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## Sustaining dancer wellbeing through independent professional dance careers

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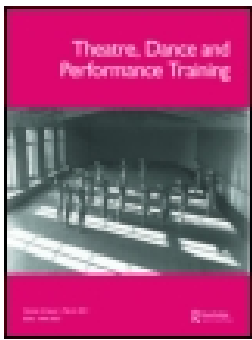
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# Sustaining dancer wellbeing through independent professional dance careers

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Dancers dedicate their lives to their art. The lucky few dancers who reach professional careers, must navigate a casualised industry, balance financial pressures and maintain performance fitness. This research aimed to provide practical considerations for dancers to support their health and wellbeing through independent, professional dance careers. Dancers from Australian contemporary dance company Co3 participated in a training program involving psychological and physiotherapy assessments and fitness training in conjunction with a major performance season. Focus groups with company dancers and staff investigated the perceived efficacy of the training program within the company schedule and in supporting dancer wellbeing. Dancers were highly engaged with the training program. Dancers expressed various benefits and challenges in incorporating the training within the demands of their careers. Themes identified from the dancer responses included making time, program specificity, dance fitness, connecting as a company, dancer monitoring and scheduling. A need to maintain collegiality outside of contracted times through communities of practice was identified across many of the themes. It is posited that the human capital of dance is challenged through the casualisation of the dance sector and requires careful attention from aspiring dancers.

**Keywords:** Artistic career, communities of practice, creative industries, fitness, human capital

## Introduction

Aspiring young dancers enter studios everyday with the dreams of a professional dance career. In their formative years, dance becomes a significant element of dancers' lives. Pickard (2012, p. 42) describes that ballet training 'engages the young ballet dancer in embodying the discipline of ballet' whereby 'dominant ideas, beliefs, norms, behaviours, values

and expectations of ballet culture are transmitted via the ballet teacher'. The physical requirements of dance dictate that pre-professional dancers commence training in childhood and dedicate a sizable proportion of their early years building their artistic, physical and technical abilities. The investment of the aspiring dancer in the human capital (Becker 1994) of dance is significant and is often motivated through a love of movement and expression discovered early in these formative years (Pickard 2012). By their late teens, the professional dance sector quickly emerges in front a small cohort of talented dancers. By this time, significant emotional, temporal and financial investments have been made by the dancers and their family, with no guarantee of return through a professional dance career. The professional dance industry would not exist without the investments made by dancers and their families.

Despite the challenges and sacrifices overcome by aspiring dancers in training, a dancer's greatest challenge can be faced when attempting to develop a professional career in a casualised sector of intermittent, low paid contracts (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; Ashton and Ashton 2016; Hennekam and Bennett 2017). The professional contemporary dance sector in Australia is poorly funded (Meyrick and Barnett 2017) and dancers experience extended periods of unemployment (Zawadzki 2016). Small companies and independent works operate under highly casualised working conditions and rely on the independent entrepreneurialism of 'Bohemian' (Comunian et al. 2010) dancers to 'migrate' (Comunian and Jewell 2018) and establish themselves as professional performing artists (Comunian et al. 2011). This is in stark contrast to the comparatively large commercial Australian dance education and training sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014) which often operates through autocratic training approaches that 'rely on imitation and memorization rather than personal innovation' (Alterowitz 2014, 10). These pedagogical approaches reflect the discipline and dedication required by dancers to develop the emotional, artistic and physical attributes required of the expert dancer. The art of professional dance is difficult to produce without advanced physical ability. A minority of persistent and talented dancers progress physically, emotionally and artistically into professional dance careers (Walker et al. 2012). These dancers experience an abrupt environmental shift from the highly structured, autocratic and commercialised dance training sector to the underfunded, unstructured and predominately independent domain of professional dance (Ashton and Ashton 2016; Hennekam and Bennett 2017).

