



Left to right: June Gamble, personal collection; Karen Gallagher. Photo: Sane Severn and Susanne Burns, personal collection.

What do we do now?

The Deconstruction of Four Decades of Dance Development in England

Susanne Burns, Karen Gallagher and June Gamble are three of Britain's most respected super-producers, arts innovators and cultural consultants. Here they ruminate, reflect and call for revolution as they take us on a journey through four decades of dance development in England.

As three dance field veterans we have contributed to different elements of the art form's infrastructure, experiencing its highs and lows and making our own contributions to the development of a thriving ecology. We recently began a conversation on Facebook, which explored the funding cuts and recent closures of regional dance agencies across the country and led to us proposing this article for Animated. It seemed as if the regional, sub-regional and local dance agencies – many of which grew out of the dance animateur and community dance movements and focussed on access and inclusion – were being eroded at a time when the Arts Council England (ACE) funding

strategy 'Let's Create' required this infrastructure for its successful delivery.

This article has been written in the aftermath of the ACE National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) announcements in late 2022, which have impacted an already fragile field deconstructing 40 years of achievement and leaving some parts of the country without dance infrastructure and others dependent on a few key freelancers. The fragility is also compounded by the aftermath of the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis.

The dance infrastructure has never been so fractured and we believe this is because of policy decisions that have destroyed what has been built >>

over four decades. Despite dance being more visible than ever with the public, we see the loss of dance in schools, the closure of dance programmes in Higher Education and reduced dance programming in some cities and towns. Coming out of the pandemic, our independent artists have never been as vulnerable as they are now and yet we are seeing the loss of dance development agencies that have existed to support local infrastructure and employment. This dance infrastructure has evolved and grown over the last 40 years since breaking free of being tied to music in what was then the Arts Council of Great Britain – now ACE. We have played very different roles in this development and between us we hold a collective memory of different aspects of its history. Through combining our three different perspectives and looking back at our direct experiences in the sector, we aim to reflect on this in the hope that we can stimulate debate about how we can work together to deliver a stronger ecology.

Let us first reflect on history and key policy changes.

“The past is... the guide to the future.” (1) If we ignore our history we are doomed to fail. The lessons of our collective dance past are not being acted on – wheels are constantly reinvented and an infrastructure that was gradually built from the mid 1980’s seems to be being dismantled because of funding choices. The implications of this are huge and, we argue, run directly against the dance field’s ability to respond effectively to the current Let’s Create ACE strategy.

Independent funding for dance through Arts Council England (ACE) only began in 1984 as prior to that ACE dance funding had been managed alongside music. The formation of a Dance (and Mime) Department coincided with the publication of *The Glory of the Garden* in 1984 and in turn this led to major growth in the infrastructure of the dance field across England. Dance Officers were appointed within the regional offices. Small budgets meant officers were dependent on collaborative partnerships with those working across dance in the regions to develop and grow the field. Much of the infrastructure created – and much of what is left – was the result of this collaboration.

Whilst the infrastructure grew in some parts of the country, in others growth was slower. Before ‘levelling up’ was a term embraced by the Tory party it was needed in the dance field where the ecology was concentrated in London and the South East.

When Harrison and Burns carried out the Dance Mapping research for ACE in 2008/09, they used



Artwork: Felix Ologbosere. Photo: David Jonah

the concept of field theory to underpin the research. (2) This was an important lens through which to view the dance world. Simply, our understanding of any one individual organisation within a field requires that we understand how it relates to other organisations in the same environment. (3) Using this approach, a field can be viewed as a network of organisations in constant struggles for autonomy and discretion, dealing with constraint and external control. Given the dependence of regional, sub regional and local dance organisations on public funding support, this perspective, the “resource dependence perspective”, is potentially critical in understanding the dance environment, the ecology and resulting economy. Dance organisations dependent on ACE subsidy are externally controlled, vulnerable to policy and personnel changes which impact decisions, and which render them fragile.

In 2008/9, when the dance mapping research was published, dance was in a good place, but the years of exponential growth in the dance field are now arguably over despite its popularity as an artform and its presence in everyday life as a social activity. The field depends on the presence of an



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ecology of different types of organisations which are interdependent, whose roles complement one another and where connectedness and collaboration are key. And yet competition for funding dominates and can override the need to work collaboratively for the collective good of the field. The regional and national dance agencies need producing companies and artists, who in turn need venues, producers and management as well as support from the network of agencies across the country. Where do you turn as an independent artist based in Merseyside or in Manchester, Plymouth or Devon when there is now no infrastructure left to support you? How is ‘Let’s Create’ to be delivered if the network of local support agencies has been reduced?

