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Connecting spectators to the 'face' of the dancer through open rehearsals

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Introduction

Across the Western world, mainstream dance companies are increasingly inviting their performance audiences and, in some cases, the general public into the rehearsal studio as spectators of creative and rehearsal processes. This event is referred to as the 'open rehearsal'. This paper discusses open rehearsals as a tool to foster deeper, more personal connections between the rehearsal spectator and dancer. This spectator-dancer connection, as experienced by rehearsal spectators, is the focus of this paper.

This paper examines two open rehearsal trials: a rehearsal of *Cinderella* (2013), by choreographer Alexei Ratmansky and rehearsed with principal dancers of The Australian Ballet (TAB); and *Emergence* (2013), by choreographer and Sydney Dance Company Artistic Director Rafael Bonachela, rehearsed with dancers of Sydney Dance Company (SDC). These trials form part of a doctoral project by a researcher who, alongside their audience research, is also an emerging contemporary dance practitioner. This paper draws on the rehearsal spectators' voices to illuminate their experiences of observing professional working rehearsals in the studio space. Through spectator discussions, the concept of the 'face' of the dancer emerges as an element that can encourage deeper emotional connections to dancers, and results in blended layers of the dancer's identity at subsequent performance.

This paper builds on a prior publication that analyses possible spectator engagement during open rehearsal events. Informed by researcher participant observation, this earlier article argues that open rehearsals present the possibility of deeper audience relationships with dancers through variations of site, close proximity, qualities of the dancer, and moments of liminality.¹ This current paper extends the work by presenting the spectator perspective of different open rehearsal events to the ones examined in the earlier article, and this provides evidence to support some of the earlier claims relating to qualities of the dancer that are revealed by rehearsal. This evidence of deeper, more personal connections to dancers presents possibilities of lasting, loyal audiences that support company resilience.

Rehearsal spectating

This topic is positioned at the intersection between dance reception, engagement tools, and dance rehearsal studies. Reception literature asserts that dance audiences are active contributors to performance events through physical, emotional, and cognitive responses.² Investigation into engagement tools to enhance audience experience is comparatively limited. The empirical research that is available on this topic focuses on talk-based tools, and argues the importance of reflection after the arts event.³ Rehearsal studies in dance document the studio process, and the use of text and video assists in this documentation. Dance

rehearsal studies also examine the relationships between choreographer and dancers in the construction of dance work. A dedicated chapter in Randy Martin's *Performance as Political Act*⁴ is a significant written contribution in this area, as it describes the creative process of a modern dance choreographer, from the first rehearsal through to performance. A significant video contribution is *15 Days of Dance: The Making of "Ghost Light"*, a documentary series which captures the entire creative process of *Ghost Light*, by American ballet choreographer Brian Reeder.⁵ Much work has been done in dance rehearsal studies, however, only a limited number of publications address how spectators might engage in these spaces. Considering the scope of this paper, only research that addresses rehearsal spectators is discussed below.

Dance researchers Sarah Whatley⁶, Sita Popat,⁷ and ethnographer Hugo Letiche⁸ offer suggestions regarding the insights and experiences that rehearsals might offer spectators.⁹ Whatley considers spectator-dancer relationships in regard to a specific online repository of rehearsal videos, *Siobhan Davies RePlay*.¹⁰ These videos include the "broader activities and operations of the rehearsal", including dancers warming up, 'marking' movement, resting, and observing: the "mystery" of how dance work is made, and even the social aspects of the rehearsal environment, are revealed.¹¹

Whatley suggests that the repetitive nature of rehearsals opens up the dancer's "thinking" process to the viewer.¹² Furthermore, she proposes that close proximity of the camera to the dancers provides an intimacy that can enable a "more somatic engagement with the dancer".¹³ Whatley asserts that the rehearsal videos subsequently enrich and augment viewer-turned-audience experience of live dance performances.¹⁴

The experience of being a rehearsal spectator in the studio space (as opposed to an online viewer) is addressed by Popat. While researching spectator co-creation through the internet, Popat reports a distinction between being 'with' dancers in live settings, and being 'with' dancers in virtual settings:

Even in synchronous communications where they may see each other, speak to each other and dance with each other, the sense of being "with" online is profoundly different to being "with" in the studio. "With" in the studio allows a dancer to control his or her location in space and proximity to the other dancer. It permits the physical sensing of body heat and odours, of skin and surface resistance, of the visceral presence of the other.¹⁵