The dancing body requires a lot of time and attention and when contracted, dancers are expected to step into the studio 'performance fit'. Between contracts, independent professional dancers face the challenge of maintaining 'performance fitness' through their elite physicality and artistry, as well as avoiding injury and illness, with the added pressure of surviving financially. The off contract conundrum of the independent dancer is how to manage 'a continually unfolding, self-managed patchwork of concurrent and overlapping employment arrangements' (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015, 264) while maintaining their physical ability and artistic identity as dancers (Fanthome 2013). The human capital developed in a

dancer is precarious in that their artistry is dependent on their physical ability. Prolonged periods of unemployment or disengagement from dance can result in physical detraining and a loss or the inability to utilise the 'capital' that is developed through childhood. The investments made by dancers early in life are therefore often lost to the pressures of professional dance (Hennekam and Bennett 2016) and many dancers fail to achieve the professional standing as a dancer that they have been aspiring to throughout their formative years.

Dance is a unique nexus of artistry and athleticism. The ability of the dancer to perform artistically is reliant on several underlying physical abilities such as strength, balance, flexibility, aerobic and anaerobic capacity. The realisation of these abilities are further reliant the performance psychology of the dancer, particularly in choreography that requires a high intensity or complex work. Increasing competition and greater awareness of the systemic health and wellbeing issues faced by dancers has seen the emergence of bespoke scientific and medical support services for dancers (Clark et al. 2014). Professional dancers have the capacity to embrace a strategic, considered and somewhat clinical approach to their work in order to meet the physical and emotional demands of the sector, while maintaining their wellbeing and career longevity. Dance can borrow much from the human movement and medical sciences with the aims of promoting mental and physical health, and avoiding injury and illness (Clark et al. 2014). It is ultimately the dancer's responsibility to engage with this knowledge of practice, yet there is very little information available which guides dancers in maintaining their health, wellbeing and performance fitness throughout casualised, independent professional dance careers.

This project explored the practicalities of how dancers from emerging West Australian contemporary dance company, Co3 support their health and wellbeing across performance contracts, as well as maintain and develop performance fitness. The research investigated how the dancers engaged with practices drawn from scientific and medical literature when on and off contract and the value that they found, or lack thereof, in the practices aimed at supporting their performance, health and wellbeing. Therefore, the physical training, for this study, focussed upon traditional athletic training which is directed at the development of basic physical capacities such as strength and aerobic capacity. The overarching aim of this research was to provide practical considerations for how dancers can support their health and wellbeing when navigating an independent professional dance career. The research contributes to the knowledge which supports dancers to retain and bolster their personal capital and investment as professional dancers, and to actualise the delivery of their cultural contributions to society as artists.

## Method

### Co3

Since the formation of the Co3 dance company in 2014, artistic director Raewyn Hill has led the company with an ethos of collaboration and

commitment to company wellbeing. Hill's work is by reputation highly physical with many performances involving over an hour of continual, high intensity movement. Hill's process naturally elicits physical challenges and fatigue across the performance season and the rehearsal process. Hill acknowledges the physical and mental stresses placed on the dancers and has been proactive in exploring means to support the dancers through the creation, performance and recovery from her productions. To avoid the incidence of overtraining and burnout that is common in the competitive world of contemporary dance (Blevins et al. 2020), Hill incorporates remedial and supplemental training into typical company schedules. Hill identifies these processes as essential for the dancers to be able to fully commit to the work, achieve sufficient recovery to minimize injury risk and facilitate ongoing effort and engagement through the making and performance of the work. Hill's process is evolving and still largely experimental.

Hill incorporates training methods such as replacing the morning warm up class with yoga three times per week, the supply of ice packs for scheduled cryotherapy and stretching sessions, daily questionnaires where the dancers report mood, energy and motivation levels as well as perceptions of training demands, and post-performance recovery at the West Australian Institute of Sport. This proactive and experimental approach to elite contemporary dance training has an intriguing potential to challenge the traditional operations of a professional dance company. However, the financial constraints placed on the young company result in the dancers only being employed through intermittent contracts. The company therefore forms intermittently to partake in intense periods of experimental creative practices which naturally stresses the dancers physically and mentally. Therefore, despite Hill proactively engaging with new practices within company time, the responsibility still falls upon the dancers to maintain their health and wellbeing and foster artistic growth throughout their professional careers both on and off contract.

