

8 Focus on Australia



Kath Papas.
Photo: Chester Dent

Guest curator **Kath Papas**, freelance producer and consultant, introduces us to some of the key issues in community dance in Australia

It has been a great pleasure to work with Ken Bartlett at the Foundation for Community Dance to 'curate' this Australian-focused edition of Animated, a publication I have long admired and enjoyed.

I am a creative producer and dance consultant working freelance for two years now, since I ended my seven-year directorship of Ausdance Victoria, the Victorian office of Australia's dance advocacy and support network. This edition has been an opportunity to explore questions and ideas that have long interested me, and which I have sought to influence in various ways through my professional practice of the last decade. I have been concerned to give Animated readers an insight into some bigger picture issues and trends in Australia, as well as a window into specific and unique practices and projects. In the process I have made some observations I would like to share here.

Practices and aesthetics that fall outside the Western-dominated 'professional' mainstream are still largely undervalued in this country. I still don't quite understand

why this is still the case when choreographing and dancing with a rich variety of people offers such a wealth of opportunities for both the individuals involved and the development of the art form. There also persists a substantial division in the minds of many between 'professional' and 'community' practice, when the reality is that many practitioners work in many modes at different times – or concurrently – as they piece together a livelihood.

The five articles that follow reveal that a wide variety of practices are thriving around the nation, both in urban and regional settings. Practitioners are not overly concerned with definitions or overarching banners, and are making very individual work that is deeply informed by location, environment and the make-up of their community. Dance participants aren't really concerned with definitions either, and large numbers of people are taking up opportunities to express themselves and connect to community through dance projects offered by organisations and festivals large and small. New training initiatives are raising standards across the dance sector. Dance is becoming richer for the development that is occurring.

I hope you enjoy this insight into Australian community dance.

contact kp@kathpapas.net



Above: fLiNG Physical Theatre 2009. Photo: Fahmi

Dancing under a big sky

An introductory conversation between guest curator **Kath Papas** and artists **Annette Carmichael** and **Lee Pemberton**

I asked two community dance practitioners – Annette Carmichael and Lee Pemberton – from opposite sides of Australia, to share their views on some ‘bigger picture’ questions relating to community dance, as a way of providing an overview for this edition of Animated.

Annette and Lee did not wish to speak for others or for the sector as a whole, but their answers, sent to me from the individual communities where they live and work, 4000 kilometres apart, are revealing of the diverse range of practices and approaches that make up Australian community dance today. Our conversation unfolded over email and telephone, and some of the questions I initially posed have faded into the background in favour of more interesting material, which arose as we went.

About Annette Carmichael (AC)

“In my community practice I am creating work within the community I live, Denmark (Kwoorabup) on the southern coast of Western Australia (WA). It is a town of 5,000 people with a ‘white’ history of tree harvesting, farming and, now tourism. I facilitate the men’s contemporary dance project, moveMENT, and create community performance works, that explore contemporary issues surrounding the non-Indigenous settlement of Australia. I also work as the State’s Regional Contemporary Dance Facilitator for Ausdance WA and the Future Moves initiative (1).”

About Lee Pemberton (LP)

“I am a dancer, choreographer and educationalist living on the beautiful far south coast in New South Wales, Australia in a town, Bega, of approximately 38,000 inhabitants. I began working here twelve years ago after completing postgraduate studies in choreography at The University of Melbourne, Victorian College of the Arts. I am the founding Artistic Director of fLiNG Physical Theatre Inc.”

We used the recent National Dance Forum (NDF) (2) as one of our jumping-off points for our dialogue. Held in March 2011 in Melbourne, this was the first gathering of its kind since the late 1990s. Community dance was represented at the NDF through a dedicated session called Dance Practice in Communities (video of this and other sessions may be viewed at www.nationaldanceforum.net/archive). The community dance sector had its last dedicated forum, Dance in the Landscape, in 2002 (3). Looking at discussion

at the two forums seemed like one good place to begin.

My first questions to Lee and Annette were: What did the picture of Australian community dance practice look like to you when you started? What does it look like now? Are changes driven by practice, the environment or both?

(AC): “The Dance in the Landscape forum (2002) had an intense focus on the question ‘what is community dance?’ This inquiry dominated discussions along with its sister question ‘what isn’t community dance?’ and informally an exploration of the dichotomy of professional vs. community practice. I was surprised at the time by the preoccupation of defining community dance as a practice distinct from the rest of the Australian dance sector. The division of professional and community was not helpful or meaningful to me, as inspiration struck in a variety of places regardless of the label attached. However I understood that at this time funding was being divided up along these lines and perhaps driving this need for division.

Almost a decade later I found myself speaking on the community dance panel at the NDF. This was a forum that embraced a range of Australian contemporary practice, not just community dance. In the session I spoke at there was no longer a preoccupation with defining community dance, although it was clear that practitioners were still seeking recognition and respect from the wider dance sector.

At the NDF I deeply appreciated community dance being part of the broader national discussion on contemporary dance. There was recognition that the ecology of dance in Australia needs diversity of practitioners and environments to be healthy.”