We have experienced so many changes in the policy context and resulting infrastructure within which dance operates – regional dance agencies became national dance agencies; dance houses were built and more recently there was an attempt to establish “dance hubs” in Leeds and Birmingham. We’ve seen dance administration schemes, the shift from ‘administration’ to ‘management’ to ‘producing’ and yet we still have not yet cracked how best to support our artists within a precarious ecology or to develop a nationwide approach to this. Surely a healthier future must depend on the ability to learn from our short 40-year history and our ability to embrace the voices and experiences of those who have lived that history? It seems that our collective memory fails us.

Let’s look in more detail at the development of the dance agencies that have proved to be so effective in building local infrastructure for artists as well as communities.

“A dance agency is the broad term used to describe dance organisations involved in dance development activity”. (4)

The dance agency model emerged over 40 years ago with most national dance agencies established in the early 1990’s. The regional dance agencies came into being as a means of creating local

structure and continuity around the dance animateur movement and were set up by individual freelancers working in and with institutions such as schools, universities, and venues. Their role was primarily around participation, and this developed into being about progression and artist development as the sector grew.

In looking at this part of the dance field, the concept of ‘isomorphism’ is useful. In creating a policy for dance development, ACE created a structure of similarity where regardless of size, investment or infrastructure the organisations were expected to offer the same business model to deliver dance in their respective regions. So, despite differences in local needs the dependence on external funding from ACE and the aims of the funder tended to dominate and dictate the typology that emerged over time.

Agencies were initially called ‘regional’, then some became ‘national’ and ‘strategic’:

“The growth and development of dance agencies – strategic, national, regional and local – has evolved over the last 15 years. There are now a significant number operating at different scales, some funded by Arts Council England, others by local authorities; some with a national remit and others very local..... The Association of National Dance Agencies (ANDA) which has now, with a wider membership, become the National Dance Network (NDN).” (5)

Today, there are only nine regional dance agencies in England – in 2020 there were 17 – and there are nine national dance agencies.

All national dance agencies are funded by Arts Council England as NPO’s, and all have a building and thus can be described as a ‘Dance House’. The dance house is a policy construct created to support the capital aspirations of dance, having the art form in a dedicated space which could host participation, production and promotion all under one roof. This model appears to add agency as very few building-based dance organisations have been disinvested. Instead, the disinvestment impacted the regional organisations that were seeking to create >>

stronger regional infrastructure. It has been the smaller local and regional agencies that have been systematically managed out of the funding portfolio, culminating in disinvestment by ACE, resulting in many closures such as Dance Manchester, Together (formerly MDI), Hampshire Dance, Dance in Devon and Plymouth Dance. These closures result in a lack of local knowledge and networks, a lack of support and employment for artists at a regional level and bring about a loss of archive and history limiting information relating to impact, achievement and practice. Further, the agencies that no longer exist impact the whole local ecology as the partnerships, connections they make also disappear and resources are lost.

There is hope – on Merseyside, a group of independent artists have taken up the baton and have joined together to reclaim the space previously occupied by MDI/ Together, rebranding it 24 Hope Street Dance Collective, acknowledging that it is:

“More than a studio, 24 Hope Street is Liverpool’s dance hub. This building is a meeting place for dancers, professional practice, artist development schemes, community dance projects, and a wide range of classes and dance styles that make it truly unique. Historically, careers were launched to tour in Europe; UK & international choreographers brought work to the LEAP festival.” (6)

Another key programme and set of policies that impacted on artists leading to the development of some of our major touring companies is also worth some consideration as we reflect on what has been lost. The need for dance administrators grew as the field grew. The Dance Administration schemes set out to support embryonic companies and individual artists to become more established and led to the development of the business of managing and touring dance and it is arguable that without these schemes we would not have some of the companies we have today.

Set up by ACE, the Regional Arts Boards and some County Councils in the late 1980’s, these schemes matched dance administrators with three independent dance artists/companies in various regions. The model was picked up by independent dance managers (IDMs) who managed a portfolio of touring dance companies.

