

Dance in/for /with/as/community: Re-defining community dance in 2015-16

Ali East

The University of Otago

An introduction to the community dance topics within this issue

At no time in history has there been more emphasis on community and culture than now—as we witness communities torn apart by war and the destruction of habitat. Suddenly, the terms social justice, ethical practices, indigeneity and cultural practices have become part and parcel of our conversations around community dance participation. How, we ask, can dance play a meaningful role in fostering healthy communities while also maintaining its status as a contemporary art within the wider community? The Moving Communities International conference on Community Dance, hosted by the Dance Studies programme at the University of Otago in November 2015, both embraced the diversity that is community dance and offered meaningful re-evaluation and critique of the profession as defined by writers such as conference attendee Diane Amans (GB) and the British Dance council. This issue contains a selection of articles arising from the conference presentations.

The conference provided a vital opportunity for community dance practitioners, researchers and administrators to come together to strengthen the profession and practice of community dance in Aotearoa; to re-define what might constitute community dance and to reinforce links with dance workers around the world. It was also a celebration of the selfless work that people are doing, each in their own way, and in many walks of life.

The conference felt like an important milestone for dance in Aotearoa—an acknowledgement of the importance of dance for a community's health and for community dance as both a viable profession and academic discipline. This was what the late Caroline Plummer, Patron of the Fellowship, believed. The conference was also the tenth reunion of The University of Otago's prestigious Fellowship in Community Dance. The article by Dr Ralph Buck provides an overview of the fellowship's origins since its inception in 2005. When one surveys the diversity of these fellows' projects one can glimpse the breadth of the work that is being done in the name of community dance.

The four-day Moving Communities conference began with a pre-conference master class that explored the senses with 2005 CP Fellow Professor Petra Koppers. Uzoamaka Nwankpa, 2015 fellow, presented a moving finale of her Mother and Child project; a reunion dinner was hosted by Vice Chancellor Harlene Hayne, the University of Otago and the Plummer family. The conference opened with a Māori pōwhiri (welcome) at the Otakou Marae, a key note by Ralph Buck (University of Auckland) and a panel titled Community, Practice and Place—where Lyne Pringle (2010 fellow), Alys Longley and Rachel Ruckstuhl-Mann outlined recent place-based projects. Louise Potiki Bryant led participants in playful activities in the Whare Tapere tradition. A memorial performance walk along St Claire beach was led by Christina Houghton (Auckland).

In the panel Contested Spaces of Community Dance, Petra Koppers outlined her Asylum project while Kristie Mortimer (Auckland) discussed the insights and challenges of facilitating dance in prisons in her talk Dancing Behind Bars. Sofia Kalogeropoulou's paper titled Zorba the Flashmobian: National Communities go Viral explored the role of flash mobs as political protest in her native country Greece. Communities of Practice were further exemplified through Kerry Ann Stanton's description of the New Zealand Dance Company's workshops in museums. In the community dance education panel, Sue Cheesman (University of Waikato) spoke of fostering a respectful learning environment while Bindu Rajendrum (Queensland, Australia) raised the challenges of reaching beyond the traditional within Diasporic Indian dance education without losing meaning. Norma Sue Stitt (UV Toronto, Canada) outlined a community dance education programme that utilised online moodles. Tia Reihana (University of Auckland) described ways of reclaiming history through performed stories, while Karen Barbour (University Waikato) spoke of engaging the community in project creation and evaluation. Christina Houghton (Auckland) asked, how do we make performance in uncertain times as we respond to apathy and hope? And how can we make our practice real? In her talk, Gutter Matters, Val Smith (Auckland) asked where identities sit within a somatic underbelly—a queer politics of shame. Addressing each member of the audience individually, Cathy Livermore suggested that we are all indigenous to this planet and have kinship with the natural world. Petra Koppers (USA) linked community dance to nationhood; Dagmar Simon (Auckland), Suzanne Renner and Ojeya Cruzbanks (Otago) each described the shifts and tensions within diverse dancing communities through accounts of specific practice.

Questions were raised regarding the role that community dance education might play in meta community concerns. Professor Sherry Shapiro (USA) (along with husband Sven) reminded us of our public and ethical responsibilities as dancers and dance educators. Sherry asked, “What is our vision for humanity?” Using a critical feminist pedagogy, she described the body as a rich site for understanding culture—as a situated place of knowing—and proposed an aesthetic process that would direct us towards imagination, empathy and connectivity. Promoting a broader sense of community, Shapiro suggested that “in speaking for oneself we are speaking for those who cannot speak”. An evening of performance talks were presented by Lisa Wilkinson (Rasa Dance, Dunedin); Hahna Briggs, former CP fellow (Solo Community), Swaroopa Unni (Bharatanatayam in New Zealand) and Ali East (Rehearsing democracy through interdisciplinary Performance Improvisation). It was appropriate to end the conference with three reflections on dance and community wellbeing by senior New Zealand dance practitioners: Barbara Snook, 2008 fellow (Cancer survivor’s project), Jan Bolwell (Crowsfeet Dance Collective, Wellington), and Felicity Molloy (Auckland) (Dance for Seniors).

As will become evident from reading this volume, community dance, in all its diversity, is a fertile place for community building, for the expression of eco-socio-political concerns, and for practising democratic values such as inclusivity and co-operation, creatively, spontaneously and playfully. It has become an increasingly viable career option for socially engaged dance practitioners and a rich source of academic research.