

Sarah Trist

Putting the P into producing A Reflective Project

Background to the project

There has been some debate in the dance sector in recent years about the role of the non-artist producer, about recognition for their contribution and significance in the production process. There has also been much discussion about what actually constitutes a producer. One factor in the debate that had particular resonance for me is the element of risk involved in producing. Such risk may be financial (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the nature of the production), but it is always personal. Producing contains many elements: theoretical, practical, creative, administrative, financial and managerial; but it is always about someone's (or a collection of people's) "idea(s)" and their "vision".

My journey in "becoming a producer" began over twenty years' ago when I managed theatre productions at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre and Royal Court. This progress quickened when I founded my own business through the process of selecting clients, prioritising projects, representing the work to third parties (composing funding applications, and so forth). This involved sharing a "vision" of a project with the client that is as close as possible to theirs. In many instances I own this "vision" as though it is mine. But that's the crux, it's not actually "my vision".

I took a step beyond my usual role in 2005 when I produced "Real Life, Real Dance" for Protein, a series of dance projects in pupil referral units in East London and Doncaster. The belief in the transformational possibilities of dance has been at the heart of Luca Silvestrini's artistic vision for many years, but I was central in encapsulating that belief in more focussed education work by the company from 2004 onwards. "Real Life, Real Dance" has gone on to become an important strand of Protein's work, with four further intensive projects since the initial pilot. There has also been a conference on dance interventions in pupil referral units which I produced at Stratford Circus in 2006. The work has involved fundraising and partnership development and a lot less nitty gritty management than I was used to in managing Protein's professional work. So in a turnaround from my usual role, I was the person with the idea and other people did what I normally do!

The professional development proposed

In the professional development proposed to IDMN, I wanted to research an evening of short pieces of dance by different artists working in a variety of genres as a vehicle for small and middle scale touring in England. Inspired by the "dance gems" idea which formed the basis of Probe's "Magpie" in 2008, this show will have four–six dance items of five–fifteen minutes each. The idea is to include as much pre-existing material as possible, to give a life to top quality work which might not be seen much otherwise, but there may be one brand new commission.

The idea behind the research project is the variety evenings of dance which have been successfully produced in London in the last fifteen years. Rhythm Method was a series

of innovative performances curated by Fin Walker and Emma Gladstone for the Purcell Room in the early 1990s which brought together the best contemporary dance and top performers in programmes of new work and classic pieces. gDA has brought the format up to date in their regular Friday night cabarets, mixing professional gems with a sprinkling of dance by community groups within and beyond their walls. Both were extremely successful, regularly selling out and delighting audiences. The appeal to the artists appearing is the prospect of revived or current work being seen in new contexts without the pressure of producing a full evening.

There have been a few attempts in the past to replicate the format outside London – most notably Dance3 – but generally the touring company dominates the regional circuit. There are obvious challenges to presenting such evenings in a touring format; consistent programming being one of the primary ones, as bringing together a diverse group of artists to perform together for any period of time requires planning and persuasion. However, there is some evidence that would suggest that the small scale dance circuit is changing; that audiences in the regions may be bored by the touring company/full evening show format; that the quality of work presented currently is uneven; and that promoters are unwilling to take a risk on booking unseen work. Meanwhile, truly wonderful work languishes unseen outside the capital or is shoehorned into an inappropriately long full evening because that is the only way to get work seen outside London.

The primary aim of the research was to demonstrate to myself through my own learning the nature of personal risk in producing dance, and to move to a new level of awareness in dance producing generally, regardless of whether the “idea” is mine or another person’s. This was important both in terms of my professional growth and the service I offer to artists within Sarah Trist Dance Management Agency.

It was hoped that the research would also develop the independent dance management sector by highlighting the nature of risk in producing, and defining the shift in perspective involved in owning an idea.

The Project

The learning approach chosen for the project was reflective practice, a process defined by Schön as the application of knowledge to practice through consideration of events and experiences. It was chosen because of its emphasis on self-regulation and personal development. As part of the evaluation of experience, I chose to record my thoughts in a blog. This also gave IDMN members the opportunity to simultaneously observe the learning process and relate it to their own practice.

Events and experiences

So, what were the events and experiences I reflected on?

