



So what has this got to do with dance?

DQDT Artistic Director and People Dancing board member, **Dylan Quinn** asks how can we choose between our artistic performance practice and developing dance opportunities for the community when both things are mutually dependable and interlinked?





Jenny Ecke and Dylan Quinn, Fulcrum. Photo: Sarah - Liberty Studios

I write this after having come out of an unusually hectic period in my life.

I recently unintentionally initiated a campaign in Northern Ireland (NI) entitled #wedeservebetter. This grew from a short social media video into a national viral movement. The reason for the campaign? Well NI, where I live and operate from, has just surpassed Belgium as the longest running democracy without a functioning government in peace time. We are now more than 590 days without a legislative assembly. Our MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) continue to receive full pay, however; they have not been undertaking their full roles and responsibilities for over 18 months. Can you imagine that in Westminster, Cardiff or Edinburgh? So what has this got to do with dance? Well, for me personally, a huge amount.

I run a small dance company in the very west of NI, in the town of Enniskillen. A beautiful island town,

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nestled in the waters of Lough Erne. I have been running the company Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre (DQDT) since 2009 and for seven years prior to this, I worked freelance here. Since establishing DQDT, we have been fortunate to receive funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI). This year, along with a wide range of other organisations across NI, our funding was significantly cut. However, we were not the worst off as a number of our contemporaries lost all of their funding.

Not having a functioning government means that departments

cannot agree budgets and therefore statutory bodies and public funding agencies are working on reduced budgets year on year. In fact, it's not even that they, and by extension we, are operating on reducing budgets: the lack of government means we don't actually know when the budgets will be agreed. For 2018/19 arts organisations across NI did not know if they were going to receive any funding until almost three weeks into the 2018/19 year. This situation is highly likely to be repeated for 2019/20.

It is clear that the pressure on public arts funders is huge. They have



no direction from government and have the challenging task of trying to support an over-stretched and depleted arts sector. This creates great uncertainty and confusion. Managing this is very challenging and really demands that funders and the arts sector work together to try and provide security and sustainability. This I believe is best achieved by those holding the purse strings proactively opening up discussions and dialogue with the organisations and people at the frontline of arts development and delivery. This will help everyone understand the sectoral requirements and ensure they can work together in these difficult times to provide stability and guidance. However, in my experience this is not always the way things happen.

In the recent funding round DQDT was the only dance organisation to receive a cut. We were informed that it had nothing to do with the quality of the work, rather it was due to the

fact that our “business model was not sustainable”. This left us somewhat confused when comparing the balance of our income streams with others. Unfortunately, we had little choice than to accept the decision.

Our previous grant funding had been shared between artistic performance practice and community / participatory work. These were by no means large funds, but nonetheless important to us. Our programming budget at its highest was £32,000. This was reduced in 2018/19, and was for the first time, we were informed, to be directed solely towards community / participatory work (at this stage I should point out that we have since met with ACNI and they have agreed to reallocate a small proportion of these funds towards some professional arts practice and, for this, we are grateful). It was also made clear that this is how they wish their funds to be spent in the future.

DQDT was established to create and produce performance practice and develop dance opportunities for the community. These areas of our work are mutually dependable and interlinked. One does not exist without the other. I trained as a dancer and my passion lies in creating and presenting art through the dance and theatre work I do, both in professional and community settings. We had managed to sustain both for the last few years because ACNI money supported our ability to produce our artistic work,



Dylan Quinn, TOST. Photo: Luca Truffarelli

whilst we raised income from various other sources to develop community projects.

We were innovative about this and it required us to explore new approaches to our work. Seeking funding in NI (and particularly rural NI) for arts practice is virtually, if not totally, impossible. The primary funder is the government, via the Arts Council. So what happens when the only source of funding that is really viable for the development of arts practice decides that it wishes (as is its right) to allocate the money it awards to another area? Well, in the case of DQDT, I would estimate it undermines the fundamental reason why the organisation exists and therefore its ability to continue to provide creative dance experiences to those it serves.

DQDT and myself very much value both areas of our work and had found a way to balance them. The community work, which forms a significant majority of what we do, is surviving and indeed thriving. We have more activities in more locations now than ever – which were set up before the funding change. The artistic work continues to remain a challenge for DQDT to undertake, largely due to our location and the complex nature of Northern Ireland. However, it was the reason I became a dancer and choreographer and it sustains me in what I do. It also feeds into the creativity of the community and participatory work that we undertake.

I have often felt that DQDT is like a beast that I am trying to tame and the heart of the beast beats for the practice of making art through my own work. If you restrict that beast’s heart you eventually restrict the beast’s ability to survive and whilst it may take some time it will eventually wither and die.

Surely it is better to engage in a conversation with artists and work out what will result in the best outcome for all concerned to ensure that both the heart – and therefore the art – will survive.

Info

www.dylanquinndance.com
admin@dylanquinndance.org
[@dqdcancetheatre](https://www.instagram.com/dqdcancetheatre)
 +44 28 663 286 86