As a rehearsal spectator positioned in the studio space of Nederlands Dans Theater, Letiche reports that his "experience of Otherness", as a spectator, varied significantly between the studio and theatre spaces: "[o]bserving dance-being-created was very different from sitting (during a performance) in the audience".¹⁶ Letiche describes this distinction between rehearsal and performance as the "there and then" performance mode as opposed to the "here and now" impact and intimacy of rehearsal.¹⁷ Letiche's finding forms a critical assumption within this current study: that rehearsals offer a

different experience of the dancer compared to the experience of performances within the traditional presentation paradigm.¹⁸

While limited, the literature in this area offers valuable perspectives that can provide direction for further research. It states that the experience of spectating rehearsals can feel significantly different to performance, that an online engagement can also present different experiences of being 'with' than in the studio, and suggests that rehearsal experiences might impact subsequent reception at performance.

Of particular significance to this paper, much of the literature, especially that relating to rehearsal spectators, is informed by the researcher's (often dance expert) perspective: the voices of diverse rehearsal spectator groups are often missing. In a field which acknowledges that each individual's unique combination of knowledge, disciplinary training, and taste significantly influences their reception,¹⁹ empirical spectator research is an important contribution to the literature.

Methods

In 2013, select Sydney Dance Company (SDC) and The Australian Ballet (TAB) studio working rehearsals were opened to two non-expert spectator groups during early phases of the creative process, where movement sequences were created and/or introduced to the dancers for the first time.²⁰ The open rehearsal trials were the first time that these spectators had entered a professional dance studio space. The spectator groups were formed using a call out process through the companies' marketing channels. Interested individuals completed a screening questionnaire to determine eligibility as a non-expert, and the final groups (of 12 and 8 participants) were constructed to reflect the age and gender distribution of all eligible respondents. For example, SDC's eligible respondents (111 in total) consisted of 31.5% men and 68.5% women; therefore, the final SDC spectator participant group consisted of 4 men (33%) and 8 women (66%) to be consistent with total eligible respondents. This same process was also applied to age.

The qualitative data discussed in this paper was offered by the spectators through post-rehearsal and post-performance discussions. During these discussions, the spectators were prompted to talk about what they thought and felt during the open rehearsals and subsequent performances. These discussions have been analysed using a grounded approach, where ideas relating to spectator-dancer connection have emerged.

'Face' of the dancer

The terminology and concept of the dancer's 'face' emerged in the very first spectator discussion: "they [the dancers] didn't have their, kind of, show face on" (SDC Spectator 5). This terminology was then adopted by other spectators, and became part of the group's vernacular.

While the spectators had previously experienced performer qualities at performances – technical virtuosity, character portrayal, and believable emotion²¹ – the open rehearsals introduced a different 'face':

I think in the rehearsal they seemed like people [. . .] they were much more anonymous in the, I felt, in the performance whereas in the rehearsal you could see who they were and that they were people and individuals [. . .] (SDC Spectator 7).

This paper unpacks three elements of this 'face'. First, the 'face' of the dancer is described in regard to emotion, personality, and physicality. Second, the spectators' emotional connections to the dancer's 'face' is discussed. Third, the spectator experience of the subsequent performances is discussed, highlighting the impact of the rehearsal experience on the way performer qualities were viewed.

The spectators observed that the dancer's rehearsal 'face' was distinctly different to the performer qualities they were familiar with. The 'face' of the dancer was "very normal" (SDC Spectator 1), and this was surprising for some spectators:

I think when you watch ballet performances, because they get so into their characters, you forget that, you know, the people playing the part have their own personalities as well. [. . .] Because when they are on stage they have the beautiful lines and everything looks flawless and they just, I don't know, you just don't think of them as a normal person. (TAB Spectator 8)

Furthermore, the spectators stated that they saw the dancers experience "actual emotions", such as embarrassed laughter when they "stuffed something up" or intense concentration when they were "really getting into it" (SDC Spectator 5). Where, before the open rehearsals, the spectators knew the dancers through the performer qualities they observed on stage, the open rehearsals introduced "real" personalities and emotions: a 'humanness' emerged. The authenticity of the working rehearsal event opened up the possibility for the conceptual 'face' of the dancer to be revealed: a "very normal" human, with "actual emotions."

