

# Choosing the unstable: Dancing through the mid-career

**Jo Pollitt and Dawn Bennett**

Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, Australia

While professional instability is a lifelong challenge for dance artists, it is in mid-career that instability becomes particularly problematic and the issue of sustainability comes to the fore. Mid-career artists build increasingly diverse protean careers in a bid to generate stability while dealing with unpredictable work patterns, aging bodies, and increased financial, family, and future responsibilities. In addition to this is the sense of physical and emotional loss experienced when the fundamental need to dance is not being fully met. In this study, we underscore these big picture issues with a more personal dialogue with three Australian mid-career dance artists. Through these case studies, we examine the constant negotiation, reassessment, and instability inherent in dance careers. Our research reveals that “putting the body down” often entails putting down work, status, and identity.

*Keywords:* dance; unstable; protean; mid-career; sustainability

Since the early 1990s, work within contemporary dance in Australia has been undertaken almost entirely by independent dance artists. Existing company-based employment usually takes the form of contract-based employment interspersed with other work. As we have argued previously (Pollitt 2001, Bennett 2009), what was once a political choice in response to previous traditions or loyalties is now the mainstream in contemporary dance. As a result, the term “independent artist” today encapsulates the majority of contemporary dance artists, who typically complete tertiary dance training before entering a competitive market where they either secure one of few contract positions or, most commonly, join the industry as an independent artist. As such, independent status often occurs immediately upon graduation and is a default position: less a choice than a necessity.

The trend toward independent practice is reflected in an increasing number of Western settings and has resulted in career development centers such as the Australian *SCOPE for Artists* program and the Canadian *Dancer Transition Resource Centre*, both of which recognize that transitions between physical and other dance practice occur throughout dancers' careers. Being an independent dance artist in Australia encapsulates a portfolio of roles, including the responsibility for career development, which is managed solely by the artist.

Such relentless career navigation and management is physically and emotionally exhausting. In perpetual transition, the dance artist is further challenged in mid-career by increased social and familial responsibilities and shifting priorities. It appears to be at this point that artists begin to question the long-term sustainability of this career model. Indeed, the very existence of a career model, with its inference of some kind of logical progression, is brought into question. The constancy of instability is an ongoing concern for dance artists at all levels and ages, as expressed by Joysanne Sidimus of the *Dancer Transition Resource Centre* in Canada: "it is perfectly possible to be at the top of your profession and not be earning a living wage" (Levine 2005, p. 33). With dance now a formal university entrance course within several Australian states (most recently in Western Australia), and a corresponding increase in the numbers of dance majors, it is timely to examine the realities of sustaining a dance career through the mid-career period.

This paper acknowledges and locates some of the ongoing pressures, potential pitfalls, and personal costs of professional instability in a protean dance career. The paper aims to provide an intimate snapshot of independent dance artists' mid-career lives. It seeks to bring attention to the particular shift felt by independent dance artists in their thirties and to make a case for continued support throughout this period of heightened instability.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study reported here focused on mid-career dance artists, all with between 10 and 16 years experience in the sector, and asked the questions: what is the impact and direct affects of ongoing instability on the professional and personal identity status of mid-career dance artists? What are the available support mechanisms and personal strategies of artists in navigating this crucial career phase? What does a real-life mid-career in dance look like? All of the survey and interview participants were Australian-based dance artists with an active dance practice. The first phase of research involved a survey of 71 dance

artists from which the responses of nine mid-career dance artists (7 F, 2 M) were extracted. This was followed by in-depth case studies of three dance artists in their mid-thirties: Maya and Steven, who are both identified with pseudonyms, and Jo, the third participant and principal investigator. It is the results of these case studies that form the basis of this paper. Jo's inclusion positioned her as both investigator and participant, giving her the opportunity to contribute in terms of both her "lived experience" as a dance artist and from an academic standpoint. This methodology proved to be highly effective in eliciting deep responses.

### **Procedure**

Respondents were identified from within professional networks, and purposeful sampling was employed to locate successive informants likely to give a wealth of information (Patton 1990). The survey collected information relating to demographics, work, and career aspirations and was presented in print and electronic format. Each of the three case study interviews began by building a short profile of the participant including qualifications, professional background, and experience. The interview encompassed instability, professional and personal identity, status, support mechanisms, working life, economic circumstances, and career lifespan. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then independently coded using Glaser's constant comparative method of analysis (Flick 2002, p. 231). Seeking new responses to the topic, aspects of grounded theory were adopted to develop exploratory interpretations of data that would focus future data collection.

### **RESULTS**

Results of the study can be summarized in three key areas. First, the study highlighted the need for professional and economic support to be continued through mid-career. This is contrary to the traditional model of supporting emerging artists on the basis that initial support will lead to a level of stability. Second, the three case studies brought to the fore the complexities of family responsibilities and between male and female parenting and artist roles. Finally, the study shed some light on the quest for long-stability and the impact of this on creative dance practice.

### **DISCUSSION**

Dance is inherently unstable, and the instability comes with the dance career rather than being chosen: "it's not necessarily that I would like to be in a high

risk business, it just happens to be [that] what I have chosen is most high risk—I'm an artist" (Maya). All three case studies are dance artists who juggle a multitude of roles, often back-to-back or simultaneously. All accepted that the protean nature of working as a dance artist is a reality from the outset.

