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Working with the Presence of a Border: An Artist's Perspective

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Summary:

Dylan Quinn provides an artist's perspective of working across the border region in the island of Ireland through discussion of the Here & Now project by Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre. Quinn describes the unique aspects of relationship-building and community engagement in a cross-border, cross-community context and calls for greater recognition of the voice of the artist in developing long term policy change for the arts and cultural sector.

Key words: Artist; Pettigo; Border; Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre; Cultural Policy; Ireland

Introduction

What? We have just crossed it ... when ? I didn't see anything, what, when?

These words from Chris Warburton, Radio 5 Live presenter for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) resonated as we weaved our way through the border lands, discussing the reality of living and working in, between, and across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The narrative of the border appears like a trilogy running throughout my life: it was there, it was not there, and now, it is considering a return. I experienced the first instalment with the towers and check points, the second with open roads and easy transactions, and I now await the release of the third version with apprehension.

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Whilst the border has been ever present throughout my personal and professional life, its physical dominance has diminished significantly since my youth. The same cannot be said, however, for the psychological, emotional and cultural impact it continues to play. I cross the invisible line on a weekly basis. I regularly put my hand in my pocket to pay for something and have to sort through coins to identify legal tender for the region in which I happen to be present. Whilst its existence does not directly prevent me from undertaking work, it has an impact in a variety of ways which are not always apparent.

In compiling this piece, I had intended to explore the workings of one specific project that I am currently delivering: *Here & Now*. However, there are interesting lessons to be considered from exploring the experience of delivering not only a specific project but also of investigating the experience of operating as a professional artist in this location and within this context. As a result, the reflection presented here is perhaps less about the process of cross-border work and more about the process of working with its presence.

The Context of Cross-border Work and Relationships

My location in large part defines my personal experience and my professional work, and that location is one that is defined by the border. I have worked as a choreographer / facilitator / dancer for over twenty-five years, across the UK and Ireland and internationally. For the past seventeen years I have been operating in and from my native Fermanagh, primarily facilitated through the establishment of *Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre* (DQDT). The work involves a broad mix of dance, physical theatre, and creative arts projects, delivered locally, nationally and internationally, and includes a range of professional and participatory programmes. My background is in peace and conflict research and as such, my work has a particular interest in and focus on exploring projects that engage in social and political discourse through various creative methods.

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DQDT is a small company, consisting of me, five board members and a team of freelance facilitators, artists, technicians, programmers and community organisations. As is common with many other arts organisations, the work involves balancing short, medium-, and long-term objectives with the need to earn a living whilst staying true to artistic and social aims. Based in Northern Ireland but traversing the rural border regions of Ireland north and south, DQDT faces unique opportunities and challenges. The challenges are many and varied, not least the lack of investment in infrastructure, innovation and public services. A quick look at a map representing the railway, motorway and or broadband networks on this island reflects the sense of abandonment many people here feel. The opportunities that I refer to spring ironically from that lack of development. Communities that produce new ideas, new approaches and new solutions, in the face of systemic challenges will only grow further with investment in people, ideas and potential.

Indeed, in undertaking any exploration of cross-border work we must be cognisant of these broader financial and social circumstances within which we work; that is, the border communities across Ireland are facing serious social and economic challenges. In Northern Ireland, continued under-investment compounded by population and youth flight restrict development and growth. It is apparent to me as a professional living and working in the region that repeated attempts to tackle these various issues have been of limited success.

The reality of the border is particularly apparent when investigating the different value artistic practice plays in the cultural narrative of a society. Clear contrasts can be found on either side of the 310-mile border in relation to: financial support, confidence of an arts sector, community support for professional arts activities, and government policies. This is evident in the development of the Republic of Ireland's first (draft) national cultural strategy, *Culture 2025* (DCHG, 2016) and its active implementation programme, *Creative Ireland* (2016). Contrastingly in Northern Ireland, there is the stalled

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attempt at a similar strategy, along with a lack of executive level government since January 2017 and massive cuts to the arts in recent years (NICVA, 2017; Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd., 2018). The disappointing reality is that if and when we, as artists based in Northern Ireland, attempt to have a conversation with our colleagues in the Republic about partnerships, we are having two very different conversations.

Everyone can highlight the need for change in their local system. However, the differences on the island clearly bring into focus the invisible line and the reality of the border. As an individual dance artist living in the Republic of Ireland the maximum I could apply for, to develop a project is €50,000. In Northern Ireland it is £3,000. In the Republic, venues will pay a (modest) fee for the presentation of dance performances, in Northern Ireland dance organisations and artists pay a fee for the hire of the venue..... I could go on.

