

Touring, Presenting, and Funding

A panel discussion for choreographers and interdisciplinary performance creators

Transcript of the discussion on Saturday, May 8th 2010 at Studio 303

Co-hosted by the English-Language Arts Network and Studio 303

Disclaimer: The panellists' responses are sometimes paraphrased. Panellists are Miriam Ginestier, Louise Dubeau, Kris Nelson, and Jack Udashkin.

[Introduction]

Miriam: This panel is co-presented by ELAN and Studio 303. ELAN helps Quebec anglophone artists to connect with each other, with their francophone colleagues and with audiences. It's a multidisciplinary organization with around 1700 members. Studio 303 is a multidisciplinary organization devoted to supporting the development of new practices in dance and in interdisciplinary performance and we do that through residencies, through production, through workshops and presentations and performances. And lately we also just started a series of support labs which involve one-on-one coaching, or artist led discussions.

I also wanted to take the opportunity to announce that Studio 303 also publishes a guide for emerging dance and interdisciplinary performance called "Taking the Leap." It used to be a book, but about a week ago we launched it as a website. It's in French and in English. This guide has lots of information about producing, self producing, finding presenters, funding projects, etc. And maybe the most useful part of it is a listing of local organizations and places that you can go to for support or that you can rent to present your own show, and presenters that are emerging artist friendly.

[Introduction to Panelists]

Kris Nelson is a touring agent. He's one of the only young agents that I know and it's great to have him and I really wish there'd be more. He represents Amy Henderson Public Recordings in Toronto and 2boys.tv in Montreal and Theatre Replacement in Vancouver. He's also the Encounters curator for the Magnetic North Theatre festival and he's worked with the Push festival in Vancouver, Rumble Productions Electric Company and with Studio 303. He helped us develop our support lab series last year.

Jack Udashkin says he's produced more dance shows than anybody else in Canada. And of course you probably know Jack as the current artistic director of La Chapelle.

Louise Dubeau used to be l'adjoite a la promotion at the Find, has also worked with Cas Publique as Directrice General and she worked at Diagramme Gestion Culturelle as a booking agent. So her expertise is in touring and funding, and now she is a freelance consultant.

I am Miriam Ginestier, the Artistic Director here at Studio 303. I work a lot with emerging artists and I know a bit about funding and presenting.

[Opens the question period up to the floor]

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Question: I'm an emerging choreographer. My last piece I independently produced with an Emploi-Quebec Jeunes Volontaires grant, and I presented it at two places in Montreal and since then I've been trying to apply to different festivals and different venues to get it presented not very successfully. I'm just wondering if guys can offer some tips about how someone like me would proceed in my career.

Jack: I think when I was first starting out a long time ago, I really didn't have a clue. I put together a press kit and I used what I call a "shotgun" approach – I just sent out hundreds of them. We did a small show in a place in Toronto and we got there and I was shy and nervous, and I figured that the show was really good and that people should come and see it. It was basic logic – the show is good, people have to come see it. How do we get them to come see it? This is not directly in answer to what you're asking but it's kind of a very reasonable street logic approach. I went through a phone book and phoned maybe a hundred different radio stations, and TV stations, and newspapers. Nine out of ten treated me like dirt, you know like "who do you think you are," "I don't have time for this." But one out of ten really gave us a shot and we wound up getting some interviews and we had something to talk about, and so the show sold out. And that started getting attention. So really, at the beginning it was really: work hard and just attack as much as you can.

I think a lot of the success of my artists' careers is that we had good photography, really dynamic photography. Now I think you need photography and you need video also. You need *something* to talk about. The artist that I was with had a really emotional show, she was really raw and she also had parents who were Olympic skiers, so on our first tour it was all stories about how her parents being Olympic skiers. You know, we had more to offer, than just another dance show.

I know that at CBC, a person that works with us in marketing says, at CBC now it's completely changed. Now they want to know "who's your star?" So it is more difficult now. But back then solo modern dance was about as boring a concept as you could get. So, you need really good photography, you need to be really articulate about what you're doing, but you really have to be able to show what you're doing. And showcasing in the studio is not necessarily the best way because a lot of people, myself included, have a really hard time making the transition between what you see in the studio and what you see on stage, like with lights and whatever, and the engagement with the public is really important. So you have to invite people, make yourself known, have a really nice presentation, get people into some kind of showcase situation – La Maison de la Culture or something – and get them to actually look at it. Be firm and confident, but not obnoxious. You can't sell anybody anything they don't want to buy.

