and although I value the variety and richness that this has brought, I have sometimes struggled to define my professional identity, my practice as an artist, and at times considered whether I should call myself an artist at all. How do I frame my work? Are there contexts where I am not an artist?

I wonder whether these questions stem from the eighteen-year-old version of myself, beginning vocational dance training with an inexperienced view of what a career in dance can look like. As I have explored and developed my dance career, I have questioned what it means to be an artist working in different contexts and how we can use artistic practice as a catalyst for change. Going into STRE-TCH, I was interested to place these questions in a different, international landscape.

The first day explored 'expanding professionalism in the arts' and

considered possibilities for artists to expand their practice out of the arts field and intersect with other industries. Discussion drew attention to projects where dance artists have used their creative processes to solve problems and create solutions in workplaces, making space for dialogue, learning and collaboration. During her workshop 'Artistic Interventions', Maria Mebius-Schröder (4) unpicked this further. She encouraged us to consider the contexts in which we want to contribute and look beyond form to find the driving forces behind our work. Can a deeper understanding of core artistic values lead to new expressions and new fields to work in?

This process of looking outside of form made me consider the rigidity with which I sometimes view my practice. Perhaps I can look at my practice as a shifting entity which changes to align with the context I am working in; the times when I am pouring over a budget or planning a schedule I don't stop being an artist, I am just using these skills in a different context and can frame this work accordingly. There is value to moving between different areas in dance. For me, it isn't about choosing a specific area to work in, but rather following my interests, letting the different parts of my practice inform each other and being open to the breadth of experiences I can have as a dance artist.

Another focus of the event was international working in relation to



Sara Kemal, Stretch 2019, Turku, Finland. Photo: Aleksi Telilä

climate change. The idea of ‘thinking global and acting local’ interested me and we had the opportunity to explore this further in working groups by considering the impact of sustainable mobility on local communities and audiences. We questioned the impact of employing local artists: would this strengthen the local cultural economy? What effect could this have on communities? What impact do funding structures have on artists’ ability to embed themselves in the areas they work in? The question of community impact reminded me of conversations happening in Scotland during an FST Dance Sector meeting. In the context of Rise Dance Festival (5) in Findhorn, we looked at the role, potential and impact of festivals, also giving consideration to their relationships with communities. In both places, the idea of ‘slow’ travel came up, as well as the importance of connecting with new people in new places. It was interesting that similar conversations are happening across different countries.

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I think that everyone was aware of the air miles we had all taken to be at the encounter and perhaps a disconnect between this and talking about reducing our carbon footprint. The workshops considered the value and hierarchy of international working, the necessity of it for work and resources and how it can develop us as artists.

Experiencing an international encounter was an incredibly valuable experience. Having attended Ice Hot, Reykjavik, I was able to continue conversations with people I had met

before, forge new connections and strengthen relationships with other Scottish artists, who are based across the country. I could also place my own experience within a different context and embrace meetings and conversations that would not happen otherwise. There is a real sense of solidarity and community in the Keđja network and a commitment to initiating lasting connections between artists which will exist beyond STRE-TCH. Going forward, this sense of community transcending geographical borders and the wider impact of events, such as STRE-TCH, will continue to resonate.

Info

www.theworkroom.org.uk

References

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5. www.bodysurfscotland.co.uk/event/rise2019