

**THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER:  
CHOREOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT**

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## I. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Universities in our time are no longer just the repositories for and transmitters of culture, they are the breeding ground for the whole new development of the culture. They are now places where new forms are made: new music, new dance, new theatre; and these responsibilities can only be met by an environment which allows an art discipline to shape its own research according to the nature of the art form itself.

(McKechnie, 1999: 3)

### 1) Changing attitudes

This ambitious statement was made in 1999 by Professor Shirley McKechnie who has been instrumental in legitimising dance practice as research in a university context. Currently in Australia there are a small but growing number of creative artists including choreographers, both experienced and emerging, who are turning to universities for research and development opportunities in order to explore their artistic practice in more depth or to head in new directions. Concurrently, academic research paradigms which are historically conservative – at least in Australia – are in a process of change, with a new emphasis on performative, collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches and reporting.

These shifts in both areas have led to a broadening of research parameters in which research *in* and *through* dance is becoming almost as prevalent as research *about* dance. With these shifts, the experience and body of the practitioner is placed alongside the text of the observer thus contributing a much needed dual perspective to dance research.

This paper will explore some of the issues with which a reflective practitioner might engage in research, through the specific example of an intercultural choreography as research project between Australian and Vietnamese artists working in Hanoi.

## **2) Artistic practice/research intersections**

For the purposes of this paper, artistic practice is defined as an act or process of making and executing art works. As such it is a creative activity and not in and of itself a reflective concept, although the activity may lead to or come from reflection. In a theatrical context this creative activity also involves the presentation of practice in live or recorded form.

### **(Overhead 1)**

In addition to this broad interpretation, one can identify other crucial elements which make up artistic practice including:

- investigation of ideas or concepts, form and/or content;
- creativity/experimentation;
- originality or reinterpretation of existing traditions, ideas, concepts, techniques etc;
- communication with others via public outcomes, live or recorded.

Despite the perceived schism between practical art making and academic reflection and endeavour, it will be seen that the above elements also correspond to generic concepts of research. **(Overhead 2)**

For example, an accepted definition of research in Australia by **DEETYA** (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs) emphasises the following characteristics:

- a creative pursuit extending knowledge and understanding;
- originality;
- investigation as a primary objective;
- results that have the potential to increase humanity's stock of knowledge;
- publicly verifiable outcomes open to peer appraisal .

(adapted from Strand, 1997: 25)

The **ARC** (Australian Research Council) defines research as contributing to 'our understanding and knowledge through conceptual advances and discoveries' (Strand, 1997: 25).

Thus from the above interpretations one could list some of the overlapping characteristics of artistic practice and research as: **(Overhead 3)**

- a creative pursuit involving experiment, trial and error and exploration;
- investigation of ideas and concepts to advance understanding and knowledge;
- public/practical outcomes;
- new ways of thinking about things - conceptual advances.

With regard to the last point, 'new ways of thinking about things', it may be argued that both research and artistic practice present and challenge views of reality. But how they do that can be quite distinctive.

### 3) Performance/research dichotomies

Although there is a radical approach to arts research which asserts that all artistic practice can be considered research, others including Maggi Sietsma, Artistic Director of Expressions Dance Company, believe that:

Not all dance is research. Dance can be created for all sorts of reasons, it can have entertainment or the renewal of tradition as a goal. However, research is a vital part of the way I create dance.

(Sietsma, 1998: 49)

Nevertheless, research which may be vital to the making of a dance work manifests itself differently from conventional research, both in outcomes and intent. Even artists who regard research as central to their practice still tend to view, as their ultimate goal, the artistic product – be it a dance, theatre or musical or hybrid performance, live or via another medium.

**(Overhead 3)** Reflective practice, by which I mean artistic practice as research, on the other hand, consciously explores and analyses connections between perception and action, experience and cognition. Although other research can be argued to do likewise, it may be relationships – between the parts and the whole, between form and content, between events and objects, between space and time – which makes artistic practice as research distinctive. Artistic practice as research also involves the presence of researcher/artist and researched/artists in a mutual collaboration and thus its nature is not only relational but emergent, interactive and embodied.

