

The power of reflection in the creative process of making a new site-specific dance work

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Abstract

This article focuses on feedback given by dancers and invited critical peers as part of my choreographic process for creating a new site-specific dance work *Curiously Quirky Invasion*, from March to May 2014 in the grounds of the University of Waikato, Kirikiriroa Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular I focus on an analysis of the feedback, and interrogate the complex ideas and multiple dialogues generated from the ways dancers and peers responded to what they had seen and experienced in the work. More specifically I examine how these responses filtered through my reflections, influenced and affected my pedagogical practice and the development of the choreography going forward, and how meaningful engagement with this feedback was embraced in relation to the development of this site-based dance. Finally, the surprises and sense of empowerment this feedback engendered will be highlighted, concluding with how this translated into the final dance piece.

Introduction

This article examines the role evaluation played in creating a new site-specific dance work *Curiously Quirky Invasion*, in the grounds of the University of Waikato, autumn 2014. How the voices of dancers and critical peers influenced my reflections empowerment and subsequently the development of the choreography going forward, ultimately the final dance piece

I am a dance artist and educator working in a tertiary university setting. Within my study leave time allocation I was excited to have a block of time to work on a new site-specific piece, yet my gremlins of doubt were in full flight: *Can I still do this? Will it be good enough? Please do not rain.* Over the last few years (2009-2012), I have been making site-specific dance works around the campus at the University of Waikato as a part of my practice-based research. In each of these works, I was interested in raising the academic profile and critical stance of site-specific dance around the campus, through dynamic exchange between dancing bodies, the architecture and function of the chosen sites (Cheesman, 2015).

Context

Site-specific dance is a growing research area. Defined as “unbounded”, the stage becomes “a fluid space and can extend in multiple directions depending on the solicitations of other people, affordances and the scope for movement” (Edensor & Bowdler, 2015, p. 710). The term site-specific references the fact that these dances “take a particular place as both inspiration and setting for the dance” (Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009, p. 1). Barbour and Hitchmough (2013) note that site-specific dance “produces a relationship between site, performers and audiences in which the embodied, emotional and sensory experiences of those present are engaged with the design, organic and structural features, as well as the social and cultural histories of the site” (p. 5). Site-based dance thus provides not just backdrops for performance, but the site itself is “perpetually in the process of being (re)produced through cultural, social, economic, historical and political processes” (Edensor & Bowdler, 2015, p. 710). Site-specific dance work continues to be discussed in international literature from a range of perspectives and multiple responses to place and space (Barbour, 2010; Barbour et al., 2019, Brown, 1998 Hunter, 2009; Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009; Wilkie, 2002). Audiences may be familiar with sites selected for dance works but the (re)production of the work is likely to generate a range of responses identifying new understandings and/or meanings emerging in creative relationships between dancers, the space and the audience itself. Reflecting on evaluation inclusive of reflection, feedback and feedforward during the process of making a new site dance is the subject of this article.

This particular project was to be submitted as part of an evidence portfolio (EP) for the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) round at my institution. In the New Zealand context, under Research Outputs, PBRF 2018 panel specific guidelines for Creative and Performing Arts, Formal Quality assurance processes are defined as “those that occur before the public presentation of the work and are many and varied across the breadth of art forms and include ... context-invitation and review processes” (Tertiary Education Commission, 2018, p. 25).

There is some evidence that traditional written peer-reviewed forms of research are favoured over creative outputs, such as performance (Little, 2013), and on this occasion, in keeping with the PBRF guidelines, I would be required to undertake a more formal review process before a public performance could be staged.