### *Research design*

This research project was funded through a collaborative research grant between Co3 dance company and Edith Cowan University. Human Research Ethics Committee approval was granted prior to the commencement of the project. The project commenced approximately four months prior to the performance season of the major 2017 work for Co3, 'The Zone' (Co3 Dance Company 2019). The work was described by Green (2017) as

Fast-paced and intense, The Zone is an hour of dance power, bursting at the seams with 11 whirling, twirling, writhing, twisting dancers. The performance opened with whiplash intensity, with a barrage of bodies banging against the walls and lurching across the stage.

Hill's intention for the work was to never 'give the audience a break' Green (2017) as once the 'pressure zone after a disaster has passed "you

go back to your life before, and all sorts of judgement... the walls between us start to build up again” (Green 2017).

Six of the 11 Co3 dancers were not located in Perth in the months leading up to the performance season. The five dancers that were available, were asked to participate in the first phase of the study. Given the close connection between the research and the company activities, the recruitment process outlined the voluntary nature of the participation. This included the caveat that the dancers could withdraw from participation, withdraw their data from the project at any time and their choice to participate in the project had no bearing on their work or role in the company. The five dancers that were available in the months leading up to the rehearsal season all consented to participate in the project and were offered initial physiotherapy and psychological assessments provided by clinicians with extensive experience working with dancers. The assessments were dance specific and directed towards the dancers’ physical and mental capabilities in the lead up to the performance season. These assessments provided the dancers a baseline to consider how they may wish to continue the training in the months leading up to the performance season.

Four of the five dancers elected to undertake a strength and fitness training program. Being relatively inexperienced in this type of training, the dancers were prescribed a generic strength and fitness program in the first six weeks of training, by the researchers and in collaboration with the artistic staff. The first six week program was followed by a dance specific training program in the six weeks prior to the rehearsal and performance season. The generic program involved basic strength exercises (chest press, seated row, squats etc.) using free weights and strength machines as well as short duration (5–10 minutes) cardiovascular running, rowing or cycling. The dance specific exercises involved whole body dynamic movements often coming down to and jumping off the floor with a greater emphasis on free weight use than strength machines.

The five dancers also participated in ongoing consultation with the performance psychologist. A weekly group session was initially established by the psychologist but difficulty timetabling between the dancers resulted in the psychological skills sessions delivered individually to each of the dancers over shorter and fewer sessions. The model of the psychological skills that were developed were based on the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy model (Hayes et al. 2006) with particular focus on performance anxiety as well as contextualising and managing the stresses associated with performance season. Weekly emails were sent to the dancers to check in on their progress with the physical and psychological skills training. Researchers used these weekly communications to provide the dancers the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on elements of the program they felt should be addressed.

Prior to the commencement of the rehearsal and performance season, the remaining six dancers from the company were invited and agreed to participate in the study. At the commencement of the performance season, the dancers were provided a physiotherapy consultation where they could enquire about any of the elements that they had been working on in the lead up to the performance season and any further ongoing



physical related issues or queries that would benefit from the consultation with the physiotherapist.

The performance season involved a five-week rehearsal period for the creation of the work, followed by two weeks of performances and a post-performance recovery week. Hill's process involved extensive movement tasking with the dancers. This process involved the dancers creatively working with one another to produce movement under the overarching direction of Hill. The Zone (Co3 Dance Company 2019) was creatively developed in its entirety, within the five-week rehearsal period. Given the demands on the company to produce the work in such a limited time frame throughout the performance season, no further interventions were provided to the dancers except for the physiotherapy consultations. However, yoga classes, recovery sessions and performance monitoring questionnaires were used in daily practice. On completion of the performances by the company, the dancers were provided a paid recovery week hosted at the Western Australian Institute of Sport. Within this week the dancers were provided remedial massage therapy sessions and had their final consultations with the dance physiotherapist and psychologist to discuss approaches to the upcoming off contract period.