Although both research and artistic practice contribute to knowledge and ways of knowing they do so in distinctive ways. Simplistically this may be viewed as a right brain/left brain dichotomy in that research is primarily an intellectual, cognitive, reflective pursuit even though it may also draw on imagination and experiential perception. Artistic practice or performance, on the other hand, is primarily imaginative, intuitive, sensory, aesthetic, performative and experiential whilst not denying an intellectual and cognitive component. As Shirley McKechnie (1999b: 6) expresses it:

The dance artist senses dance in the mind's body, in its bones and nerves and muscles, just as painters see with the mind's eye, and composers hear with the mind's ear. All humans have the capacity to understand the world in these ways. It is in the powerful connections between language and sensory image that we discover our most compelling visions.

One of the problems of reflective practice as research is its 'fit' with accepted research conventions. Yoni Pryor (1998: 55) talks of the necessity for what she calls 'translation', in an analysis of a performance as research project:

There are a number of crucial aspects of the process which cannot be adequately addressed either through the written word, through still images, or through 'moving pictures' for the simple reason that they are ideas written, and dependent for their meaning/s, on a present body in a present space with a present witness.

## **II. CONCEPT OF THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER**

It is the presence of the artist to make meaning as well as interpret meaning that is fundamentally different from most other research practices. In reflective practice, researching *through* the art work makes the performance itself a valid research outcome. Reflective practice, however, implies some form of interrogation *about* the created work even though the artistic practice per se is central to the research paradigm and the methodology, with reflection and analysis as a parallel discourse.

### **1) Dual modes of operation - moving between theory and practice**

This hybridised role of theory and practice is complex. As Patrice Pavis (1992: 88) suggests:

creation and reflection are two different modes of knowledge, which may coincide in a single individual, but not in the same discourse, or only at different moments of the same discourse.

Thus the artist turning to research to reflect on his/her practice will continually move between two ways of seeing the world, both as outsider and insider to the research material.

### **2) Nexus of process/product in an investigatory practice**

In the process of making and performing dance, in particular, discovery and the revelation of meaning occur at the most fundamental level of the body, in a neuromuscular articulation within the creative act. As alluded to earlier, this process yields understandings of a different

order from the observed analysis of much research, which is primarily visual and intellectual. These non-verbal knowledges provide a wealth of research data. In dance, the 'text' speaks within the body of the dancer whose experiential and kinaesthetic knowledge has been intensified and refined through hours of daily practice over many years. Such knowledge adds a valuable and alternative perspective to research normally underpinned by scientific, semiotic or cultural studies theories.

The value for dance practitioners engaging with research is that it allows a stepping away from one's practice to consider issues that move beyond it, thus contributing to broader philosophical and intellectual issues of performance, the arts and cultural representation. Conversely such reflection assists in illuminating and challenging one's individual practice as well as the art form.

### **3) Parallel structures and discourses in creative practice and research conventions**

Despite the distinctions and tensions outlined, a comparison of the generic structures and approaches in both engaging in a research project and in creating a new artistic work reveals many similarities (**Overhead 4**).

These include:

Research question/problem	Area of artistic exploration; idea or concept
Interpretive paradigm/s	Contextualisation of practice
Methodology	Creative process
Extrapolation of meanings	Interpretations and points of view
Research outcomes	Performance and documentation



### **III. OUTLINE OF A CHOREOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH THESIS (Overhead 5)**

The following specific example of choreography as research draws on a choreographer/researcher's experiences as an Australian working with Vietnamese artists in Hanoi, and the parallel and subsequent reflection on that intercultural experience in the form of a doctoral thesis. The choreographer/researcher is myself and a brief background to this study is helpful to understand the research pathways chosen.

In January 1988 Dance North, of which I was Artistic Director and resident choreographer, became the first contemporary dance company to visit Vietnam since the end of the war. At that time Vietnam was still a country closed to much of the world and its artistic developments. The artists who came to see our performances were excited by what was, for them, a totally new style of dance. They asked me to return and share with them something of our techniques and choreographic style. This saw the beginning of a series of ten visits over ten years, from periods ranging from three to fourteen weeks. A close rapport was established between the dancers of the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre and myself, and together we began to explore ways of integrating contemporary dance processes into the existing amalgam of Soviet classical ballet influences with nationalised folk and court traditional dance styles.

