

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE ARTS

CATHY LIVERMORE

Cathy Livermore was born in Australia and moved to New Zealand in 2001 to complete her Bachelor in Performance and Screen Arts at Unitec, Auckland. She is currently head tutor on the Contemporary Dance programme at Whitireia Performing Arts and has been a dancer with the acclaimed Atamira Dance Collective since 2004. Earlier this year she spent three weeks as artist in residence at the Oceania Centre, University of South Pacific in Fiji. She returned recently from a second trip to Fiji where she performed her latest choreography and spoke as part of the panel on Contemporary Pacific Dance Developments at the Festival of Oceanic Dance, Suva, Fiji. Cathy recognises the essential role of dance in the lives and cultures of the Pacific region and is passionate about the journey of evolution taking place and how this is reflected through the creative expression of our bodies.

I was born in Australia, in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. The year of my birth is 1976. Around the age of 17 my Nana told me the story of her family. It was then that I first found out about my Maori ancestry and links to Aotearoa. Around the same time, with the finishing of my schooling in 1993, I left Australia to spend several years traveling overseas. Not long after returning to Sydney and deciding that the way of life there was not for me I moved to the area of Byron Bay, Australia where I became intensely involved in an environmental campaign against a gold mining company and spent several years fighting for the rights of Papatuanuku and indigenous cultures. I also spent a lot of time exploring different spiritual philosophies and alternative approaches to health.

It was at this time that I decided to re-focus my energies into performing arts and to finally take seriously my passion to dance. I began my training in Australia before deciding to move to New Zealand to continue my training in dance but more importantly to continue my personal spiritual and philosophical search by looking into my family's history and uncovering my whakapapa and therefore my links to Maoridom.

After finishing my dance training I was invited to dance with Atamira Dance Collective, a Maori contemporary dance company. Not long after that I saw a teaching job advertised at Whitireia Performing Arts and applied for it on a whim. I have now been teaching there for 3 years and continue to dance with Atamira.

I am a woman
I am a middle-class Australian beach girl
I am Maori
I am an immigrant
I am a part of Generation X
I am a hippie activist
I am a dancer and choreographer
And I am a professional educator

These are all my cultures.

And here I am today to talk to you about cultural diversity.
In a nutshell, you are looking at it.

It is a privilege to share my experiences and views with you especially in support of such a kaupapa; building on a inspiring vision and developing a strategy, a map for where we hope to move towards in our cultivation and celebration of the arts. What I speak today is my humble offering towards the journey ahead of learning and discovering HOW to nurture and grow this vision so that it may come to bear great, delicious fruits for future artistic sustenance.

Now returning to my previous statement

I am cultural diversity

I am engaged and move within all my different identities, contexts and communities every day so when considering how my being a professional artist fits in with my culture I must acknowledge that this is not a simple question to answer because of the multiple and diverse ethnic and cultural elements that make up who I am, that I fit into in some way, and therefore inform and influence me as a dance artist.

Generally speaking, in some situations my being a professional artist is received in positive ways- intrigue, admiration, excitement and at other times it can be viewed derogatively or suspiciously- that it's not a serious career, that I'm a bit of a self indulgent weirdo.

In my reality I am required to navigate through and negotiate all the diverse cultures that make up MY culture and they all have differing understandings, values and judgements on me as a dance artist. The essential point I believe to consider here is this diversity to avoid oversimplifying when defining and categorizing the contexts and relationships in which I and many other artists operate and 'fit into' in our contemporary society for in my opinion no-one in NZ today operates in a singular culture but more so straddles themselves over multiple cultures

To be honest with you I do not feel it is possible for me to adequately engage and respond to this panel discussion within only 5-10 minutes. The questions posed to me could each be discussed and debated for well over 10 minutes and by way of their profound and complex directives necessitate more time being given to the investigation of them in greater depth.

So for today in order to contribute what I can to this panel in a short time span I can only respond with broader generalizations but hope that this does not mask the complexity of real life experiences that form the answers to these questions.

For me being a professional artist is a privilege and yet generally is extremely challenging. People seem generally curious about me being a dancer but don't often seem confident in knowing how to really engage with or understand what this entails. While I have little trouble in seeing how dance and what I do can feed into other areas of my life I think those around me find it harder to relate beyond a superficial sort of acknowledgement to my life as a professional dancer.

Now in relation to the philosophical debate between individual vs collective approaches to art, in short there is plenty of discussion and debate within my environments around these definitions and dynamics of individual behaviour and collective participation within art making processes but again I don't have the time here and now to specifically identify and talk about them.

What I will offer though is that the real issue for me arises when we see these two concepts as being diametrically opposing or negating the other. People who fully take ownership of their personal or individual role within the collective is necessary for the collective to flourish and sustain itself. In my experience I am finding that the less concrete and judgmental I am about labeling these approaches as opposing and the more fluid I allow the dynamic between them to be then they become more aligned and collaborative.

I believe that instead of the individual/collective debate a more pressing issue exists around acknowledging and engaging with cultural processes that enable or disable people's abilities to be able to participate in art making and therefore in CNZ's vision.

In reflecting on the process of developing art I think that generally non-artists are not so engaged with processes of developing art but are more interested in participating and experiencing the outcomes, so it is the artists that must be considered.