The dancers then participated in one of three focus groups to share their views on the efficacy of the research interventions. The dancers were assured that the focus groups were a safe and confidential space that they could express their true feelings about the efficacy of the research interventions and that the researchers should be considered as a confidential third party to the company. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The dancers were aware that they would be de-identified in the transcripts, they could retract any statements they made and any reporting of the focus group transcripts to either the company staff or via academic publication would be a summary of the predominant themes of the conversations and not identifiable to the individual. The company artistic staff also participated in a focus group after the performance season.

Thematic analyses were used to interpret the focus group transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first analyses identified theme specific statements within the transcripts. A second researcher then reviewed and either accepted or challenged the identified themes and statements. The researchers then met and discussed the interpretations to reach consensus on the analyses. The overarching themes are presented as sub-headings in the proceeding section.

## **Interpretation**

### *Making time*

...it's just a funny thing of trying to find time which I guess that's what you've got to do, that's the job. ...you've got to find your own time to get your fitness up and try and keep at that level that's you're not going to hurt yourself if you go into a big rehearsal block next week. (Dancer 8 Focus Group 20<sup>th</sup> September 2017)

Of the four dancers that participated in the prescribed fitness programs, only two were able to train together, 'we tried to have a couple of sessions together, but again that's just when you're not on contract it's almost impossible' (Dancer 9 Focus Group 20th September 2017). Participation in the fitness programs was valued by the dancers in developing their generic strength and fitness in the lead up to the performance. However, they also expressed that 'in no way pushed myself as I did in rehearsals or in performance with a group of people watching' (Dancer 9 Focus Group 20th September 2017). In previous years, the company had scheduled cross training exercise classes that were performed as a group in the lead up to the major performance season. The dancers recalled the benefits of working together by being 'more accountable because my mates were there and there was a trainer there that I pushed myself' (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017) and that 'together you had to work together and support each other through, so it's a similar kind of like values and kind of connections as to then what would carry over to the studio' (Dancer 10 Focus Group 20th September 2017).

The clear benefits for working together as a company are hindered when operating in the casualised contemporary dance sector. This problem reiterates the need for development of communities of practice (Hennekam and Bennett 2017) in creative industries wherein dancers may collaborate in physical training (either dance specific or generic) with the common goal of maintaining performance fitness through for example casual catch up exercise sessions or dance classes.

### *Program specificity*

All dancers saw value in the ongoing sessions and consultations with the physiotherapist and psychologist. They particularly valued the dance specific knowledge and skills of the clinicians working with dancers whereby the consultations 'gave me at least two tools out of a massive tool box I'm sure that (the psychologist) has' (Dancer 9 Focus Group 20th September 2017). This highlights the need for clinician education and access for dancers to clinicians who have experience and understand the unique demands of elite dancers (Wang and Russell 2018). These clinicians can provide direction for areas of work and advice that is specific to the dancer and their work. The artistic staff also felt that having the ability to refer the dancers to an experienced clinician was as an effective way of supporting the dancers and maintaining company efficacy.

The barrier of cost was identified by the dancers for future consultations with these specialised clinicians outside of the research project. The research funding was able to provide the dancers free access to clinical appointments at various times through the project. The lack of secure and substantial funding that is associated with independent dance is a significant barrier to dancers being able to support their health and wellbeing when in need of specialised clinical advice. Healthcare initiatives such as the National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science in the UK ([www.nidms.co.uk](http://www.nidms.co.uk)) are highly commendable in establishing bespoke clinical support for

the performing artists using public health funding. However, this is unlikely to be supported by the predominantly private health care system for allied health services such as physiotherapy and psychology in Australia. Companies and artists in Australia who are able to pool resources, again potentially through communities of practice, may consider looking to create bespoke clinics or specific drop in times at specialised performing arts focussed clinics to provide dancers with the required clinical support.