I do not wish to focus on the financial issues, however. These are easy, really, for anyone to highlight. For me it is of equal, if not of more, importance to recognise the value placed on the work, as a part of the cultural framework and how the historic and current context of Northern Ireland can undermine the positive role 'culture' can play. Culture Ireland, Creative Scotland, The British Council, and Wales Arts International are organisations which all play an important role in promoting regional communities to international audiences. Their messages appear to be supported by executive levels of government and are viewed as an important tool in cultural promotion. In Northern Ireland there is no agreement on cultural identity and no agreement on the formation of a government. Furthermore, there is no agreement as to how to explore the complex, but vital, shared conversations that need to take place in order to reach a resolution on these matters.

It is in this context that I continue to create, deliver and present various professional and participatory projects in and around the rural western border regions of Ireland. *Here & Now* is one such project.

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Navigating Cross-border Work and Relationships

Here & Now officially commenced in late 2018, but grew from work and relationships established much earlier. It takes place across west Fermanagh and south Donegal: specifically, within the border village of Pettigo. Pettigo is a village divided by the border. Literally, the border runs directly through the middle of the village following the path of the river. The part of the village in the north is Tullyhummon, with Pettigo in the south. The project seeks to gather and explore experiences of living in and around the border and present these experiences through film and movement. The range of activities have been delivered by me along with community dance artist Anna Treanor, writer Carlo Gebler, and filmmaker Róisín Loughrey. *Here & Now* follows a format aimed at supporting community participation in the arts. The project has four activity programmes: Dance with older people, youth dance, creative writing/story collection and a final community event entitled, The Big Border Brunch, all concluding in the creation of a short film.

In my experience it takes time to build the necessary relationships you require for successful community engagement. This is especially true when asking individuals to share life experiences, particularly in relation to border life. The project illustrates the slow processes, conversational nature, openness to diversity of experience, and space for reflection that such cross-border arts experiences require. These are also critical aspects applicable to any aspect of cross-border working, outside the arts.

In many occasions, the building of relationships is best done at a slower pace. The relationship-building for *Here & Now* actually started two years prior to project commencement with the regular delivery of a programme of dance fitness classes for adults on a Tuesday evening. On cold winter nights I was taking a forty minute drive from my house to Pettigo to deliver workshops that did not always make a lot of sense financially but did enable me to build relationships, understanding and hopefully trust. The project-

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specific activities began in Autumn 2018 (finishing August 2019) involving a series of dance classes with an older people's luncheon group that meet in Pettigo twice a week in order to provide activities and social interaction for older people from across the area. The luncheon group organisers expressed an interest in becoming involved once they had become aware that the project offered opportunities for engagement in some physical activity. The dance classes were contemporary in nature and challenged the participants' understanding of dance whilst helping to improve physical and mental wellbeing. Over the course of the classes Anna, our community dance artist, then I developed a rapport with the participants. The original plan was to deliver one hour-long classes in the local leisure complex, The Termon Centre. This required the members to travel from their luncheon group meeting point to the leisure centre. However, it quickly became apparent that by meeting the group in-situ, the requirement for travel (a barrier to participation) was removed. The plan was therefore adapted, thus increasing levels of successful engagement. I travelled to their gathering on a Thursday morning and after chatting, and having been almost force-fed tea and scones or biscuits (willingly), we moved the chairs and tables aside and created the space to dance.

Our methods have been playful and drawn from a diversity of experiences. Over the one-hour class we played with movement in a wide variety of directed and creative ways. Sometimes we explored games with balloons, created sequences of movement around doing the washing, did the Can Can dance and performed the Siege of Ennis dance, amongst many other things. The dancing was our means of initial engagement; it was an important element to help improve wellbeing but also a vital element in building relationships. We talked before, during, and after the dancing. Once the relationship was well established, I asked the group if they were willing to engage in a few conversations with Carlo, the writer on the project. The theme of these conversations was loosely around their experiences of living

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in and around Pettigo and indeed the border. I stressed that everyone could participate in the dance activities but were under no pressure to share more than they were happy to share. Carlo and I attended a few Thursday gatherings together until Carlo was comfortable continuing the conversations with the group himself. Over the course of a number of weeks, the luncheon group shared experiences, considerations and thoughts about living in and around Pettigo.

The Meaning of Cross-Border Working

With the gift of time, the offer of lunch, and a willingness to chat, we gathered a fascinating insight into some of the participants' fears and desires for the area. Personal and collective stories were shared: who played what part in the horror film that had been recorded in the village some years previously, whose home crosses the border, who moved in, and who moved away. Over the course of time one issue kept reappearing: a sense that the area had been abandoned. This sense of abandonment was voiced most emphatically in discussions exploring the impact of the railway lines closure in 1959. Indeed, this closure was talked about not in historical tones but in contemporary tones; the impact of which is still felt today. The participants felt that the reason for the closure of the railway line in Pettigo was in large part due to a decision by the Unionist-dominated Belfast government to cease financial support for the railway line.