Methodology

My site-based dance research is located within a Practice as Research (PaR) paradigm with the creative output identifying as practice-based research. PaR is becoming increasingly accepted as an established form of research activity in the academy and is particularly helpful for those working in creative arts-based environments, where the work acts as a form of research (Smith & Dean, 2009). My research focuses on the process of site-specific dance making as an embodied way of knowing and as a research method (Barbour, 2006). The methodology is multi-layered, embracing feminist practices and using multiple dialogues as a self-embodied dance. Within this methodology I have used a range of methods to generate data: still and moving images, researcher journal entries, discussions with dancers and feedback from critical peers, all of which inform (new) understandings of site-based dance pedagogy. Reciprocity was an important part of the data gathering—I ensured acts of reciprocity were woven throughout the process, particularly in invitations to provide feedback and the mutual exchange of ideas.

Unlike previous projects, and despite my skepticism regarding its usefulness, on this occasion, I had embedded many more opportunities to receive feedback/feedforward in order to potentially deepen the reflective process during the composing, rehearsal phrases and after the performance phrase. “Dance as bodies moving through time and space, provide an evocative vehicle to engage in a creative dialogue with, and interrogation of, site” (Stock, 2011, p. 1). As choreographer of the piece, I was reminded of Lavender’s (2009) point that “no matter how a choreographer works, the need for evaluation (spontaneous, reflective, intuitive or some other kind) is pervasive, for it is through evaluative choices that a work gets built up, shaped and completed” (p. 8). Three years prior, Lavender (2006) asserted that “rehearsal criticism is neither dance centred not artist-centred, it is rehearsal process centred”. He expands by saying that “rehearsal criticism does not seek to shape the dance or steer the dance maker and is primarily concerned with the making of dance”. His model IDEA has four operations: improvisational, developmental, evaluation and assimilation. Furthermore, he stresses that “IDEA is not prescriptive but a map of operations intrinsic to dance making” (2009, p. 73).

Lavender defines dance criticism as “focussing on the description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the dance itself regardless of how it is made” (2006, p. 12). In my case it would seem that critical peer discussions would fall mainly under the dance criticism definition because they were far more revolved around the dance

than on the choreographic process; however, the comments did have ramifications for the completing of the work through the choreographic process.

This PBRF requirement of a more formal review process provided an opportunity I decided to fully embrace (although not without concerns) in the form of an invitation to critical peers to watch a showing and to provide feedback in the form of a shared evaluation. The three invited critical peers are experienced researchers who understand both artistic practice and PBRF academic process and offer different perspectives. In evaluation it is important to embrace the following: “Each viewer’s experience is unique, not simple because each person has a different heritage of associations to the dance but because each viewer has literally made a different dance” (Foster, 1986, cited in Hämäläinen, 2002, p. 41).

My concerns, encapsulated within my thoughts as questions below, were largely related to how the feedback would affect our process and in turn the final product are. Notes from my researcher journal reveal some cynicism towards the purpose and effectiveness of feedback and feedforward from a showing:

Have I done enough to stress it is a showing to support the dancers? What happens if I do not agree with the feedback? What happens if I am thrown a curve ball that I cannot solve in the time left before the performance deadline? Will it be a positive experience? Will we be provided with suggestions going forward? Will they notice the gaps? Why am I doing this—to be compliant!

I am aware of a tension that I am about to embark on a mode of dance criticism for PBRF purposes in order to comply with the procedures set for artistic work within the University system and eventually to be rated, measured and scored. (Researcher Diary)

This process would offer an opportunity for me to take an active role in reciprocal critique of the dance work. I was hopeful critical peer discussions would provide a supportive, imaginative, more in-depth probing of the work in progress by fresh eyes. I was aware of where the choreography needed further development especially the transitions between sections and different areas of the site. At this point I was so engulfed in trying to structure the piece, I lost sight of the underlying ideas. So the guide questions were constructed as evaluative in nature but also gave room for interpretation and meaning, and the perception of the pivotal nature of the relationship between the environment and the dance.