Miriam: I think just making a list of every presenter out there and sending a kit and a video is a real waste of time and energy and money. I would say spend time researching presenters and only send a video when it's an actual call for submissions where they ask for that. And those are often, if you're just starting out, the presenters who don't have the budgets to travel and go see work - these are the ones that are the most open often to video submissions. Or they are the ones that are very far away –

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Newfoundland or somewhere small like Guelph. I think often if you have some kind of “community” or “audience development” or one of those kinds of components that you’re selling with it, like “I can teach a workshop” or “I do this thing with kids,” that can often help. Sometimes places have funding for that specifically. And I think that one of the best ways, other than just sending kits to wherever there’s a call for submissions, if you want to target other presenters, is to find out if they’re presenting work that you have an affinity with or you think you’re in the same league as. And if you can get any kind of personal connection, you know “so-and-so told me to contact you, and is a friend of yours,” that really helps because it makes you stand out a bit. And it’s good with those presenters to go by stages: first send an email, and then a “would you like me to send you a video,” and then if they say yes, you send it. Then you’re perfectly welcome to later go “did you see the video?” It initiates a conversation.

Jack: And then ask for a meeting if you don’t get an absolute “no”.

Miriam: But after they already have something from you. You wouldn’t ask for a meeting with them right away.

Jack: And try to avoid a situation where you walk in for the meeting and you’re going to show them the DVD while you’re sitting there. It’s really an uncomfortable situation, so I prefer really to have seen the DVD before I have the meeting.

Kris: First, be prepared that this piece will never ever tour but it might be the second or third piece from this piece that will tour. So it’s more important probably for you to build a relationship with programmers around the country and abroad, and especially in Montreal. I think it is more interesting to build a relationship with someone like Jack who may never present your work but would always tell you the straight goods about your piece. That relationship would actually feed your process. So, to give yourself those kinds of contexts is probably more interesting than “yeah, we did three nights in Toronto and then that’s it,” I think. With this piece in particular, also ask yourself if you and the artists you are working with have the capacity to tour. And, is that what’s really what’s going to feed the work at this point? If a presenter says to you “I’ve got a thousand dollars for your show,” and you’ve got an ensemble of six people and you have to get them to Halifax, is it reasonable? You kind of have to look at the whole picture before. I think there’s a real pressure on artists to tour right away now, especially because in a weird way the presenting climate in Canada is quite strong and there’s a lot of presenters, and there’s a lot of tours, and there’s these wonderful circuits, but the work has to be ready and the company, in a way, has to be ready. I mean, you’re never ready, the first time you tour, you always spend too much money and things go wrong.

Question: If I submit for something and they send me back a “no thank-you,” what’s a good next step to take? Do I ask for their feedback? Do I just wait till next year to submit something else? Is there anything I can do to follow up or do I just let that one lie?

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Kris: It depends on the “No Thank You”.

Jack: Do you ask for feedback?

Question: Yeah, I usually try to ask for feedback but I almost never get a response.

Miriam: I don't think there's anything wrong with asking for feedback. Especially if it's something you really thought you had an affinity with. If it's not the type of work they're looking for and they tell you what type they are looking for, how does that help you anyway? You're not going to make different work for this one place.

Kris: I think it's also really important to value a presenter that says “no”. Many presenters don't say no. If you say no, then the conversation's going to end and you're going to lose the chance of working with the artist in the future. I've had a few “no”s where I've talked to someone about an artist, and said “what do you think about this artist?” And they've said “It's not for me. It's representing terribly on DVD. I don't think I'd ever present this work. I might want to see it in person. I know this choreographer is being followed by a lot of presenters so I believe in them, but it's totally not for me.” That kind of response was like a gift, because I knew where to redirect the energy.

Question: How do you get to that point of having a talk about how much funding a presenter will have to pay you when touring? How do you broach the subject? What is a fair amount to ask?

Jack: I was at the National Arts Centre for years and there were times when I would give the artists more than what they were asking for because I realized they were fresh and had no idea that you can't ask for \$1000, you need to get at least \$2000. But there is no kind of standard. I don't know how much PUSH pays their artists and they are some of my closest collaborators. I don't see any problem with being really up front about it, and asking: how much do you pay your artists? I think it's important for you to look around you and ask funding agencies and other colleagues. Ask people, given the type of show I have, what kind of fee should I be expecting? But you must ultimately set the cost. [General nodding from the panel]. If you are negotiating a fee for a show for three nights and asking \$5000, you should know that if the presenter is offering \$3000, whether you can do that or not.

Kris: I use a magic formula, where the fee is what it costs to do it, including all the production costs and royalties and to pay the dancers, and if it goes below that we can't do it. Then there is always some money to go into the company, into the structure. That's part of the variable that allows for negotiating.