## **1) Research problem, purpose and objectives (Overhead 6)**

### ***Topic***

It was the latter period of my work with the Vietnamese dancers which became the subject of my doctoral research, the title of which was:

***Making intercultural dance in Vietnam – issues of process and context from the perspective of an Australian choreographer and her colleagues from Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre 1995-1998.***

The study was undertaken as an exploration into Vietnamese culture through two intercultural performance projects, of which this paper will briefly discuss the second.

### ***Purpose***

The longer I worked in Vietnam the more intense became my desire to reveal aspects of the country's arts practice, virtually unknown to the outside world. At the time I began the research, Vietnam was a little-known culture but a much politicised and exoticised country, which continues to this day despite or perhaps because of the recent influx of tourists. As Trinh Minh-Ha (1991: 99) remarked: 'Every spectator owns a Vietnam of his or her own'. I dared to hope that this research would reveal another Vietnam, unavoidably partly my own, but one in which Vietnamese artists' own perceptions of their homeland and evolving contemporary as well as traditional culture were heard through both their artistic work and their words.

As an Australian, engaging with an already hybridised Vietnamese culture beginning to embrace globalisation, the purpose of the research became to contribute to the debates about intercultural performance through:

- privileging the voice of dance artists;
- providing a dual Australian and Vietnamese perspective;
- providing an insight into Vietnamese artistic practice;
- exploring the nature of artistic and personal transformation.

### ***Research objectives (Overhead 7)***

Because of the equally important dual purpose of examining the Vietnamese context in which we were working and the nature of intercultural performance processes, the research objectives fell into the two following areas:

#### *Objectives pertaining to the broad context of a Vietnamese setting:*

- to examine the nature of evolving Vietnamese dance traditions and their current practice as well as their relationship to contemporary professional practice in Vietnam;
- to examine the major factors shaping cultural change in Vietnam since the introduction of the *ñoãi mòi* (renovation) policy in December 1986, with reference to professional dance.

#### *Objectives pertaining to intercultural performance practice:*

- to identify contextual and processual issues arising from a particular intercultural performance practice;
- to devise and implement a model for intercultural performance practice, drawing on a previous cultural exchange project in Vietnam as a pilot study, in order to identify

appropriate creative processes and procedures;

- to implement a case study in the form of a new artistic project;
- to extend the theory of intercultural performance from the experiential perspective of professional artists from both cultures.

## **2) Interpretive paradigms / conceptual frameworks (Overhead 8)**

The theoretical framework for the study was the broad context of interculturalism and overlapping paradigms such as postcolonialism, nationalism and orientalism.<sup>1</sup> A crucial juxtaposition to the ideas proposed by well-known cultural theorists of these paradigms were the voices of a range of intercultural and Asian artists writing of their experiences at conferences or in industry journals. Within the broad concept of *interculturalism* the study extrapolated the following issues which both informed and were informed by the artistic practice of the research. They included concepts dealing with :

- Cultural universals /cultural differences;
- Representation of self and 'other';
- Appropriation and orientalism;
- Ownership and control.

### ***Processes of intercultural performance***

Similarly the more specific area of intercultural performance practice was examined and the following areas interrogated both in the practice itself and in the analysis of that practice:

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<sup>1</sup> In evolving such a framework, I drew on the works of cultural theorists such as Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Homi Bhabha (1984, 1990), James Clifford (1986, 1988), Trinh Thi Minh-Ha (1989, 1991, 1992), Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (1988) and Edward Said (1978, 1995), as well as the evolving canon of intercultural

- What is exchanged? – conventions, techniques, relationships, stories, traditions, meanings, emotions;
- What are the major considerations in meeting the 'other'? – acceptance, acknowledgement of difference, level of participation, alternative modes of awareness (performative, emotional, liminal);
- How is the exchange effected? – infusion/immersion, appropriation/borrowing, adaption/synthesis, transformation.