In 2000, the Independent Dance Management Network (IDMN) was formed – supported by Jaqueline Rose of London Arts Board – and a training programme for IDMs was created that matched trainees with more experienced individuals, resulting in the emergence of the next generations of Independent Dance Producers. Some of these individuals managed their own client or portfolio of clients or went on to work in regional and national dance organisations and/or regional and national ACE offices. These initiatives pushed up the issue of dance management for the sector on national and regional agendas and had significant impact on the economy. Rose commented in 2003: “From a selected sample of eleven independent dance managers, it has been calculated that they are responsible for 47 dance artists/companies that are all currently active in the UK...If we add together, the current portfolios of just six of this sample group of managers the total value they manage is £1,705,000 and this includes minimal investment from the arts funding system.” (7)

Sadly, investment in the training of IDMs ceased in the mid-2000s and was refocused by ACE on the training of Managers attached to a number of Dance Institutions/Organisations. The reality was that the sector needed investment in both.

The role of the Independent Dance Manager varied, and several had long-term relationships with their clients, spanning up to 15 years. A key characteristic of this relationship and way of work was the collaborative way of working between the funder and the manager which was mentioned earlier in relation to the work of the earliest Dance Officers in the Regional Arts Boards. There was a sense of an invisible ladder that could be climbed with funding increasing incrementally and the ultimate goal of being invited to apply for long-term funding. Importantly, as suggested above, it felt as if the ACE officer was working with, not separate from, the companies, artists and managers.

Further, IDMs, on behalf of their clients, initiated and established long-term good working relationships with the Directors of venues, festivals and regional and national dance agencies/ organisations. These relationships took time and care to build and resulted in touring circuits for

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each client. So, over four decades, the IDMs kept abreast of the policy shifts and changes and the development of the regional and national dance agencies, in order to ensure the best possible future for their clients. The field was working together for the benefit of the whole.

These managers came to be perceived by venues and national dance agencies, as “gatekeepers” or “talent scouts”, dictating who and what was toured to the regional venues. This led to the decline of the role and with the introduction of the Grants For The Arts programme, there was no way for the artist/ company to finance the consistent engagement of IDMs. G4A was the beginning of the end for this model of IDMs and Touring Artists/Companies working together as collaborative partners for long periods of time. Artists were encouraged by funders to become “Self-Managed”. Regional and National Dance organisations started to engage the original IDMs to create and deliver training programmes for Self-Managed Artists, however, these training programmes stopped being commissioned in the mid-2010s. The lack of continued investment in the training of IDMs has resulted in a dearth of experienced IDMs with those who are currently operating having limited capacity.

So where do we go from here?

It is important to state that none of the above is to diminish the incredibly valuable work of the existing regional and national dance agencies or deny the value of the many producers working in the dance field today. It is simply to reflect on previous models and ways of working that have been lost in order to shed some light on the ways in which the field has been weakened at a time when national policy requires a solid regional grass roots infrastructure. Artists need it, commissioners need it, venues and promoters need it. It is not enough to invest in the development of work to tour if there is not support on the ground with local knowledge to support the touring.

15 years on from the Dance Mapping research, there is a need to reconsider dance policy and practice and to examine what the field needs to rebuild a holistic ecology that will support its

development which will in turn support artists and audiences and deliver on ACE policy. The recent funding decisions by ACE, whilst going some way to address historical imbalances, appear to mitigate against the very principles upon which the ‘Let’s Create’ strategy sits and upon which its successful delivery at a local level of our “villages, towns and cities” will ultimately rest. A clear vision is needed premised on evidence and learning from what has worked in the past and what hasn’t worked so well.

A stable ecology depends on a mutually supportive way of working, where collaboration and partnership outweigh competition, where all voices are heard and valued and where ‘gatekeepers’ use their power for the benefit of the whole ecology. If Covid taught us nothing else, it was that we are interdependent; large organisations need smaller ones and both need the freelance community upon whom the sector sits.

The dance world is poorer for decisions that have failed to draw learning from our collective history – failing to look back in order to better inform how we might move forward together. Now, more than ever, we need to come together to rebuild the infrastructure upon which our success as a field depends.

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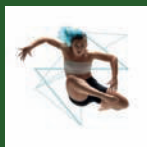
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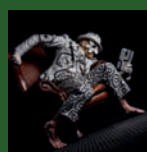
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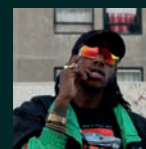
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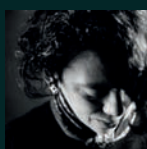
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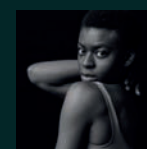
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