Jack: Are you talking a national tour or international? In Canada, if you're going to a Festival, usually they can access funding for travel. It's very rare to go to a presenter that's not a Festival and have them pay for your travel.

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Miriam: I think also that the CanDance Network has a form available that helps you work out what it costs to go on tour.

Question: You have to rehearse before you go away. Do you put that into the budget?

Jack: Sure, if you can. But as an emerging artist, it's pretty unrealistic to think you'd be able to recuperate your costs.

Kris: In an ideal world you would be able to split your rehearsal costs.

Question: And when do you talk about this?

Jack: I would talk about it right up front. Europeans tend to have it in their tech sheet: the cost of the show. They list hotels, per diem, author's rights, etc. But with Canadian presenters, it's probably better to get them interested first.

Louise: Usually they will ask you about a fee, or more likely they will say this is what we can offer.

Miriam: Often it's a situation where they will say that they are waiting for funding, and don't know if they can pay for travel, and you have to make a decision before you know sometimes. It's a risk.

Question: I know you have your resource online, *Taking the Leap*, but I am wondering if you have other resources for presenters here or outside of North America.

Miriam: We did that a few years ago and we realized that it never ended. There was constant turnover, this one closed and this one opened. A directory does exist, but we pared it down to include some sites to go to. There were plans to update it, but most of artists we talked to said not to bother, as such lists are invariably out of date, and as a personal contact or affiliation is so important. But everyone wants this magic list, and 303 has a project to create one that stems from its artists, asking them where they have been presented abroad, so there is a relationship to the list. This will give artists an idea of out of town presenters who present artists who you may actually know.

Jack: Here in Montreal we've got incredible resources for international touring; we have FTA and CINARS who bring in tons of people every year. The best thing to do is to make **friends** with these people.

Kris: Jack is right, there is nowhere else in the country that there is CINARS and FTA, and no where else are artists as good at getting people to see their work in a context they can control. The only thing I've seen like it is New York at APAP, which is a huge hotel with five floors of booths. There is a huge opportunity in Montreal for you to go beyond just having a list of presenters. There is something to be said as well about champions. People like Jacob Wren who has been touring for most of his career has

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been really generous about telling people that this local scene is hot, and about artists he has been following from home. So finding people like that who are touring a lot, are some of your best links to presenters.

Jack: If you can, get a show in OFFTA or FTA, and go to those shows.

Question: I always find that during that time it's difficult to get attention.

Jack: Yes, you have competition, but competition is good.

Question: What are the two Festivals you are referring to?

Kris: Festival Trans Amerique and OFFTA, and CINARS.

Louise: CINARS is the Conférence Internationale des Arts de la Scène.

Jack: In the off years they have conferences and things. It is a huge group of booths and presenters move around. You set up a showcase and have someone standing there and handing out pamphlets. Or you can apply to get into the conference, but it's very expensive. If you have friends that do similar work you can kick in and share a booth.

Question: I have a meeting with presenters in Europe. Do you have any tips?

Louise: Just be yourself. They are people too. Some of them probably were artists or want to be artists. Just get to know them. Let them talk and find out what makes them tick.

Kris: Get to know their program from this year and last year and ask questions about it. Be interested.

Question: Any advice about giving video documentation to presenters?

Jack: Just make sure that it shows what you are doing. It doesn't have to be great quality but it has to show what it's about. It can be just one camera, that's OK.

Miriam: Show it to someone who hasn't seen your show, because I have seen people who have spent money on editing and shooting and I cannot tell what's going on.

Jack: There are two problems with presenting video: one is that you get video that looks really great and the show is not, and on the contrary I got a video from a show in Europe and the video was such crap, I didn't program it, but I went to see them at F.I.N.D. and it was incredible. The video should be a window on what's going on.

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Question: Is it a good idea to edit your video documentation?

Miriam: When there is a cut in the video, we don't know what was cut out. Was it ten seconds or fifteen minutes? You should have viewing notes if one part is really dark or hard to see, just to help it along. It's also super important that the video is in front of a live audience. If there's no response, it's not good.

Question: As an emerging artist, when is it fruitful to invest in a touring agent? Is it better at the beginning or when you are more established?

Jack: There is no answer to that. It is better just to find a boyfriend or girlfriend who can help you. There are what, six agents, five... and no one is taking anyone on. That's something that is perhaps worth more discussion.

Kris: There are no agents that will just take you on if there is no magic there.

Question: How much is an agent's role about pushing and how about helping to develop artistically? Is that a mandate for an agent?

Louise: It depends on the agent or the relationship. Sometimes you need to push the dancer artistically and sometimes you just need to organize them. The agent has to really be in love with the artist and help them.