The spectators also spoke specifically about developing understandings of the dancers as individuals: "I think you got to know them. [. . .] In the rehearsal you feel like you've got a little bit of what their story is" (SDC Spectator 4). The individual personalities of the partners in TAB's rehearsal was described by one spectator:

One of the couples, they were just really cheeky. They were having such a fun time and [were] very playful. Madeline [Eastoe] and Kevin [Jackson], yeah. And then there was one couple that was very serious, quite studious. They each had their own personalities and I think they were matched up pretty well that way, apart from physicality. Like Spectator 8 said, they nearly all had the human quirks and some of them fooled around and having slips and falls and things like that. It was very natural. (TAB Spectator 2)

These, and other, elements of the 'face' of the dancer do not appear on stage when all of the dancers must perform the same characters believably.

The close proximity to the dancers in rehearsals presented opportunities for the spectators to see physical details of the dancers' bodies and facial expressions that are hidden in the theatre by distance. In one instance, some spectators were surprised that up close, and without matching make-up, hair and costumes, ballerinas do not look identical. Others particularly enjoyed the close proximity because of their ability to observe small movement details:

So for example, Charmene [Yap], one of the dancers that I've seen in a number of things, and she's an incredible dancer, just to be able to see her close up, see the process she's going through and see how her limbs move and see that intimate detail of all the body movements. It's just an amazing experience that you don't get very often. (SDC Spectator 7)

Even though there was no direct interaction between this spectator and the dancer, seeing the finer details of Yap's body, and observing the way that she participated in the rehearsal process was considered a valuable experience. In another instance, a spectator even likened Principal Dancer Madeline Eastoe to herself as she "sized" the dancer up during the rehearsal (TAB Spectator 8). The 'face' of the dancer, as discovered by the rehearsal spectators, included perceptions of the dancers' emotions, personalities, and physicality (alike to their own) that are hidden by performer qualities and distance in the theatre.

The spectators discussed emotional connections to the dancers in the form of positive affect toward the 'human face' of the dancer, empathising with this 'face', and expressing further interest in the dancers:

Something that I really liked from there [the rehearsal] was how they [the dancers] show their appreciation for each other and also, sitting on the end [of the row of seats], you can kind of hear them chatting amongst themselves a bit and hear the nice comments they have. [. . .] it raised the enjoyment for me as well, to see how much they enjoy working with each other. (SDC Spectator 2)

This spectator formed positive feelings for the dancers in response to the 'human' interactions that they had witnessed during the rehearsals.

Some spectators spoke about empathetic connections to the dancers, in that they experienced emotions on behalf of dancers. This element of the spectator experience emerged when they discussed parts of the rehearsals that they perceived to be negative experiences for the dancers. One example was when a dancer was removed from a particular section of choreography; some spectators "felt uncomfortable having watched that and sympathetic for him" (SDC Spectator 5). In other instances, the spectators commented: "I couldn't help feeling how I would feel if that were me" (TAB Spectator 3), and "I actually did start to get a bit worried for them" (SDC Spectator 10). In these examples, the spectators perceived and felt negative experiences on the dancers' behalf, thus making an empathetic connection with them.

The rehearsal, as experienced by these spectators, developed beyond conceptual engagement and into genuine emotional connections, not with the performer qualities that were being developed, but with the dancers as 'humans'. An empathetic involvement became part of some spectators' rehearsal experience.

Furthermore, this interest in the dancers extended beyond the rehearsal as the spectators discussed an interest in learning more about their 'humanness':

You feel like you kind of want to get to know something about them as people. [. . .] this opens up a whole new avenue of interest in them. (SDC Spectator 10)

The introduction to the 'human face' of the dancer arose as a significant element of positive interest in the open rehearsals. This interest developed into empathetic relationships, and left the spectators wanting to discover more.

Experiencing the 'face' of the dancer in rehearsal influenced the way in which the spectators experienced performer qualities as audience members at subsequent performances. In the post-performance discussions, the project audiences spoke about remembering elements of the dancer's 'face' while seeing their performer qualities on stage. They saw both the 'face' of the dancer ('human'), and the 'face' of the performer qualities (character or embodied emotion).