When the three of us compared notes over the phone recently, Lee agreed with Annette’s assessment of the NDF, but noted that for her the community panel was the only one where ‘the heart of the session related to me’. Both spoke of the need for more gatherings specific to community dance. In such a big country there is a host of issues to sift through. (The Australian dance sector is simultaneously dispersed, and tightly knit).

(LP): “There are no theatres, no practising dancers and few dance studios here in Bega. Moving here I found myself alone in my work; I had no peers, no classes to attend or performances to see. I stumbled into regional dance practice as a way of making a living and in a short period of time became hooked with a vision that from a small regional

I was surprised at the time by the preoccupation of defining community dance as a practice distinct from the rest of the Australian dance sector. The division of professional and community was not helpful or meaningful to me, as inspiration struck in a variety of places regardless of the label attached.

centre I could produce work that would be unusual, relevant and stand up against the best of youth dance in the country.

fLiNG Physical Theatre is successful beyond my initial intention and has been a lifeline for my work and for many young emerging dancers who have grown up within the company. After 12 years and a huge learning curve we have seen many keen and excellent dancers use fLiNG to springboard to greater things.

Over that time, things have not changed that much and any changes that have occurred are probably mostly within myself. I am continually developing in my knowledge of the cultural landscape in which I work, I have been able to develop a depth in practice and I also have the benefit of hindsight with me now developed from the length of time I have spent in one practice.

As a company we still struggle to support many of our needs, to build or find a permanent home, supply enough studio time to individual dancers, offer enough community classes to adults, expand our program to younger children or the Indigenous community and at the end of the day after ten years the company still only has one full-time employee.

Currently my greatest concern is sustainability and that fLiNG does not cease when I decide to leave. We are currently working on a succession plan that will enable a new artistic director to take my place with the additional support of a second employee. The potential for fLiNG to grow is huge but a lot depends on being able to attract the right people of a high calibre and build the business that surrounds them.

fLiNG is also beginning to embrace new technology as an economical, practical way to advance in regional Australia. We have recently held our first Skype rehearsal and started our first online project. Watching 22 kids absorbed in online tutorage with a Melbourne choreographer was eye-opening."

Annette's practice is evolving to embrace more political content over time: "One of my more recent works, *Our Secret River*, started from a strong urge to contribute to the body of 'sorry' works being created in Australia – the works that are apologies to Aboriginal Australians for their suffering as a result of white settlement. It showed me how an individual and honest exploration could seed a project that became an experience for the broader community and a way for our community to challenge and complicate our town's recorded history. From my viewpoint community arts practice is playing an important role in opening up complex, difficult and contradictory issues. During my career I have come to experience community practice that engages in political discussion, something discussed by Indigenous artist Wesley Enoch, all those years ago at *Dance in the Landscape*."

During our telephone discussions, the role of independent artists and the aforementioned (fictional?) professional/community divide caught our interest. It seems that little

attention has been paid to the fact that independent artists are playing a large role in community practice, for the benefit of all.

Lee noted that: "Collaboration with the independent artists I have been able to engage over the years benefits all parties. It gives the independents an opportunity for paid work where they can test their creative material with a large cast of reasonably skilled dancers. In exchange the energy that they bring breathes some fresh-air into the culture of the company and offers the company members a much needed taste for the smorgasbord of classes, workshops and performances available in urban environments. Being a sole operator, the exchange supports me through providing a much needed conversation about the practice of dance with another professional, observation of new techniques, 'steps' or styles and a creative mind to bounce ideas with."

Annette echoed Lee's views about the benefit of collaborating or guest artists, and added:

"In Denmark, *moveMENT* – the community's men's dance project, is developing relationships with a few independent artists, namely Sete Tele and Jacob Lehrer. These two incredible male dancers support the group in simple ways, offering the occasional workshop, coming to view rehearsals and performances and most importantly socialising with the men. The conversations around coffee or a beer at the pub have a big impact on how the community participants approach and value the project."

She also spoke about surprises: "After a workshop with 15 community participants to generate choreographic ideas for a new work, the visiting independent artist leading the workshop told me she had enough content from this one workshop to feed her for years. Quite simply she had not had the opportunity to work with so many bodies, being limited in her practice to just the few dancers she could afford. In community workshops, artists also have access to performers from a range of movement backgrounds with cultural and life histories more diverse than the monoculture that sometimes exists within a group of trained dancers."

Annette Carmichael **contact** regional.wa@ausdance.org.au
Lee Pemberton **visit** www.flingphysicaltheatre.com.au

References

- (1) Future Landings and Annette's work as a regional contemporary dance facilitator is an interesting story in itself. visit www.ausdancewa.org.au/pages/future_landings/about_future_landings.php
- (2) The National Dance Forum was a partnership of the Australia Council for the Arts and Ausdance National and took place in Melbourne in 2011
- (3) 'Dance in the Landscape' community dance forum was facilitated by Ausdance Queensland and presented at Brisbane Powerhouse in 2002.