Jack: Yes, because the work of being an agent doesn't pay. That's why there are no agents.

Question: I recently met an agent who wants to present me. Now that I have that, should I be continuing to develop these relationships with presenters, etc, or is that their job?

Jack: Absolutely continue to do it yourself, because the agent doesn't always work out. It is important to realize some agents are disagreeable, and we want to work with the people who are nice and easy to work with. It's important to understand how your agent is viewed by the presenters.

Kris: Can we talk about the Montreal context a little? The thing I noticed coming from BC, is that there is competition between presenters for artists. This is interesting to me.

Jack: In Montreal, we have a lot of presenters. Yes, there is a lot of talent as well, more and more all the time. If I want to get an artist that has been at Tangente a bunch of times, I talk to them first. Sometimes they recommend artists as well. But it's not always like that. If you have a question about it, you have to talk to the presenters themselves. I don't have a problem with competition. If a performer can get a better deal somewhere else, then that's OK, and perhaps the best thing for the artist.

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Question: I know that some of these presenters are really open about calling up and asking me to talk about my work. What about places like La Chapelle, should I just call you up?

Jack: I prefer to get an e-mail from somebody saying: "I would like to meet with you and show you my stuff", and then I will get a DVD or go see a showcase of their work someplace. If I find it interesting, then we can meet.

Miriam: I used to do meet with artists, but it was clear that people weren't understanding how Studio 303 works, and it seemed like a waste of time. Make sure you know what kind of things we do here, and then you can apply, because we already have procedures for that.

Question: And what if it's not a full-length work, but I want to get known. For example I know Tangente is booking their 2013. So, in three years I could maybe have a full-length show. But is it a waste of your time to see me before I have a full-length?

Jack: Well, no, I mean if you have a 20-minute piece which is really high-impact and up our alley, and I can tell that from a DVD or whatever, then it's not a waste of time.

Miriam: Often it's better to just invite people to come and see your work. It's good to invite, but do a follow-up call.

Kris: And it's good to share your resources with other people and make a showcase.

Question: I have a work being presented in October at Tangente, and what would be a good time to invite people?

Jack: Right away, as soon as possible, and then follow-up.

Kris: There is something that artists often forget about presenters, in that they can be a resource. Presenters see hundreds of performances. They can be the best audience, a really good dramaturge and provide feedback for you.

Miriam: But you need to ask them for it, and you have to want it, good or bad.

Question: When I premiered my show last June, I was just thinking... people from the press are people too. If you notice press people, you can also get feedback. Philip Spzorer came to my show and provided me with a lot of feedback, it was very good.

Miriam: Dance writers can also be real champions for your work.

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Kena Herod: I've written for *Maisonneuve Magazine* and other dance magazines. Those few of us who are left doing dance writing do it for passion, because we don't get paid very much either. We have jobs, and then we make an effort to go see a show, we want to have a good evening and generally go into it with a positive attitude. Keep in mind that editorial space is shrinking and shrinking. I dealt with a situation for a friend who is a mid-level choreographer and he did a show, but got no reviews... no publisher wants them.

Jack: We had two dance shows and a local newspaper said that they would only do one review.

Kena Herod: It wasn't always that way. We are hampered, so when you send something out, be sure it has impact. It will determine where we will go. A good image and a couple of paragraphs.

Jack: When you get a press kit as a presenter, you ask, who is writing about this? Is it *NY Times* or *Le Monde* or blogs? Now, it matters less and less. The reviews of a show count less and less, and where they come from, whether it's online or in print.

Question: I wanted to talk a little about the underground dance community as well. Their approach is more informal, but lots of people go to those shows.

Miriam: Those types of venues are listed on *Taking the Leap*. It's important for that scene to stay active.

Kris: It's a really exciting ecology here in Montreal. Getting good press and presenting is good, more important is that you commit to showing your work and don't allow these roadblocks to get in your way. Keep showing your work and things will start to come to you.

Question: I was under the impression that electronic media is all you need now for promotion, but we did a show with a really powerful image on the poster and it worked really well. So they can work together.

Miriam: What's true for one artist won't always work for the other. So at 303, it is often word-of-mouth and friends of friends.

Jack: It does depend, and it's always difficult to identify. We did posters one year and then none the next and it made no difference. It's getting to the point where we're so inundated with information we're not going to look at it anymore. Recommendations can be very important. If you know influential people, get them on board. It's all about "buzz". It used to be 20% "buzz" and 80% method, now it's almost all "buzz" and there is very little method. People want someone to tell them it's a great show.

Miriam: Thank you very much to the panelists and to all of you for coming.