Many of the dancers reported feeling confused or a lack of direction in the first six weeks of the fitness and strength training program in response to the generic and non-dance specific nature of the exercises. It was only when the program became more dance specific and the trainer had developed a better understanding of the needs of dancers, that the dancers felt they were more engaged with the program and benefitted from the strength and fitness training. The dancers felt more motivated and engaged with the exercise programs when they were performing exercises that had a close connection with the dance movements through 'exercises that also balance out being a dancer and exercising right like cardiovascularly and also the same muscles you would use when you're moving everything at once' (Dancer 1 Focus Group 20th September 2017).

That is, dynamic movements that involved moving up and down from the floor involving large muscle groups and multiple body segments were perceived to be more interesting, engaging, motivating and better connected to dance than traditional planar weight training exercises such as chest presses and curls. These responses would suggest that dancers are more likely to engage in supplementary fitness training if the programs are built with a clear focus of dance specificity.

The initial fitness program also involved running exercises over progressively increasing distances in the first six weeks of pre-season training followed by higher intensity sprint training in the subsequent six weeks. None of the dancers completed the first six weeks of the running training citing pain and that 'the running for me was detrimental, but we figured that out early and then it was great to be able to shift that and then find the new program' (Dancer 9, Focus Group, 20th September 2017). The dancers were however much more comfortable undertaking supplementary training such as indoor cycling or rowing 'still get that cardio effect of the running program' (Dancer 10, Focus Group, 20th September 2017). There are direct benefits of running for dancers. The high anaerobic and aerobic training stressors associated with running can have direct transfer into dance performance given the predominant bipedal and locomotor nature of dance. Developing bespoke means of dance specific anaerobic and aerobic training would be valuable in future research.

Psychological skills aimed at building confidence and reducing performance anxiety were expressed as particular benefits of the psychological skills training that would be of ongoing benefit for the dancers. The psychology sessions were reported as particularly useful in addressing the balance between the dancers' personal and professional lives. On one hand, as artists, the dancers must project themselves emotionally into to the work which naturally comes from a personal space. This emotional investment helps to establish authenticity in the work. However, if

difficult life situations or fatigue were confounding the work, the dancers felt the psychological skills assisted them to engage professionally with the work while managing personal distractions.

Access to dance specific wellbeing support services provide valuable assistance in maintaining the investment that dancers make in developing themselves to contribute into the professional dance industry. Ongoing training and professional development are essential outside of contracted work if independent professional dancers are going to continue to maintain performance fitness, break new ground in their discipline, challenge themselves and stay connected with their passion for their art.

### *Dance fitness*

An interesting and pervasive response from the dancers and company staff was that 'you try and do things before the rehearsal period but nothing actually prepares you than just being in the rehearsal period' (Dancer 10 Focus Group 20th September 2017). That is, no amount of preparatory training was perceived to comprehensively prepare a dancer for the demands of an actual dance performance where 'you build the majority of your strength when you're in the studio eight hours a day, that's the thing, you get dance fit because you're doing the dance' (Dancer 6 Focus Group 20th September 2017).

The act of making and rehearsing the work through the rehearsal period of the performance season was perceived by the dancers to create a level of dance fitness that developed up until the dancers arrived at the performance period. The diverse and intermittent nature of contemporary dance affords a lot of variance into the physical work that the dancers must perform. This may explain, in part, the perception dancers have of the specific fitness demands of each dance work. Reinforcing the findings of Wyon and Redding (2005), there was a clear theme that was unopposed by any of the company dancers that there is a 'dance fitness' that comes through the making of a performance that cannot be replicated outside of the studio or even outside of the actual rehearsals. This may be akin to the concept of match fitness that athletes describe in sport whereby the underlying preseason fitness places the athlete at a certain fitness level coming into the season however it is only after repeated matches that the athlete feels fully adapted to the sport and ready to compete (Gamble 2004).