Taking into consideration a range of approaches which acknowledge the need for evaluation in the analysis of dance (Adshead, 1988; Duffy, 2015; Hämäläinen,

2002; Hodgens, 1988; Kearns, 2017; Lavender, 2006; Lerman, 2020) so that I could shape guide questions in such a way that appreciation of the work was not overwhelmed by analysis (Adshead, 1988). For critical peers attending the showing, I drafted a set of discussion points to provoke dialogue. These points are informed in the main by Lerman's (2020) Critical Response Process⁴ (CRP) with its four core steps combining questions with informed dialogue in the form of firstly statements of meaning by responders, secondly the artist asks questions about the work and responders may answer the questions, thirdly responders ask neutral questions about the work and the artist responds and fourthly responders state opinions. In this process there are specific roles artist/maker, responder, and facilitator.

Questions for critical peers:

- What did you notice and/or what intrigued or interested you in this work?
- How did you see the relationship between the environment and the dance?
- What was your response to the piece and why?
- List four to five words to describe what you experienced.
- Strengths

Curiously quirky invasion

Mentioned previously, as a PaR choreographer, I was interested in exploring further the relationship/interaction between the site, choreographer, performer, performance and audience in the new site I had chosen. On this occasion I had selected a site within the University of Waikato grounds for its interesting contrasts of natural and manufactured aspects. The site comprised of a grassy, flat oval area surrounded by trees; a second space with a large open grass space on a different level, flanked by grey stark buildings; the architecture with its straight and curved lines framing this area, edged with a glass wall on two sides and a long rectangular shaped infinity pool on another. Professional dancers¹ were engaged for this project which was developed over three weeks with a statutory Easter holiday in the middle week; dancers were with me for the first and last week of this period. In the intervening week I adapted and played around with the movement content to develop the choreographic material created in the first week from the improvisation phases recorded on video. Over this period of time, I used a variety of processes to work with the dancers in order to build the piece, namely structured improvisation, sequences made up by me and tasks with movement content produced by the dancers in response to the site. I frequently returned to the site for further inspiration, looking at the form and use of the site as well as spending some time in the multiple

areas of the site, noticing the associations that seemed to appear randomly in my looking.

By discussing and unpacking the researcher reflections on the variety of feedback, I was hopeful that the multiple ways this affected the choreographer and process, the performers and the outcome were illuminated and the effects might support further understanding of the power of reflective practice to deepen dance relationships with place and space.

Feedback was gathered from extensive discussions with the dancers and through written and verbal reflective responses from peers to questions posed after they attended a showing. Throughout, I also documented personal observations of video footage captured in rehearsal and creative phrases in researcher diary notes based on a constant cycle of action and reflection, including embracing at times choreographic blocks and doubts. The data collected from the choreographic process formed a rich tapestry to help support the challenges arising in the creative working process. However, due to limitations of space, this article focuses primarily on the feedback given by peers; findings, analysis and discussion are based on the responses to the guide questions set out earlier in this article.

Reflections

This section takes a close look at the responses to the showing and is set out in parts as an ethnographic account, based on extracts leading up to the showing from my researcher diary. This account shows how the development of the creative process was disturbed, disrupted and supported, and how the challenges encountered in the process were mitigated.

Leading up to the showing, diary entries from my third week point to a number of choreographic decisions needing to be made with some urgency with limited rehearsal time remaining before the showing was to take place. It is clear from the entries made that the last week was significant in its highlighting of the anticipated pressures of performance and confidence in decision making regarding the (seasonal) timing of the site-based project. The following discussion will specifically focus attention on the last week.

Researcher reflects:

Monday

was spent shaping the pool section, experimenting with the introduction of dance books and joining phrases together in between showers. I selected three

illustrated contemporary dance books stacked up by the pool and then read silently by each dancer as they roll slowly across the concrete bridge straddling the pool providing a transition to the last section of the dance. These books referenced: the building towering directly behind which houses the University library and Bennett's book shop, student life and dance. An amusing occurrence once these books were introduced, I noticed that dancers all seem to have the same favoured book, making sure that this was in the right place for them to pick up in the stack. I also further crafted the waltz phrase; however, I was grappling with the entry onto the green grassy oval.