### 3) Research methodology (Overhead 9)

Since no single existing methodology encompassed an artistic practice component in research, a hybrid methodology was devised consisting of aspects of action research and ethnography in conjunction with the artistic practice

- *Action research* was chosen because of its similarities to aspects of creative practice including the primary goals of professional development and improvement of practice (Sagor, 1992: 12). Its collaborative approach in which participants have a 'mutuality of interest' (Bunning, 1994: 44) is also pertinent to artistic practice, as is another aim of action research to be a 'transformative activity' (Tesch, 1990: 66). Transformation is, of course, one of the defining elements of theatre. In this particular study there was another significant link with action research where the role of researcher becomes a catalyst for change. In this study this was paralleled by my role as director/choreographer introducing new techniques and processes into the existing artistic environment.
- *Ethnography* was crucial to contextualising the research in terms of providing tools for

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performance theorists such as Schechner (1982, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996), Pavis (1992, 1996), Marranca

investigating the broader cultural context, which encompassed the examination of two cultures intersecting. Ethnographic research methods assisted in exploring the dual focus on etic (culturally common) and emic (culturally specific) aspects (Brislin, 1993: 71-76) of the process and product of the artistic project. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork became a major area of data collection. This included 66 interviews with key protagonists including leading artists and scholars, which were seminal to providing a dual perspective to the research. Stylistically and philosophically, contemporary ethnographers such as Clifford (1986: 26) opened up possibilities for 'hybrid textual activity' in which allegory could feature in both the artistic practice and the reflection of the practice. This allowed a multiplicity of viewpoints to be placed alongside each other, narrating myriad versions of the creative process and artistic product. Tyler's concept of a 'polyphonic text' (1986: 126) was also central in validating the varied mediums, written, visual and kinetic, which were employed to capture and document the research.

- *Artistic practice*, however, was central to the research methodology, comprising the pilot and case studies as two discrete artistic projects; their performance, the documentation of the creative process, critical analysis and reception. Apart from the performances themselves, interviews with participating artists foregrounding their experiential perspectives provided a unique contribution to the research.

### *Dance and embodied meaning*

Since choreography was the principal medium of the artistic practice, accompanying reflection opted to:

- privilege the actuality of dancing through embodied meaning;

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(1991), Brook (1987, 1996) and in particular Bharucha (1984, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997).

- emphasise what the dance and dancers revealed kinetically about intercultural performance and interaction.

These research choices subsequently led to decisions concerning the analysis of the dance material, which included

- rejecting research tools of structural analysis which favour the dance over the dancer;
- privileging perceptual experience which favours the dancer over the dance;
- interpreting, via the artistic practice, what dance reveals about the cultures it is exploring, rather than what it reveals about itself as a discrete art form.

#### **4) The artistic project and analysis: *Through the Eyes of the Phoenix***

The pilot study drew on existing genres and traditions, creating a narrative work which was a celebration of Vietnamese rural and folk culture. All collaborating creative and performing artists apart from myself as director and choreographer, were Vietnamese.

However, by the case study, I was cognisant of Bharucha's criticism (1994: 7) that Western artists tend to tap into a traditional past which largely ignores how contemporary Asians define themselves. *Through the Eyes of the Phoenix* therefore chose to look at urban contemporaneity, referencing Vietnamese popular culture and the effects of globalisation. Stylistically, the decision was made to emulate the variety show format of much Vietnamese live entertainment through a series of episodes in a post-modern pastiche. The other difference from the pilot study was the collaborative mix of creative artists consisting of three Australian choreographers (two of Chinese ethnicity), an Australian designer, an Australian

and a Vietnamese composer, together with dancers, musicians from the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre.

### ***Content***

As an intercultural exploration, the case study also examined previous foreign influences on Vietnamese culture such as the court traditions of the former imperial court of Hue, which encompassed strongly Vietnamised Chinese imperial influences. At the opposite end of the spectrum we drew on social dances and cabaret styles introduced into Vietnam during the period of French colonialism. These acculturations were infused with Vietnamese traditional aspects in the guise of props, gestures and stylisations.

