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South African contemporary dance funding: perceptions of choreographers in the contemporary dance industry, in relation to shifting funding frameworks.

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2008-06-24T11:19:17Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/4977

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CHAPTER 4:

Conclusion: What do I deduce from the research?

My research arose from a suspicion in my mind surrounding current contemporary dance funding in South Africa. As I work in this field, most of the complaints I have heard in the past have been that there is not enough available funding to provide for a stable environment. This made me curious, as there appear to be a number of pathways to apply through. Through my coursework at the University of the Witwatersrand, I have heard, from people within some of the funding bodies, of some of the most common mistakes people make when applying for funding.[1] Listening to both sides of the funding arena, I find the following to be true: a large sum of available funding monies does exist, but is not sufficient for the increasing numbers of applications; and that a lack of skills exists amongst those applying for funding. I also find that the perceptions exist that certain themes and styles of dance take preference for funding over others, that racial boundaries are very discreetly coming to the surface, and that participants feel that those within funding bodies do not understand the contemporary dance style and have set up criteria that infringe on the artistic freedom of contemporary dance choreographers. What has also come to my attention is that in general some of the participants seem to be uninformed about the criteria and requirements of the funding bodies, while those within funding bodies suspect that applicants do not research the conditions and differing criteria that are presented.

A glaringly obvious result of this research is the need for the provision and development of skills, particularly in writing proposals or business plans, budgeting and accounting. These skills appear to be sorely lacking, as evident not only from the point of view of those attempting to access funds, but also from the point of view of people within the funding bodies. Even if some of the participants feel that they may be able to complete these tasks fairly competently, there is still the question of actually having the time to give them the full attention they need. Once people are finished earning their primary sources of income, then processed their creative thoughts, attended rehearsals and performances, it seems clear that there is little time left over for such an important aspect of their creative arena. The skills that are also

[1] Class discussions with Nicola Danby from *Business and the Arts South Africa*, and Ashraf Johaardien from the *Arts and Culture Trust*.

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missing are those relating to technical costs too – what is the minimum pay for dancers; how much does a lighting designer cost; how much to arrange for a new sound score to be created; what is the average fee for an accountant? From the participants' responses, it seems that the feeling is that there is also little support to increase this knowledge or skills, and that the knowledge is staying in the hands of the same people. On the other hand, Monamodi feels that when workshops have been organized, there is very little response.

I feel that it is a worry that some participants have never applied for funding as they believe they simply won't qualify. Some leave it up to companies to apply, and then choreograph or perform for them. Only two participants mentioned the 'Cultural Helpdesk' in Gauteng – an organisation that has existed since 2001 and provides "advice, training, development and consultancy" in areas such as management, administration, fundraising and marketing and is supported by Nedbank through the ACT[2]. One of these participants was a first time applicant (who was successful), and the other is from the Eastern Cape. It seems that it is not only the funding bodies that are perceived as being badly advertised, but the very type of body who could help many people too.

It is evident that not all individuals or companies, new or established, feel secure in applying for funds either. Both appear to struggle when trying to access funding, finding it difficult to validate their existence or history. Yet some do admit that they have been successful, despite being new or feeling that they aren't very well known. However, some funding bodies also require 2 years of financial history (NLDTF), but the question is how individuals can then prove their credibility and accountability. Some participants are of the opinion that funding should be split to represent newcomers and established companies separately. There is evidence of thoughts of implementing this type of process in the NAC, but organizations such as BASA and ACT do not seem to have the resources to actually carry this through. This seems to place a lot of emphasis on the effect and influential power behind funding at the NAC but we need to be wary of approaching a situation like pre-1994, where arts councils fund what they deem as acceptable theatre, or dictate how people should be creating

[2]http://www.nedbank.co.za/website/content/artsAffinities/ArtslifeProject_detail.asp?ItemID=183&Article =Articles

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work in order to receive funding. There is already some inkling towards this, as some participants feel that they should be writing or creating what funding bodies want, instead of creating what they, and possibly their audiences, feel artistically drawn to. Another danger here is that workshops and community programmes are run purely for tokenism, and therefore do not inform or promote contemporary dance in an appropriate or healthy manner.