Theatre audience researcher Bruce McConachie refers to this phenomenon – an audience's shifting and mixing of states – as "blending", and posits that when the audience is engaged with both the actor and character, they "live in the blend".²² The project audiences experienced multiple 'faces' at performance, where the 'face' of the dancer was blending with the performer qualities on stage. One rehearsal spectator explained:

I think you felt more of a connection. You know, you remember that that person was making a joke or that one smiled a lot or whatever. So yeah, I think it did give you a different kind of connection or, kind of, intimacy with the performers. (TAB Spectator 6)

I felt that it [rehearsal] changed what I was viewing tonight. [. . .] seeing their personalities had carried over a little bit as well. (SDC Spectator 5)

Even though the dancers presented performer qualities on stage, the rehearsal spectator-turned-audiences' experience of their performance was affected by 'meeting' the 'face' of the dancer during the rehearsals. The performer qualities that the spectators saw on stage were filtered, and changed, by their memories of the dancers they came to know in rehearsal.

Furthermore, one project audience member stated that the dancer's voice formed part of the blend they experienced during performance: "For some of them I could still hear their voices while they were dancing. So when the spotlight was on them I was hearing what they were saying" in the rehearsal (SDC Spectator 5). This intriguing comment illustrates how the echo of the dancer's voice added new layers

to the performer qualities that they experienced in the theatre. Prior to the open rehearsals, the spectators had little, if any, knowledge of the qualities of the dancers – their ‘human face’ – and, therefore, the open rehearsal opened up the possibility of blending at the subsequent performances.

Conclusion

While this study is a nascent investigation into dance rehearsal spectatorship, the spectator discussions have illuminated significant elements of their rehearsal experience that impact on their connection to dancers and their reception of performance. The open rehearsals revealed elements of the dancers that were previously unknown to the study’s non-expert spectators. Through the rehearsal ‘meeting’, new understandings of the ‘human face’ of the dancer developed, and, subsequently, these understandings framed the way in which the project audiences viewed the performer qualities on stage. For many, this resulted in a blend of ‘human’ and performer qualities: a new, more personal, connection to the dancer/performer. For many spectators who participated in this study, this contributed to a more fulfilling performance experience. This is best explained by one spectator:

I think I appreciated tonight’s performance more having seen those people in the rehearsal because I could recognise them. Because I could identify with them, it seemed more personal.
(SDC Spectator 1)

Deeper, more personal audience connections to dancers and more fulfilling performance experiences present possibilities for greater audience loyalty. The open rehearsal is a practice that holds significant potential for supporting this audience connection, and might contribute as one strategy towards company resilience.

Notes

1. See Anja Ali-Haapala, 'Sneak Peek: Dance Audience Relationships during Open Rehearsals', *Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship* 3 (2015): 1-15.

2. Theories of physical engagement include common audience behaviours such as applause (see Lynne Conner, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), intrinsic impacts such as kinaesthetic empathy (see Susan Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011); Judith Hanna. *The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor in Dance and Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, 'Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance', *Dance Research Journal* 42.2 (2010): 49-75; Dee Reynolds, Corinne Jola and Frank Pollick, 'Dance and Neuroscience - New Partnerships', *Dance Research* 29.2 (2011): 260-269), and the use of embodied language when describing the experience of watching dance (see Brian Knoth, 'Interactive Multimedia Performance and the Audience's Experience of Kinesthetic Empathy', in Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, ed., *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012) 281-300).

Theories of emotional engagement include emotional contagion (see Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and emotion as result of cognition (see Lynne Conner, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, 'Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance', *Dance Research Journal* 42.2 (2010): 49-75).

Theories of cognitive engagement include 'playful' attention (see Paul Thom, *For an Audience: A Philosophy of The Performing Arts*, edited by Joseph Margolis, *The Arts And Their Philosophies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), conceptual 'bridging' between stage and audience member (see Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, 'Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance', *Dance Research Journal* 42.2 (2010): 49-75), meaning-making (see Lynne Conner, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Judith Hanna, *The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor in Dance and Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Annie Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process: 'Post-Control' Choreography', *Dance Chronicle* 33.2 (2010): 180-207), and movement 'language' (see Judith Hanna, 'The Language of Dance', *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 72.4 (2001): 40-45; Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Mystique of Fieldwork', in Theresa Buckland, ed., *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999) 13-25; Lincoln Kirstein, *The New York City Ballet* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

3. A key research project in this area, *Conceiving Connections: Increasing Viability through Analysis of Audience Response to Dance Performance* (2002-2004), argues that post-performance reflexive methods offer more value to audience members than pre-performance preparation, such as information sessions (see Renee Glass, 'Observer Response to Contemporary Dance', in Robin Grove, Catherine Stevens and Shirley McKechnie, ed., *Thinking in Four Dimensions: Creativity and Cognition in Contemporary Dance* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2005) 107-121). Talk-based approaches to post-performance reflection, specifically audience discussions, are argued to support audience pleasure and engagement when 'productive talk' is achieved (see Lynne Conner, *Audience*

Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Rebecca Scollen, 'Regional Voices Talk Theatre: Audience Development for Performing Arts', *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 13 (2008):45-56).

4. Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (New York: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1990).

5. This series is particularly significant because it includes lengthy periods of unedited footage, and often offers two camera angles where the viewer can simultaneously observe the dancers and choreographer (see Elliot Caplin, *15 Days of Dance: The Making of "Ghost Light"* (Picture Start Films Inc., 2010).

6. Sarah Whatley, 'Recovering and Reanimating 'Lost' Traces: The Digital Archiving of the Rehearsal Process in Siobhan Davies RePlay. *Dance Research* 31.2 (2013).

7. Sita Popat, *Invisible Connections: Dance, Choreography and Internet Communities* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

8. Hugo Letiche, 'Crafting an Aesthetic: Observer versus Audience', in Stephen Linstead and Heather Höpfl, ed., *The Aesthetics of Organization* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

9. Dance researcher Nia-Amina Minor also examines the spectator in rehearsals, however, she approaches the spectator as a tool within the creative process from the choreographer perspective, as opposed to focusing on reception from the spectator perspective (see Nia-Amina Minor, *The Exchange: An Investigation of Engagement in Dance*. MFA Thesis. University of California, 2014).

10. See <http://www.siobhandaviesreplay.com>

11. Sarah Whatley, 149.

12. Sarah Whatley, 153.

13. Sarah Whatley, 152.

14. Sarah Whatley, 154.

15. Sita Popat, 109.

16. Hugo Letiche, 157.

17. Hugo Letiche, 173.

18. The traditional presentation paradigm is a format in which dance work is "presented to the audience (in a monologic format), irrespective of individual audience characteristics". Dance researcher Clare Dyson identifies five characteristics of this paradigm: the performance site is front-facing, in fixed seating theatres; "the expected codes and conventions of performance, inherent in traditional performance venues (theatres), are adhered to"; "audience agency is 'restricted' or non-existent"; "audience proximity to the stage is fixed" and distant; and dancers employ performer qualities which can include dancing "without personal engagement" through to performing "believable" emotion or character (see Clare Dyson, 'Mapping the Experiential in Contemporary Dance.' (*Contemporising the Past: Envisaging the Future*. Proceedings of the 2014 World Dance Alliance Global Summit, Angers, 6–11 July, 2015). Online: <http://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/mapping-the-experiential-in-contemporary-dance>).

19. See Lynne Conner, *Audience Engagement and the Role of Arts Talk in the Digital Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sondra Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987) 61; Susan Melrose, 'Who knows - and who cares: about performance mastery?', in Judie Christie, Richard Gough and Daniel Peter Watt, ed., *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future Evidence of the Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 132-139; Susan Melrose, 'Expert-intuitive Processing and the Logics of Production: Struggles in (the Working of) Creative Decision-Making in 'Dance'', in Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wilschut, ed., *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009) 23-37; Dee Reynolds, Corinne Jola and Frank Pollick, 'Dance and Neuroscience - New Partnerships', *Dance Research* 29.2 (2011): 266; Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 141.

20. A 'working rehearsal' relates to the authenticity of the rehearsal. The term is considered on a continuum from 'working' to 'performed' rehearsals. A working rehearsal, for the most part, operates like a regular closed rehearsal; it is not prepared, rehearsed or adapted for the spectators (see Anja Ali-Haapala, 'Sneak Peek: Dance Audience Relationships during Open Rehearsals', *Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship* 3 (2015): 2).

21. Developed as one of five scales of audience engagement, Dyson's 'performer qualities' considers the multiple ways in which the performer might present themselves on stage (see Clare Dyson, 'Mapping the Experiential in Contemporary Dance.' (*Contemporising the Past: Envisaging the Future*. Proceedings of the 2014 World Dance Alliance Global Summit, Angers, 6–11 July, 2015). Online: <http://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/mapping-the-experiential-in-contemporary-dance>).

22. Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 43. This concept is drawn from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's concept of blending within the actor. Fauconnier and Turner suggest that the power of dramatic performance is when the actor blends with the character into one identity. McConachie develops this theory by placing the act of blending within the spectator rather than the performer. See Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 265.