However, a potential conflict exists if dancers in rehearsal must build their baseline fitness levels, 'at the beginning when we would do a run I would nearly vomit, but as we did the runs ... you grow the fitness to keep doing it' (Dancer 2 Focus Group 20th September 2017) in addition to making and refining new choreographic work. Arguably, if dancers were to enter the rehearsal period with sufficient underlying fitness to perform the work, they could then place greater emphasis and focus on artistic development and technical refinement of the choreography.

... if you go into it conditioned, maybe not cardiovascularly but like your muscles are conditioned, they're not overworking, nothing has to

overwork, you know everything is kind of holistically trained then you avoid injuries. (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017)

The question remains that if a dancer's baseline fitness declines between contracts, is the artistic development of the work compromised through the rehearsal period as the dancers' fitness levels build up until the performance? Would the rehearsal and development phase be more productive if the dancers commenced the phase at a higher fitness level? This notion cannot be generalised across dance styles, but has relevance in the context of Hill's intense and highly physical choreographic style in which 'the aesthetics that Rae does work inside, I do think legs, upper body, and cardiovascular fitness, are going to put you ahead of the curve before a season or before a process for sure' (Dancer 5 Focus Group 20th September 2017).

It would be interesting to examine the use of the actual movement used in choreography as training exercises aimed at developing performance fitness. Once choreographic material has been developed it presumably could be adapted into repetitive exercises that can be performed at various durations and intensities. These exercise sets could be incorporated into the rehearsal times presumably towards the end of the day whereby the dancers are able to overload and expend energy knowing that they will move directly into cool down and recovery. This process may provide the dancers with sufficient stimuli to overload, accelerate fitness adaptations in the lead up to the performance season. However, the approach would need to be supplementary to the artistic and technical development of the choreography and carefully monitored so as not to disrupt the artistic quality or nature of the performance. Further, if the artistic staff have a general sense of what type of movement they expect to be incorporated into the upcoming work, dancers may be able to train pre-season in a similar manner whereby their performance fitness is developed through movement specific to the work that they are producing. The preconceived movement that the dancers could work with would further provide a good place for the dancers to meet and collaborate in the pre-season in the lead up to performance.

### *Connecting as a company*

'It's team bonding as well. Because sometimes you just landed from another country or another state after not seeing each other for a year, and then it's just like – make an awesome show' (Dancer 7 Focus Group 20th September 2017). Working effectively as a company represents a significant challenge for dancers and companies operating with intermittent contracts. In addition to entering the rehearsal period physically performance fit, dancers must enter rehearsals and engage creatively and emotionally in order to rapidly generate the upcoming work. Many of the dancers in this project had not worked or met with each other in the year prior to making the 2017 performance.

With just five weeks to create a significant work for the company there was understandable pressure and a period where the dancers 'feel

most vulnerable' (Dancer 10 Focus Group 20th September 2017) working in close physical and emotional proximity to one another, with little time to develop or reconnect with one another socially. Part of the process in familiarising with each other is discovering each other's capabilities and styles so that the dancers can develop their expectations of one another.

Many of the dancers expressed how important it was to be able to rely on the other dancers for support when 'say I haven't been on for a while so then I can carry them and then they carry me in another part' (Dancer 10 Focus Group 20th September 2017). There seemed to be an implicit understanding that they could rely on one another without having to articulate or ask one another for assistance. There appeared to be an unspoken ethos of support and team work whereby the dancers could feed from one another in making the work succeed by traversing the fluctuating energy and performance levels of one another in each run of the work.

Avenues for contact and communication can easily be unestablished outside of the contracted time that the dancers are working with one another. Despite modern opportunities for online connectivity, the dancers did not necessarily connect with one another outside of their contracted hours. Dancers acknowledged the difficulty in creating work with one another in such a short space of time at the commencement of the rehearsal season. The artistic staff also recognised the value of the dancers entering the rehearsal period with an accurate, preconceived notion of how the work would form. This knowledge set from the dancers was seen as highly valuable in quickly and effectively entering the making of the work without any of the teething or familiarisation issues that can be experienced when the dancers and the artistic staff had not worked together recently. Formal avenues that the dancers recognise as a common space for the dance community to voluntarily engage with one another outside of contracted hours which once again relate to establishing communities of practice may be an easy means to facilitate ongoing contact and collegiality within the independent dance community.

