

HELPING TO BREAK THE MOULD?

Composer Christopher Best considers questions raised by this year's Composers/ Choreographers Exchange course.

Last month ten choreographers and ten composers met up for six days at the Royal Festival Hall, with a view to exploring the complex world of collaboration through practical activity and discussion.

The course is one of only a handful of European initiatives designed to bring the worlds of western music and dance back into a more symbiotic relationship. We might ponder for a moment on the fact that this is even necessary, in marked contrast to cultures such as Indonesian, where movement and sound can be expressed together in a single word.

It would not be appropriate to dwell on every detail of the course's content, but I should start with a general overview about its structure and ideology if the ensuing discussion is to have any meaningful context.

The exchange aims to focus on the *process* of collaboration between composers and choreographers and not on finished product. At its heart lie ten one-to-one encounters of one hour each where every composer gets to work individually with every choreographer and vice-versa. They are sent to beaver away in odd side rooms at the Festival Hall or seek out their own idiosyncratic spaces amongst the stair-wells and corridors that encircle the central concert hall. These practical workshops are followed up by group sharing, showing and discussion.

This year's Artistic Directors, Kenneth Tharp (dance) and myself (music) had already been involved with the course both as leaders and as participants. It is a tradition that a fresh artistic director is brought in each year from the ranks of those who have done the course in order to provide both regular new blood and continuity. On each occasion the structure and content is re-examined for its relevance and thrown up in the air to see where it lands. What exactly is exchanged on this course? How useful is it for the participants? How close does the experience come to working in the real world? How relevant is it in a changing climate of artistic activity? Should the Exchange focus solely on dance and music- what about the visual arts, or theatre, or multi-media?

That last question was the one we had to address first. It was clear that no course could attempt to examine the whole canvas of collaborative activity and still achieve anything tangible. Music is still the art-form most commonly paired with dance, and evidence of professionally made work would indicate that much still remains to be done to improve the collaborative element (where collaboration is appropriate).

In terms of its track record, the Exchange in its present form could be justified in that many participants have gone on to make successful collaborative work. But arguably these (or different) collaborations may have happened anyway- entry onto the course being restricted to artists who are already engaged in some professional activity- so the real test is whether former participants worked *differently* and more *successfully* after having experienced the course.

As a preamble to brainstorming the exact content of this year's Exchange, Kenneth and I spent several months debating many issues. We considered the similarities and important differences between music and dance language, the extended process of collaboration that goes on in the making of new work (with all its inherent logistical and artistic problems), and the kind of structures choreographers and composers develop.

It was clear to us that in relation to these questions, the one-to-one sessions on the course are entirely artificial. Whereas in the real world collaborators may meet up seldom and have to communicate over an extended period by 'phone or e-mail and send tapes or videos back and forth, on the Exchange choreographers and musicians are closeted together continuously for six days.

Furthermore, the one-to-ones can never go far beyond first base; The course ends with at least ten starting points and no real exploration of the latter stages of collaboration. Yet every artist knows that it can be a rocky road from a work's initial concept to its first performance! The test of whether a collaboration is working or not often comes painfully late in the process; perhaps only when lighting, costume or restrictions of the performing space finally become clear.

The logistical problems of working apart, if not handled with care, can seriously endanger success. Too often physical separation leads to artistic separation; each element drifting into its own world and losing the plot of the other. Or having sent rough sequenced versions of music along the way, composers sometimes proudly present the finished score, finally recorded by 'real' musicians, only to find that dancers have internalised the robotic qualities of their rough version and can no longer identify key gestures or moments on which their steps depend.

Composers and choreographers too often assume that the other can identify the structural detail that to them is so clear, and are then horrified or offended when demands are made to cut or extend passages of music or choreography.

Both parties may inadvertently create 'sections' during the devising process, which become fossilised in a way that hinders organic evolution or battles against the required structural integrities of the other medium.

We can expect none of these pitfalls to be addressed by the one-to-ones (though they may well arise as issues through the accompanying case-studies and group discussion that form an important element of the course).

It must be acknowledged that the experience of the Exchange is artificial in other ways too. Participants have access to very limited resources; they come without their dancers or rehearsal studios, musicians or electronic equipment. They are strongly encouraged to analyse and discuss process as an important adjunct to practical experimentation. Their initial findings are the subject of almost instant feedback from peers and there are no deadlines or budget restrictions hanging like a sword of Damocles over their heads.

So where does all this point in respect of the relevance of the Exchange? Crucially, many of these disparities between real life and the Exchange are not shortcomings at all. They are quite intentional. They allow time for artists to dwell on aspects of collaboration and questions of artistic importance that real life often sweeps aside in its tidal wave of professional pressures. To illustrate this, I would like to give some impressions of the kind of material that gets generated by the one-to-one workshops.

Not surprisingly, there is a simplicity and directness about the work shown. There is no time to dress up an idea with extended detail, there is precious little rehearsal time and there are only the two participants involved.

Much of the work explores humour. Perhaps this is for easy effect or as a safety device, but more likely it results from the desire to challenge expectations and convention.

Work is very often a response to the space in which it was devised. The need for almost instant inspiration leads collaborators to grasp any starting point they can find; be it a settee, extraneous sound, doorway, shelf or staircase. Somewhat unexpectedly, there is usually a self-contained quality to the work; It becomes a maquette rather than an embryonic idea. This indicates that, despite the underlying tenet of focus on process, artists have an instinct to create meaningful product no matter how miniature.

The most important and powerful feature of this work, however, is a striking level of integration. Musicians dance and choreographers make sound; Instruments are incorporated into the choreography and the sounds generated by the movement form an integral part of the score. There is a marked sense of a unified concept that makes a nonsense of any questions to do with 'how the music related to the dance'.

In summary, the material generated in the one-to-ones repeatedly shows *democracy* and *play* at work. Bearing in mind that each participant will have engaged in ten such activities, the one-to-ones unquestionably draw from the participants new levels of inventiveness, flexibility of approach, quick-wittedness, ability to take risks and immense concentration.

If these are important qualities drawn out by the *artificiality* of the Exchange, then it should be asked how such noble qualities can be made to survive the pressures and compromises of working in the real world. How to mutually inspire when working so much of the time at a distance. How to maintain democracy when there are in-built hierarchies imposed through the outrageously unfair commissioning system. How to maintain the spirit of 'play' when there is pressure to produce a certain kind of product for a certain kind of audience. On the other hand, it is also important to ask whether integration, democracy and play really *are* qualities appropriate to the professional world!

We need to ascertain more feedback from past participants to answer these questions. We also need to hear from artists working collaboratively who have begun to address these questions but who have *not* done the Exchange.

If it should transpire that these qualities *are* important, but cannot currently withstand real life collaboration, then is it time to insist on working in a different way? To effect changes in attitudes towards funding, product-labelling and hierarchies, to re-define the art-form and challenge basic assumptions about the relationship between dance and music? If so, then maybe the Exchange's real function is to exert a subtle but increasing pressure towards change, by stimulating creative artists to break the mould.

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