Tuesday

Last night tossing and turning trying to order the piece. Completely absorbed in this creative process and thrown around like a barrel in a very turbulent stormy sea pounded with rain falling. I was scrabbling, huge headache I could not get an order past triangle and rectangle phrases. My responsibility to the dancers was to block the piece—make some decisions I told myself. I had organised a showing on Wednesday, a deliberate strategy with dual purpose to get the piece moving and receive feedback for PBRF.

Tuesday dawned—thank goodness a fine day as it had pelted with rain both in my head and outside all night. In hindsight, autumn in Hamilton, New Zealand, may not have been the best time of year to have an outdoor site work in terms of changeable weather. On this occasion I was lucky with the weather although it did mean contending the with a wet site particularly wet grass on numerous occasions. Today seemed to flow and I was able to move forwards with the piece including blocking it in an order and my night in the choreographic storm was not wasted.

The feedback from the dancers at the end of rehearsals on the Tuesday was heartening because they all felt today was hard but good to have the piece together Eve commented that “I had no idea how it would go as it was just bits before today but felt how it came together surprised me”. Renee stated, “It was good to have a longer rehearsal time to work on one piece instead of odd days plus made links on one section about the slowness of the water section related to infinity especially with the books bit.”

End of Tuesday saw a request from the dancers that they felt they needed to go over details of movement lost in the process to structure the dance.

The showing

Whew I awoke to a beautiful autumnal sunny day and we spent most of the morning practising, recapping order, and adding in transitions where needed. I was acutely aware of how exposing this impending showing was for myself and the dancers and the vulnerabilities that were just below the surface. We had only just blocked the piece. As the choreographer at this point in time, I readily admit the piece was so close to my face, it is extremely hard to step back with any sense of perspective. (Researcher)

Eve, Renee and Helene performed the work full out for the first time for an invited group of peers. Post showing, I was on a high adrenaline rush, elated—we had a piece. I was extremely proud of the dancers' efforts to pull the piece together and perform with such acuity. Directly afterwards myself, dancers and critical peers sat together and discussed the piece. I am very aware of the argument that dance needs to be honoured for its embodied way of being and that dance criticism is dominated by forms of linguistic feedback/evaluation. Furthermore, I would suggest that the responses, although linguistic, seem to leave gaps for the ephemeral nature of dance to be present, holding its ground through ambiguity and slippages that leak through the cracks of literary responses.

This rich dialogue provided all of us with so much more than I had expected. So many aspects were illuminated that I had considered but not actually brought to consciousness. For example, the many associations and meanings round the pool section and the relationship of the black and white checks on the costumes to the architecture lined with shadows. In addition to the verbal discussions, I also received written comments from all three critical peers. This feedback provided me with a clear sense of how the work was understood and valued and feedforward suggestions to improve the work. This process was also highly valued by the dancers as evidenced in the following comments:

Having well-spoken and in-depth feedback during the process inspires, opens eyes to the big picture, re-engages, and encourages ... new perspectives over the past few days ... placing higher value on outside eye feedback and comment (Dancers).

I wrote to all on the evening after the showing saying:

... The dancers and I were delighted to have the piece reflected back to us so poetically and eloquently. Also, the feedforward comments made for a

constructive afternoon before the performances in the next two days.
(Researcher, personal communication, 30 April, 2014)

The richness of these conversations was that they were not solely focused on ‘fix-its’, thus allowing for shifting perspectives to emerge. Importantly, at this point Lavender asserts that “through evaluative decision-making that works live or die, and the closer one draws to the end of the rehearsal process the more power each seemingly small decision has to make or break the overall effect of the work” (2006, p. 10). Some of the comments drew my attention to the aesthetics of the work.