The impacts of instability were seen as both positive and negative. Negative impacts relate to the difficult economic and ecological landscape of working in dance. Card (2006, p. 13) offers that dance artists in the small to medium sector are akin to "a bunch of responsive scavengers who function in a state of perpetual crisis though a life of irregular support and erratic employment histories." However, positive impacts of instability include the development of a strong sense of self preservation and adaptability, alongside the freedom to be creative, unorthodox, or innovative.

The instability of dance is a given, but in many ways it is manageable. The difficulty seems to lie more in the disconnect between the instability of dance and the stability of everyday life; most participants reported to being personally and emotionally stable, in contrast to the unknown components underpinning the instability of their professional lives: "working in arts in Australia you're often able to work if other people allow you to work, rather than just continuing with your work. So that's unstable, because it's not up to you" (Maya). Multiple participants identified a need to justify their dance practice to friends and family who have difficulty understanding, accepting, and valuing irregular, often erratic work patterns. Such irregular project-based work was noted to be problematic in terms of accessing community resources such as childcare, which demands commitment to a regular schedule well in advance.

Acceptance of and rebellion against instability appears to be a gradual shift in attitude and priorities rather than a sudden decision point or age. For two of the case studies, parenthood was also a factor in the reprioritizing. Yet dance is not something that can be put down and picked up, either physically or emotionally. Jo reported that project-based practice results in a deep sense of loss during "down times" when she is financially unable to justify continuing work without funds. The reality that "physicality needs to be available on demand," regardless of other priorities and activities, was for Jo becoming both difficult and impractical. For both Jo and Steven the pursuit of stability was coupled with an overt grief at the potential loss of the physical dance practice. For Steven, this occurred when he made the decision to focus on business interests "to work smarter, not harder." Steven's failed attempt to create a stable income in support of an integrated work/art/life philosophy, when "theory and practice didn't add up," resulted in a loss of physicality that denied him opportunities to pursue his physical dance practice. His desire to

teach also diminished as it was his artistic practice that gave him the “juice” to teach: a dual loss of both practice and other work potential related to practice. For Jo, the grief was a recurring state of “pre-heartbreak during every project, knowing an end is imminent.”

Reflecting on his life in dance, Steven considered himself to have “careered rather than had a career,” implying a lack of control in his “careering” through both dance and jobs outside of the arts. In identifying his motivation for working, he was clear that “I work for my family now, not for myself.” Because of time constraints and family responsibilities, Jo stressed the need to generate income directly from artistic projects. For Maya, too, it was financially necessary to maintain a reliable income source. She separated her “paid work” from her “artistic practice,” though she still expected to generate her future income from her arts practice. This is in line with our previous research, which found that the income source of artists may not align with their professional identity.

In summary, this paper has provided insights in three key areas. First, the real life snapshot of a dance artist in mid-career is complicated and unique to each individual: Maya remained hopeful and reconciled, “the same as always;” Jo was building stable frames around her to house the continuation of an ongoing practice in increasingly unstable circumstances, yet she did not envisage a departure from dance; and Steven continued to research job options and was prepared to “let go” of dance in order “to be the provider,” though he was still deeply engaged in an ongoing inquiry of his artistic practice. All but one of the participants expressed a deeply felt need to stay connected to their own physical/emotional constitution, and grief when this need was not met. Secondly, the case studies, with their different stages and relationships with dance, all acted as reflexive balancers of the unstable. Possibly in direct response to the inherent instability in the dance environment, they actively sought to cultivate sustainability in their work, family, and lives, and all desired a home base in which to “locate and situate the chaos” (Jo). The role of parenthood here arose as a major factor in slowing the “artistic nomadism.” Finally, the results reiterate the vital need for support once dance artists have moved beyond the “emerging” phase. Ironically, though mid-career is contemporaneous with the period at which many dance artists begin to enjoy an established practice and “senior” artist status, the factors of mid-career deeply challenge the equilibrium. The need for support is evidenced by the 107% increase in applications for the *Scope for Artists* program, with over half of participants currently in their thirties. Further funding schemes, such as the new mid-career dance fellowship in Western Australia will allow artists to benefit from the available career development assistance and continue to

develop their practice. However, much more needs to be done in order to cultivate an environment in which dance careers can be sustained in the longer term, and where experienced Australian dance artists can be empowered to challenge and grow the art form.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to acknowledge the time so generously given to this project by the dance artists who shared their experiences and expertise.

### **Address for correspondence**

Jo Pollitt, 28 Aughton Street, Bayswater, Western Australia 6053, Australia; *Email:* joannapollitt@hotmail.com

### **References**

- Bennett D. (2008). *Understanding the Classical Music Profession*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Bennett D. (2009). Dance careers: Beyond performance to the real world of work. *Journal of Dance Education*, 9, pp. 27-34.
- Card. A. (2006). *Body for Hire? The State of Dance in Australia* (Platform papers No. 8). New South Wales, Australia: Currency House Inc.
- Flick E. (2002). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Levine M. (2005). *Beyond Performance*. The Hague, The Netherlands: International Organization for the Transition of Professional Dancers (available from [www.iotpd.org/beyond\\_performance.pdf](http://www.iotpd.org/beyond_performance.pdf)).
- Patton M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Newbury Park, California, USA: Sage Publications.
- Pollitt J. (2001) *Accumulated Experience in Live Improvised Dance Performance*. Unpublished masters thesis, Edith Cowan University.