### *Dancer monitoring*

Co3's artistic director Raewyn Hill had been proactively asking the dancers to complete daily monitoring questionnaires as a feedback tool for her to gauge the energy levels, emotional state and motivation of the dancers throughout the rehearsal and performance season. Hill found this a valuable exercise in providing the dancers a regular medium to feedback and document their state of mind and body. Hill would use this information to choose how she directed the day's work and how she engaged with the dancers. Hill hoped that the dancers felt that they could feel comfortable in expressing if they were feeling fatigued or run down and by the same token if they were feeling energised and motivated. The dancers however reported feeling that there 'was a certain level of judgement' (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017) associated with the monitoring and had hesitations about being completely 'honest with them' (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017) if they were feeling tired, run down or unmotivated in case these responses adversely

affected their role in the work, 'if you are presenting something like a number on a piece of paper, that already has a level of expectation' (Dancer 5, Focus Group, 20th September 2017).

...in the back of my mind I'm thinking 'oh my god I'm going to have to justify this. I'm going to have to justify that 2.5 or you know, it's so like, 7.5 like why isn't that a 10? There is a little certain pressure bubble around it. (Dancer 4 Focus Group 20th September 2017)

The dancers therefore highlighted concerns in expressing to Hill their true physical and mental state at the risk of missing opportunities in the performance particularly when future opportunities to perform are often unknown or involve a large lapse of time in between contracts. This exemplar provides an interesting conundrum in the effective implementation of dancer monitoring whereby it benefits both the dancers and the company.

In implementing the questionnaires, Hill was attempting to pragmatically address the need to achieve maximum efficiency from the company as a whole, by using the feedback from the dancers to focus her energy on a day to day fluctuating basis. From Hill's perspective the artistic director needs to manage the company as a whole into the performance. Part of the reason for introducing the monitoring forms was to provide an indirect means for the dancers to express any difficulties or concerns they were having day to day so she could accommodate and avoid any escalation of issues within the rehearsal period and focus on bringing the work together. The monitoring was also intended to give the dancers more accountability for their own actions and how they enter the rehearsal period and conduct their recovery outside of working hours.

Open lines of communication, feedback and transparency are clearly essential for future work in conducting dancer monitoring within a company environment. Trust between dancers and with the artistic staff was also mentioned several times as essential in effectively making the work and operating as a company. Dancer engagement with the monitoring process would likely be greater if the dancers shared the perceived value of the monitoring process as expressed by Hill.

The monitoring was not undertaken to identify underperforming dancers, but to facilitate an opportunity for the dancers to manage their workloads within the intensity of the rehearsal and performance period. This notion had seemed to have been lost in communication between the dancers and artistic staff, 'there's not enough information about how it's going to be used or why it's there' (Dancer 4, Focus Group, 20th September 2017).

A number is so hard. If I wrote a 5 and then Dancer 9 saw my 5, it could be totally different. Each person's numbers are so different, it's just a number, we can't write a comment or you know, like 'talk to me about this'. (Dancer 10 Focus Group 20th September 2017)

The daily monitoring was also hoped to provide the dancers with a means to reflect on past entries so that the dancers could evaluate and reflect on their own progress throughout the performance season. Exploring personal

benefits of the monitoring for the dancers would likely better engage the dancers giving them more value in completing the questionnaires honestly and assisting them in managing themselves as independent dancers.