Figure 1: Dancers Renee Ball, Eve Veglio-White, Helene Burgstaller in ‘Curiously Quirky Invasion’. Photograph by Cheri Waititi

With the first space my intention was to echo the village green complete dancing full of swirls and twirls and fair-like activities including playful relationships between the dancers. Circling, triplets, weaving, lifting, playing with a somewhat lyrical bent to the movement dynamics formed the basis of this section. I wanted to challenge myself by using very different movement vocabulary to my usual staple and it seemed from the feedback I had achieved this:

Circling into the confines of the circle, flowing, spiralling, graceful interweavings. Images of the three graces ... Folk dance on the village green ... As colours swirl in a bubble. (CP 1³)

The waltz section of the dance was unexpected to me, from how I have seen Sue work in the past, but I enjoyed it as it's a way of moving that I enjoy, and am comfortable in. (Dancer)

As opposed to my more characteristic choreographic traits and movement vocabulary used in the second part captured in the following:

'grassy site dance' with movement characterised by jumps, wriggles, angular movement and quirky rhythmical timing recognisable as a feature in your choreography, along with lifts and hand gestures. (CP, 2)



Figure 2: Dancers Eve Veglio-White, Helene Burgstaller in 'Curiously Quirky Invasion'. Photograph by Sue Cheesman.

At the time of the showing, I was struggling with how to begin the piece and aware that the first section needed further choreographic development plus there were a few technical issues with the lifts and travelling pathways that needed solutions. Critical Peer 2 picked up on these concerns at the time of the showing and commented that they felt

the main focus was the second part and suggested that the first part be further developed to justify its inclusion or be removed. (CP, 2)

With my own intuition and this feedback, I redeveloped the beginning, locating the dancers in the trees. One by one they promenaded through the trees, onto the path in single file to enter the oval grassy space, hands joined, reminiscent of a daisy chain.



Figure 3: Dancers Renee Ball, Helene Burgstaller, Eve Veglio-White in '*Curiously Quirky Invasion*'. Photograph by Cheri Waititi.

At this stage dancers seem to be the best to solve these technical issues in relation to the lifts by adapting and tweaking positioning while I acted as a 'sage on the side', providing suggestions. Further crafting took place as I clarified the waltz/triplet section and developed it through manipulating the existing motifs. The following crucially captured the changes made, which was affirming to me as choreographer.

In the performances I observed that you developed the first part in response to this feedback. You set the dancers within the trees by the lakeside and they walked slowly into the grass oval, their movement progressing from sombre to joyful and childlike within the weaving and lifting choreography. (CP, 2)

Pool tempting

The following critical feedback statements focused on the same part in the piece brought to the fore, by reflecting back to me many of the ideas I had been playing with. There was evidence of description, association and meaning making, effective moments and evaluation.



Figure 4: Dancers Renee Ball, Eve Veglio-White, Helene Burgstaller in '*Curiously Quirky Invasion*'. Photograph by Cheri Waititi.

Breadth and the pull of water. Elemental play. Striking reflections. The near static stripes now evoking stillness after their earlier business. Taken into the water with breath. A magnificent playful intervention. Narcissus destroys the mirror and our building reflections disappear in a cascade of ripples. The water becomes the dance. Hold that moment. Synch the breath? Delightful swimming motifs playfully explored without becoming trite. (CP, 1)

Precarious balance by the water—a sense of drowning yet floating even though on land—Narcissus staring in water? Pure joy or curiosity, temptation, danger and intrigue of water-delicious. (CP, 3)



Figure 5: Dancer Helene Burgstaller in '*Curiously Quirky Invasion*'. Photograph by Cheri Waititi.

The 'pool site dance' played with the precariousness of the edge of the pool with dancers suspended on the edge, balancing, looking in, 'swimming' motifs, rolling along the edge and touching toes to the water. Both the reflection of the site and the dancers in the pool were captivating, and then the ripples on the water as the dancers broke the surface were mesmerising. Particularly effective was the moment when the dancers lay with their heads over the edge looking in and blew on the water. (CP, 2)



Figure 6: Dancers Renee Ball, Eve Veglio-White, Helene Burgstaller in '*Curiously Quirky Invasion*'. Photograph by Cheri Waititi.