This brings me to the perceptions of who is actually getting the funding. Some participants say that it is the traditional dancers, others say that it is the contemporary style, and another few suggest that it is the ballet companies who still seem to be fairly secure as they produce what is seen as historically "good", and is received by a regular, loyal audience. When one looks at the figures though, it becomes evident that contemporary dance is indeed receiving a fairly large portion of dance funds a lot of the time. I don't think that this indicates that there is enough money, or that people should just keep quiet and stop questioning where the money is or who it goes to, but I do think that the dance industry needs to be aware of its own environment before it can begin to compare itself to others. Participants seem to be unaware of actual amounts of money being put into dance in general, and into contemporary dance in particular. They also don't seem to have a sense of when funding bodies are open for applications. For example, the NAC has 2 funding sessions (in the beginning and middle of each year), and the ACT only has one (in the first quarter of each year). I understand that an organization such as ACT cannot open its doors until it has resources in place to do so, but surely larger bodies, such as the NLDTF, or the NAC are able to find a means of effectively advising the public of their funding sessions at greater notice, as it seems that newspaper advertisements are not reaching enough people. Wouldn't this begin to defuse a sense of alarm and panic, and encourage companies and individuals to begin thinking of their funding needs in advance, and promoting the environment of sustainability that the funding bodies preach?
This does not mean that that it is solely the job of funding bodies to correct the problems being experienced and perceived in the contemporary dance industry. Choreographers and performers need to be actively involved too. I think it is evident that the current funding framework is no longer the "cheque book sponsorship" mentioned in the introduction, but rather an environment of negotiation, where one needs to be cautious of protecting one's own needs while simultaneously meeting the

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criteria put forward by the funders or sponsors. I believe that tension will always exist between funding bodies and those applying for funds, but there needs to be sufficient dialogue between all parties in order for a healthier environment to be established. This could also provide more negotiated opportunities for our contemporary dance talent to receive the deserved exposure during the 2010 Soccer World Cup, instead of allowing performances to be flooded by only Traditional Dance, Ballet or Afro-fusion, or creating the "ethnic image" for foreigners that le Seuer speaks of. This will highlight the diversity of our cultures, instead of trying to promote a national culture that may not really exist.

Ten years ago, Steinberg already warned against the tensions created around the notion of a "national identity" (1996:164). It seems that these tensions are evident today, with practitioners not knowing or understanding how to represent this, or feeling that they have to conform to themes or styles that they know are not their own. This also seems to hint back to the PAC's, where they determined what was deemed as real theatre. Obviously we need to promote certain standards and high-quality works, but perhaps trying to promote the sense of a national identity is not the way to go about this. Monamodi explains that the NAC interprets this as projects that have significance nationwide, but contemporary dance choreographers are misinterpreting this. It also appears as if Pienaar's findings in 2002, regarding insufficient funding, inappropriate evaluation and limited performance opportunities, can still be validated today: the same processes of marketing, promoting, funding, performing and evaluating works are still in question and still hold deep concerns.

Many of the participants were also concerned with the problems of access experienced with the NAC and the NLDTF in the past few years. These are inexcusable, and blame seems to have been shifted from pillar to post, but these organizations surely realize that they have a lot of reconciliation to do themselves, and this is not just with the dance community, but also with the arts environment as a whole. This does not mean that they can suddenly begin to throw money at everyone, but encouraging questions, debate and dialogue would certainly be a step in the right direction. Besides actual forums for debate, perhaps another means of achieving this is to establish, or support the establishment of an arts 'diary' wherein discussions can occur. Reviews could be given, promoting media exposure; shows could be

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promoted, projects and funding sessions advertised. A corporate sponsor could be found, as the target audience around the performing arts is growing year by year. This may begin to then open much needed avenues of discourse, instead of rumblings remaining unvoiced.

The problems of contemporary dance funding reach beyond just the dancers and the choreographers. Participants report that administrative staff is also grossly underpaid. But the final result I would like to mention is that half of participants requested anonymity. Some of these participants said that this was because they fear discrimination by the funding bodies if they hear negative comments or criticism. This is a particularly dangerous position to be in, as it means that people fear repercussions for their honesty. One's initial response may be that these were mostly new choreographers, when in fact it was a very even mixture of both new and experienced. This research is evidence of a lack of confidence on behalf of contemporary dance choreographers. This type of environment could lead to the loss of not only performers and choreographers, but of potentially exciting projects too. It seems that in the attempt to make funding accessible to more people, and to ensure the freedom of expression clause in our Bill of Rights, the funding environment has become slightly more stifling. Who can actually explain what it is to be South African, or what a South African flavour is? Many of the recommendations of the White Paper are now outdated, so it also appears necessary to look at the policies which govern the arts environment.