It is interesting to note the particular impact felt by the closure of the railway because whilst countless roads were also closed for many years, those roads re-opened. The railway never returned and neither did the trade, the people, or the opportunities it offered. They voiced their views that this was a decision made by others elsewhere and without a full understanding or appreciation for the major impact on Pettigo and indeed the broader region. I and the people affected could see direct connections with the present dominant political issue: Brexit. Here we discussed shared experiences and concerns

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for the future as well as the synergy between then and now and based upon the reflection of a decision made by others in faraway places with no real understand or concern about the impact on the people of this region.

The impact of such considerations was resulting in a fascinating evolution of the opinions expressed on a range of subjects political, social and cultural, not least the constitutional nature of Northern Ireland. A subject in the past avoided or at best referred to as something to discuss at a later date, was now becoming something that needed to be properly considered. The people of the border communities have for a long time felt that they were the last to be consulted on issues impacting them. They no longer wish this to be the case. As in places across Europe, creative voices are enabling people on the margins of our communities to be heard. Within this context, it is interesting to note that the European Culture Foundation (2019) has recently launched a second round of its funding programme for 2017 – 2020 entitled, Democracy Needs Imagination. This is a scheme of significant size that is promoting new and creative ways to engage the people of Europe in the democratic process. As artists we may be perfectly placed to support this call for new approaches, new voices and new forms of democratic engagement.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the importance of appreciating people and place cannot be under-estimated in navigating cross-border work and relationships; particularly in the current circumstances where some border communities feel they are being offered up as a sacrificial lamb. The experience of, and learning from, the *Here & Now* project demonstrates the importance of embedding the project in a local community through the development of interpersonal relationships. While this may not be a unique process when working in and with communities, the experience of this activity in and across the border brings new insight.

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In my view, politicians and governments relish the opportunity to exploit images of creative activity and words of prose and poetry to demonstrate their intelligence, authenticity and cultural connections. However, their commitment to develop that which they utilise for creative creditably, and particularly in Northern Ireland, has been left very wanting. More importantly so has their ability to understand and appreciate the value creative artistic practice offers our society. This dearth is reflected in the fact that DQDT remains the only professional dance or indeed theatre organisation based in the rural border regions of the island. We are in extremely unique times politically, socially and culturally: the structures of government and the constitution of the United Kingdom are being tested to the limit and the island of Ireland is facing potentially the biggest constitutional debate since the formation of the state.

Unique times require unique solutions. Arts and by extension artists have a fundamental role to play in enabling and expanding the range of conversations we must have. If we require creative solutions in these times, then we require creative thinkers. This is the space that we as artists can fill. Not only can we give voice to those excluded from mainstream discourse but we can help begin to be a fundamental part of how we build new conversations, new communities and a new creatively-engaged future.

In doing so, we must be honest enough to recognise that the systemic change required involves long-term investment and many of the historical approaches have been too brief and narrow in their focus. This has not been helped by a serious lack of imagination in political developments within Northern Ireland. It has also been compounded on occasion by shortsighted decisions from state funders. Indeed, this in itself is an area that requires further unpicking when exploring sustainable forms of development for artists and the arts sector. It is clear that the questioning of decisions made by state funders such as Arts Council Northern Ireland is fraught with difficulties: 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you'. Therein lies a fundamental problem in relation to agency, knowledge, experience and power. It is common practice

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for decisions to be taken that impact directly on artists or arts organisations that fundamentally undermine years of work and future plans without having had a single conversation with the artists at the very coalface. It is vital therefore that we explore new ways of building relationships, for funders to talk to communities, to listen to artists, and to hear their experiences. It is about engaging in discussions to ensure that the development of the art form in particular contexts does not suffer as result of ill-considered or ill-informed decisions. This dialogue is particularly important in under-developed and under-resourced regions, and there are few less developed than those within the border regions. In light of this, the formation of public policy developed as a result of consultation with artists living and working in the region, would be a start. Whilst investment in art making, pay for artists and infrastructure is valid and important, improved communication and real understanding between those creating the work and those with the ability to enable the work is a necessary requirement for effective and sustainable development.

Dylan Quinn and has been working as a Choreographer, Dance Artist and facilitator for over 20 years. In 2009 he established Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre (DQDT) in his native Enniskillen. Dylan has extensive experience of working within community settings and specifically within a peace and conflict context.

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