### **VIDEO EXCERPT 1 (5 minutes)**

#### **('Death of the Phoenix' in the Hue court style, 'Fan Dance' and 'Colonial Tango')**

In order to tie these disparate influences together, continuity was provided by the dual metaphor of the phoenix. This metaphor combined the transforming Western symbol of phoenix as the new arising from the old with the Vietnamese symbol of the phoenix as one of the four sacred animals of imperial tradition, representing beauty and harmony. The bird imagery gave allegorical scope for concepts of nurturing, preening, mating, flight and so forth.

### ***Process***

The complexities of the creative processes in undertaking this work are properly the subject of a separate paper. Suffice it to say that although much of the dance material (though by no means all) was created by the Australian choreographers, the Vietnamese dancers worked



through collaborative structures which consciously and unconsciously transformed choreographic material to a more Vietnamised aesthetic. In the words of dancer Thu Lan (personal interview, Hanoi, 11/12/97); 'We understand that we will interpret [the idea] in a more Vietnamese style'. In this style internalisation or 'saving' of the movement accompanied by a continuous gentle fluidity (*mem deo*) was often prevalent. Artistic Director Cong Nhac (personal interview, 9/12/97), who played the role of the 'traditional phoenix' expressed this defining quality of Vietnamese dance, describing:

a shyness...closed, not open...only half is revealed. It is not like in Australian dance, western dance or ballet. Something is always hidden. Even happiness; we would never show it all, only half. That is the Vietnamese way.

### ***Analysis of creative process and product via theories of body encoding***

The analysis of the artistic project drew very much on the dancers' own perceptions of the creative process. This was contextualised through an exploration of what might constitute a 'contemporary Vietnamese aesthetic sensibility' and its connections to past traditions and world views. What transpired was a transformation in both form and content of the choreography created by the Australians, through a process of Vietnamisation.

### ***Transformation at the site of the body***

The site where Vietnamisation of the project occurred most profoundly was that of the body. It was also the place where the most revealing insights regarding cultural, professional and personal difference lay. Consequently the findings of the case study posits body encoding as the crucial issue in intercultural dance making.

### ***Body encoding (Overhead H 10)***

The most important analysis in the research drew on theories of body encoding as they pertain to dance practice. In addition to biological factors inscribing every body, with regard to the dancing body, the research examined through the dance itself three major areas of encoding:

- ***cultural*** – incorporating social conditioning and socialisation patterning, where the body becomes a cultural 'identity marker' (Royce, 1977: 155) through the rituals of daily life and taught physical modes of behaviour.
- ***professional*** – arising from dance training in specific techniques or styles creating a 'dancing bodily consciousness' (Foster, 1997: 236)
- ***'autographic' or personal*** – involving individual idiosyncratic inscriptions and preferences.

### **5) Research outcomes**

Analysis of these three areas of encoding and how they were manifest in the Vietnamese dancers' bodies, through a process of aesthetic transfer and conscious and unconscious manipulation of time, space and energy patterns, provided a key to understanding the process of ***cultural translation via Vietnamisation*** which was a significant outcome of the study.

Other outcomes, via research processes of perceptual analysis, concluded that:

- ***context*** was paramount in how deeply social, historical and political factors were embedded into the actions, thoughts and practice of the collaborating artists – both consciously and subliminally;

- *artistic practice* contributed direct insights into intercultural performance theory in relation to:
  - the nature of collaboration and empowerment;
  - the role of researcher/director as a catalyst for change;
  - a two-way aesthetic transfer between participating artists of different cultures;
  - the diverse pathways of transformation, not only of the work and technical processes, but the of artists themselves;
  - the process of 'mutual influencing' (Schechner, 1985: 258) brought about by a learning environment in which intercultural performance practice became a tool of discovery.

**VIDEO EXCERPT 2 - 3 minutes**

**('Intercultural lullaby')**

To conclude I would like to quote the dancer Vu Long with a comment that synthesises the transformation and integration of the duality of the work we made together.

It is like the male and female phoenix but it becomes as if one, like the plus and minus balance (the philosophy of *yin/yang* or *aâm/döông*) and that is a metaphor of the past...the old and the new coming together to make one symbol of the new, and it reflects the idea of the work, so that two become one.

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