It is understandable that ACT and BASA may have slightly different roles in the funding framework – ACT aims to satisfy the needs of their founding trustees in order to maintain a large portion of their funds, and BASA mediates between sponsors and artists to ensure that a fair deal for all is developed. But the NAC and the NLDTF need to ensure that its future funding endeavors do not intimidate, isolate or interrogate the artistic needs of the creative industries, and particularly dance. I agree that they need to have measures of accountability and interests in sustainability, but intervening now should avoid a situation where more choreographers and dancers begin to give up. Yet on the other hand, choreographers need to investigate their environment more – the more information you have, the more prepared you can be to defend your artistic endeavors and beliefs. I do think that some of the criteria are too

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large a burden, especially for individuals – no-one has the right to coerce a particular voice or persuasion from those who trust their right to freedom of expression – but choreographers and dancers have the responsibility to themselves and to the industry to be informed, and to speak out when they feel they aren't. A sense of apathy from the dance community may negatively affect their reception by funding bodies, funding through embassies and international agreements with the DAC, and corporate sponsorship. Choreographers need to find ways of making their work stand out from the rest, to use their creativities to explore innovative and fresh ways of working without them compromising their artistic integrity.

I was surprised by the results of my research. One of my thoughts was that having a pool of participants from a predominantly metropolitan environment, particularly Johannesburg, would leave me with a mix of people with a lot of knowledge and access to funding bodies. My pool of participants is not the size I initially anticipated, but I am surprised by how little information there seems to be known when it comes to funding bodies. I think that the participants of this research are those people who are willing to be involved in the discourses required to improve the funding environment, but I suspect that many, many more choreographers and performers do not understand the new funding climate, and still expect to be given exactly what they want without understanding the current requirements of funding bodies. What I also found intimidating was the urgency with which people speak of their experiences and their wish for actions to be taken. This is noted particularly when participants wish to create full time work out of their choreography and performances.
Contemporary dance, by its nature, can be alienating to existing and to new audiences. It often requires understanding to deconstruct and find meaning. The nature of contemporary dance can also often be political and confrontational or challenging – commenting about issues that still make many uncomfortable, such as sexuality or roles of the masculine and feminine, of race and gender. For these reasons, it should be nurtured in a different way – I believe that because of its very nature the considerations when providing funding for it should be different. Some corporates may like this because of the new marketing audience they could be targeting – one that is edgy, innovative and not just seeking entertainment.

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The previously referenced texts and documents provide valuable insights into the world of contemporary dance funding, but I feel that it is equally beneficial to discover whether these observations are still substantiated today, or not. This is particularly valuable when regarding the research undertaken by the Performing Arts Network of South Africa regarding South African theatre, and funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy (2005). This research proposes a manner in which the theatre industry of South Africa could be developed over a period of 5 years. If choreographers become part of this proposed process of change, the industry can develop in a manner that helps funding bodies and contemporary dance to grow. Hearing the perceptions of choreographers and performers that currently exist could help in avoiding the same mistakes from being made. As no research documentation can be found regarding the perceptions held by choreographers and performers towards contemporary dance funding, I hope that this research has provided valuable insights and vital information, allowing future research to find methods of improving what I perceive to be an unstable area of funding.

I feel that if the members of the contemporary dance industry see that their work is valuable, and that active research is being undertaken in order to improve the funding environment in which we exist, they may be encouraged to speak out for themselves even further, and be willing to create and participate in regular forums in which responses may be articulated. Contemporary dancers have a challenging environment in which to exist, as injuries could end careers and just the need to make money and survive could lead them away from this field for good. This would weaken an already shaky environment and lead to a draining of valuable resources and experiences.

South Africa is home to a multitude of voices, opinions, conflicts and celebrations. We are relatively young in our democracy, yet rich in our histories and experiences. A variety of arenas have been developed in order to encourage and promote the creative industries to experiment and produce works of which the country can be proud. But this is a heavy burden to bear, and artists should not lose their sense of power and individuality for the sake of being ‘Proudly South African’. By ignoring the realities of the present, we run the dangerous risk of repeating the mistakes of our past. But it is the duty of both funding bodies and artists, including choreographers and dancers, to promote dialogue and exchange before the rift is too large and the

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process of reconstruction must begin all over again. Choreographers and performers must take responsibility for not letting dance remain "the orphan" of the performing arts, letting other creative industries race ahead, but must stand up for their right to be heard and their right to be heard in earnest. I feel that this research has voiced some valuable insights into the contemporary dance-funding environment, and I hope that it can be used to benefit the environment of the future.

Concludes.

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