

Yes, look to the future but do not turn your back on the past.

By Mariaa Randall

I began writing this amid COVID-19 and would not quite know how myself, let alone my practice, would survive a world pandemic. So, to be a part of a co-design team to imagine a new dance festival for the future was tremendous and daunting at the same time. Given any other circumstance, I would have had a defined opinion on a way forward. But a pandemic that makes you re-evaluate your life, your priorities, and your art is not that simple.

I provide my contribution to the co-design of a new dance festival through a reflective process. I reflect on what has happened in the co-design discussions, the past 12 months, and all I experience in the process.

Looking back

Things cannot go back to the way they were

The pandemic had people thinking 'things can't go back to the way they were, 'we have to reimagine how we make, tour, and create dance' and 'we need to try different approaches'.

Let's not kid ourselves; the artistic 'norm' before COVID was not working and continues to provide anxiety areas for artists. We are continually producing new works to be toured, and the seasons are getting smaller and smaller. There is no sustainability or artistic/self-preservation in this process for artists. Can we at least try, think, or attempt something new? I am sure many artists would have much to contribute to this topic.

WHO is contributing to the conversation, and WHO is sitting at the table?

Throughout the online discussions, there were many people that were grateful to be invited to the table for the first time; many were introduced to people they had never met before.

I find across the dance sector; many people are engrained in the table's curves because they have never asked who is missing from this conversation. They place their voice at the centre of the conversation while others merely wait, for however long, to be invited to the table.

First nations, for Nations.

It is essential to be able to see yourself reflected in the every day. One First Nations person on stage makes it possible for the next generation to imagine themselves there too. Presence and representation for all peoples on stage and across the board, not from a western background, is vital to changing the status quo.

Eyes forward

Seeing on stage what surrounds us daily

As we venture throughout the day, we do not see one gender, one skin colour, one age group, one sexuality; you do not hear one language or one opinion. You hear, see, and experience a multiverse of cultures. This multiverse of cultures would be the preface for a new movement festival, a reflection of the every day, making sure many movement versions are present in anything new.

Dance artists are more than movement.

Many artists have a plethora of skills that have allowed them to navigate their careers. When you engage with them, think more extensively about how you can engage with artists. Ask them about all the skills they have and how they can build a sustainable artistic relationship with you.

If there is one reason to create a new movement festival, let it be this.

Diversify the lens of movement in Melbourne/Victoria. Allow for it to be something that is not influenced by American or European forms, structures and ideology and seek to imagine something originally from here.

Let's take a moment

For there to be any change for anyone not considered part of “the usual suspects” in the Victorian dance ecology, we must shift the lens, pass it around and hand it to other people, so it does not reside in the hand of the comfortable or controlling.

The framework of this co-design is a simple example of how a new festival can be created. That is, employ four artists from different cultures, gender and lived experiences and get them to co-design something, anything and see what can happen. The co-design process has been very rigorous, and we have all had to learn from each other and even more about ourselves and the sector that engulfs us.

I do not know if the overall co-design idea is a tokenistic exercise to make the organisations look deadly for diversifying an experience or a sincere attempt to change systems that are no longer working. What happens next will determine the answer.