Developing something always involves the process of change and integration and this process always holds its elements of resistant tensions and the momentum of new beginnings. In relation to the process of developing art I think ultimately that artists views and responses will depend on WHO is driving the process and the ideas and what THEIR motivations are or their expectations and desired outcomes.

The question that I am interested in asking though is who in this particular process is defining what is 'art' and therefore what gets focus and energy to 'develop'?

For instance in relation to dance there are a lot of common blanket assumptions around dance making in NZ by lots of different parties linked to dance some of which are true, But most of these assumptions are based on defining 'process' and 'art' viewed through a European lens and thus 'professional' art making processes and outputs are validated primarily in this country within a European context. In this sense 'professional art making' is seen as an exclusive arena that excludes the age old processes operating within ethnic communities around cultural participation and creative interaction that results in artistic practices and outputs.

The ROLE of art making processes and art experiences in a communities' life differs across cultures and communities,

And in relation to gender roles and dynamics

And in relation to diverse cultural and communal systems used for validating artistic work and merit.

These are just some of the elements that combine to influence how artistic processes are viewed. SO in relation to each of my cultures that I identified before I could give you a different analysis in response to this question.

Yet this I think is the essential point, that there is not going to be an easy going one-approach strategy if you truly want to access and highlight diversity.

In maintaining self and identity.

Sometimes I feel great pressure personally to 'live up to' identities, especially as a Maori here in NZ because this as an identity is precious to so many and is also very political. This can sometimes obstruct my enjoyment or ease with engaging with both Maori and non-Maori because everyone seems to have an opinion inside their own head as to what validates you as a Maori. This is especially true as an artist not working in culturally traditional forms. Being tangata whenua at the same time as being an immigrant can get pretty confusing too.

How I am treated because I am a woman, how I am treated because of my age, how I am treated because I am Maori, how I am treated because I am Australian all differ depending on the culture of the environment I am in at that moment and who is there with me. So self and identity for me is a journey full of potholes of reflections, straight roads of contentment and windy roads of learning and growing and change.

Self and identity are not experienced as absolutes for me but is a growing and morphing story of my understanding of myself in all directions, it is a continual conversation b/w past self, in relation to history, current self in relation to the present and to future possible selves, it is something that develops in response to things beyond my control and through the choices I make.

It is in many ways an insecure place to be but this is the reality of a time when so many possibilities exist and the challenge is in finding something solid and consistent in one's experience in which to build a sense of self upon. By staying grounded and present in this experience then what comes out, I figure, will be my true identity.

How others engage with who I am can inform me about myself but ultimately it is me knowing and affirming my own story, which I do through MY DANCE, that forms and consolidates who I am. Of course there are many times when this philosophy of mine feels challenged to hold on to, but hey that's all part of the process of living it.

Tu tangata - to stand tall - is what drives us at Whitireia Performing Arts. As tutors our efforts are focussed building strong skill bases while inspiring high standards in all actions through cultural practice. In this way we don't focus on telling our young people

what to do or be but instead focus on empowering our young people to be able to make successful choices for themselves. Skills and high standards are the tools that can provide successful outcomes.

Being involved in education and currently embroiled in the process of writing and delivering a new applied arts degree programme I am acutely aware of the importance of TIME and how we understand the working of it when attempting to engage with others to define and orientate towards synonomous goals; time to try, sometimes fail, adapt, negotiate but most importantly to listen to those you are trying to reach out to for true guidance on how to succeed with your efforts in creating new pathways.

When creating my teaching strategy or map I try to clarify my understanding and relevance by asking some essential questions that I would like to propose to CNZ.

1) Who exactly are your target groups? Or in other words what is your definition of culture- is it ethnic cultures you are wanting to engage with exclusively, does 'culture' include age groups and their cultures, gender's and their cultures? Culture as a word can spread wide and therefore thin in its definition so the challenge I see with this strategy currently is how to clarify your targets more specifically so that you may begin to make the desired face-on-face connections and relations to those individuals or communities and so you can begin to also create a clear position from which to see and plan for future directions and possibilities that are effective in putting ideas into action.

2)What are you defining as success or in other words what are the desired outcomes that are being embedded within your strategy? Identifying these clearly helps groups and its individual members relate better within collaborations and partnerships when they know what is going to be required of them and where things will head for them from there.

3)Are the definitions and frameworks of reference exclusive or inclusive of your desired target groups' culture; THEIR ways of being and day-to-day lifestyles? Within this there needs to be consideration of the blurring of definitions b/w art and culture, individual and collective, contemporary and traditional, and the dynamic of multi-ethnic identity's and influences.

Such questions excite and fascinate me and I wish we had longer than just this afternoon to participate in discussions on these questions which have highlighted themselves for me in my process of preparing for this panel because I believe that questions such as these help empower us in understanding the differing positions that feed into the dynamics of our communications within our partnerships.

The success of such collaborative visions as these being discussed in this new strategy is in my opinion going to be based on not what we try to achieve but in HOW we go about establishing and building our relationships and opening up the opportunity for more people to publicly participate in artistic and creative expression that reflects where we have come from, who we are now and where we dream of going which ultimately is what I hear CNZ proposing.

For as I stand here a living example of cultural diversity I can confirm for you that cultural diversity does not need to be fostered, it already exists throughout this country on the streets, in homes, school playgrounds, community centres, everywhere you look- What is left therefore is to discover IF and HOW these peoples would like to share themselves with a more public audience.

In this I wish you patience, perseverance, inspiration and success.