Some of these could be defined as “me going through the process of producing”. They included meeting artists to discuss ideas towards the mixed bill programme; talking to promoters (face to face and on the telephone) about potential interest; attending shows which might potentially feature in the programme; and watching videos. Inevitably perhaps, the reflective practice spilled over into all aspects of my working life, whether or

not they were connected with “the project”, so that it was more or less a continuous process.

The blog

My intention had been to record my blog weekly, but I found myself feeling very self-conscious about this aspect of the process. When my honesty betrayed a block in my creative energies (just after the death of my mother), I was approached about discontinuing the project. I felt rather paranoid!

Findings

So much of what I discovered through this process relates closely to my experience of observing artists and their creative processes. I’m not sure why, but this surprised me somewhat, reflecting an assumption – misplaced as it has turned out - that the manager personality-type was fundamentally different to that of an artist. Other discoveries were surprising in different ways:

Collaboration. Through this process, the idea of working with like-minded people towards a shared goal became important. I wasn’t prepared to carry the vision and have to “sell” it to everyone involved on the creative side (performers for instance). Doing that felt very lonely and scary! That said, I reflected that I couldn’t expect anyone to share my vision 100% but that they might share 50% of it 85% or 20% of it 100%.

Mixed bill programming. Programming a mixed evening of dance? Not as easy as it sounds (again, my naivety was fairly astonishing). I had to put myself in the position of the programmer and try to imagine what the impact of the conjunction of different pieces would be. This was completely impossible! And what would I do about all the pauses and intervals? Thinking about it became rather dreary. I hitched on to the idea of a themed evening in consequence of all this; though, it has to be said, I’ve still a long way to go. Having a theme would also help solve my branding issues – I hope so anyway!

Procrastination. This “dreary” feeling around trying to imagine the event made my creative energies dry up completely. I saw myself in the position I put clients when trying to draw from them more information on the, as yet, unproduced show. Having ideas, making decisions, these don’t just flow because you’ve suddenly got an IDMN bursary you know (for which read G4A). This was a humbling and frustrating experience.

Risk. Identifying these fears and inadequacies has, in some ways, reduced the sense of risk. It is certainly a risk producing – financially, emotionally – and what about the potential for reputational damage. But, as Clive James pointed out, the Metropolitan Police suffer reputational damage every time someone is shot, but someone (or, in their case, some organisation) has to do their job. That’s kind of comforting. That said, can it be enough to be gritting one’s teeth (like the Chief Constable of the Met every time someone is shot) when it comes to risk? Should one not feel more driven or determined?

Other people’s opinions. When I shared my ideas with people in the sector, I genuinely expected them to be astonished or pleased. Here was I, an arts “manager” of twenty odd years turning into a “producer” (sorry, Producer), an event which I considered to be so momentous. Crikey, when I first started working, people who did my job were

called Administrator. It had taken me years to change my handle from that to Manager. Instead, people seemed decidedly underwhelmed. Were they just not surprised that I was taking this course; did they think that's what I did anyway; or were my ideas just not as fascinating as I thought they were? I never got to the bottom of that, but what I did start to see was people – artists included - who were open to me being a producer. Somewhere along the line since 2006 when I organised a whole seminar on the subject of who needs managers, had everyone got over the whole manager/producer thing and left me behind? Was it only me who felt there was a difference? Not sure about that either, but being called a producer gives you quite a lot of clout when it comes to having your ideas taken seriously. But, as we know, other people's perceptions are incredibly important in how you perceive yourself. Which brings me neatly to:

Confidence. Being a Producer is a bravura task. Being a timid producer is a bit like being an insecure rapper. You cannot run and you cannot hide. That's your name on the programme, your idea, your success, your failure.

Conclusion

This activity ran for just over twelve months which is approximately twice the original estimate. It involved meetings and travelling and mostly it involved lots of thinking. It was in many ways, the closest thing I've got to a sabbatical, a chance to reflect at arm's length on my role in the dance sector. I've enjoyed it hugely and feel I have benefited by being able to shape a potential project which I can bring to light in the next year or two. If it does or doesn't happen, I feel the project has given me the knowledge that I have the courage to take the step up to be a Producer. Which is just as well, because in the eighteen months' which have passed since I applied for this bursary, the financial basis of my organisation has changed enormously and it may well be a case of necessity being the mother of invention! So, watch this space!

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