The statements gave me a rich insightful reading of the piece at that moment in time through in-depth poetic comments, moving beyond pure description into nuanced associations and meanings. These words danced off the page and gave me a sense that this part had layers of meaning the different voices alluded to, and interesting to note that the feedback from the performance by the audience also noted this section.

Putting on shoes



Figure 7: Renee Ball, Eve Veglio-White, Helene Burgstaller in ‘Curiously Quirky Invasion’. Photograph by Cheri Waititi.

Playful exchange of shoes but socks lack same whimsy. Sock it to us!
Need to sustain playfulness and pace otherwise we are dragged down into what appears a mundane conclusion. (CP, 1)

At this point, I was very aware that one of the dancers needed more time to put the shoes on and the need to draw attention away from this by weaving this action into the piece and keep the momentum going. As a result, we further played with the dynamics and upped the game stakes by trying to pinch each other’s shoes, fast and slow tying of lacings and general camaraderie between the dancers while putting on the shoes and jettisoning the socks. These solutions worked well and provided a seamless transition to the last section of the piece.

Another point that was raised alerted me to the number of places observers thought the piece had ended and began clapping. In response to the feedback, I edited the last section, worked on the pace and kept the freeze shapes against the

wall for longer but less of them, edited out the sounds and found a stillness with dancers in strong individual shapes around the far end of the pool echoing different ideas in the piece.

The following bank of words in response to the piece documented by the audience encapsulates similar resonances of the piece and attests to the number of features found within the work.

Quirky, imaginative, playful, humorous, connected, different, peaceful, awkwardness, beautiful, unexpected, intrigued, excited, stunned, engaging, linear, experimental, mesmerising, delicious, captivating.

The post showing discussions also provided me with opportunities to ask questions and probe the responses for a deeper insight and possibilities for ways forward for this piece. The creative conversations that the work provoked provided a range of potential pathways which could be explored, I was very encouraged by dancer and peer engagement with the process itself, going beyond reception of the showing, and signalling a number of avenues along which we might proceed.

Conclusion

I recognise that this research, and this article, is located in one site-specific endeavour and situated within my interpretation of the various voices of reflection in this process. The reflective voices of critical peers were not unfamiliar to me and though they had been invited, approached the showing with their own ‘fresh eyes’ in the spirit of site-based dance. Their lyrical responses provided me with affirmation of the work, and affirmation of the process—originally positioned as compliance with research regulations. My fears began to subside, and I found myself embracing the critical peer evaluation as opportunity, allowing me to take on board the suggestions to improve the outcomes for the work. The questions and the conversations at times were a mirror, allowing me to find creative solutions to the issues identified. After the peer critical feedback, I felt supported, invigorated and nurtured in the process going forward to complete the site dance. This process provoked my curiosity about the different ways I might look at evaluative processes outside the scope of dance with new lenses as well as ways in which reflection within an evaluative process allowed for a much richer understanding of both process and performance of a site-based dance work. I would argue that the evaluation was an amalgam of dance criticism, combined with critical dialogue through constructive feedback and feedforward. In future evaluative processes, blending more established processes,

such as CPR and IDEA, and incorporating a focus on critical peer feedback will become an established part of my practice. The embodied process and reflective responses gave me an aesthetic lens on the work and furthered my practice as a creative artist and an arts practice-based researcher. Receiving feedback was not only a positive experience in which my own agency was strengthened, but also the cynic in me with regard to this reflective process was banished. I learnt that there was far more to be gained in the form of an array of possibilities to improve the final outcome and ultimately resulted in this site dance *Curiously Quirky Invasion* being a far richer work.

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End Notes

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² Acknowledgement of the photographic account of this piece '*Curiously Quirky Invasion*' by photographer Cheri Waititi.

³ Acknowledgement of critical peers for their feedback and insightful conversations post showing.

⁴ <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>