### *Scheduling*

Given the physical and psychological demands on the dancers through the performance season, and little time is available for any supplemental work. The dancers and the artistic staff acknowledged the pressure to produce and perform in season and that supplemental work needed to occur outside these contracted times. Co3 are however unique in scheduling recovery time at the end of each day and replacing the typical technique class at the start of the day for a shorter yoga class. Outside of these initiatives, the company and dancers must carefully consider work and recovery times and activities throughout the weeks leading up to performance. It would be worth exploring fluctuations in the intensity of the day to day workload during the rehearsal season and in the lead up to the performances. Models such as a three day cycle of increasing intensity followed by a rest day may open up the space for better physical fitness preparation for performances. One of the dancers also suggested;

...you go from being on this schedule which is 10 – 6 I think, and then all of a sudden you go until 11, like the next week. And so that actual shift in actual time, and then you're doing a run when you're usually eating your dinner, you're doing a run. So it's also like, that shift in timetable is what, is exhausting. (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017)

The dancer suggested to move the rehearsal times to later in the day as the rehearsal season progressed so that the dancers were training at the same time as the performance times. An abrupt shift from daytime rehearsal into the evening opening night performance naturally places some new and possibly avoidable stressors on the dancers in the lead up to the important opening of the work.

All dancers demonstrated an in depth and engaged understanding of how they intended to manage themselves through the rehearsal season. There was a conscious acknowledgement that; 'you don't have the luxury to just go, I need a day like I'll just call in sick and go and see the doctor and just make up like I've got the flu or whatever' (Dancer 3 Focus Group 20th September 2017).

Many of the dancers reported actively monitoring themselves and the amount of exertion they were putting into the rehearsal periods. They understood that they could not maintain 100% effort across the entirety of the work creation, and that balancing workload and exertion was necessary to be at peak performance for the opening night.

### **Conclusions**

This research provides practical considerations for how dancers can support their health, wellbeing and performance fitness when navigating



independent, professional dance careers through intermittent, casual contracts. The challenges faced by professional dancers to maintain and develop their 'artistic capital' are significant and often deleterious to aspiring dancers' careers. Avoiding injury as well as maintaining wellbeing and performance fitness is particularly important for dancers considering the dependency of dancers on their physical ability in producing their art. Overall, the dancers engaged with and saw benefit in accessing the strength and fitness training, clinical physiotherapy and psychology services involved in this research. The expertise and knowledge of the clinicians about the demands of dance greatly contributed to the perceived benefits of the service delivery for the dancers. The dancers further saw benefit in the ability to train outside of performance seasons in preparation for the demands of the performance season. However, challenges were identified in scheduling and dancer engagement with traditional western fitness training. Dancers expressed a pervasive belief that a certain level of dance fitness could only be developed through the actual participation in the dance work to be performed and that the development of fitness came during the rehearsal period in the lead up to the performance. Given the perceived benefits of engaging with supplemental health and wellness services and activities, challenges remain regarding how dancers can be guided and mentored to maintain health and wellbeing and to facilitate successful dance careers.

A need to maintain collegiality outside of contracted times through communities of practice was identified across many of the themes that emerged from the dancer focus groups. Building local networks of dancers who collaborate in the interests of wellbeing support would appear to be a worthwhile initiative. Regularly connecting outside of contracted, project-based work could enable dancers to collaboratively develop performance fitness, engage healthcare providers with dance expertise and socially connect with one another to facilitate future creative projects.

The term the independent dancer quite literally describes the position of the professional dancer. Despite the best of company intentions in supporting dancer wellbeing, it is the responsibility of the dancers to independently manage their health and wellbeing through their careers. This research suggests that there many opportunities for dancers to work collegially on their common needs for performance fitness and wellbeing. In an uncertain and casualised sector, dancers can support themselves through communities of practice dedicated to health and wellbeing that are 'independent' from the contract based artistic projects.

Dance education and training institutions may be well placed to host these communities of practice for professional dance cohorts. The abrupt shift of dancers' lives from the highly structured dance training environment into independent professional dance may be dampened if training institutions were to provide a place for the dance community to connect, collaborate and develop professionally. In the interests of lifelong learning and professional development, dance training institutions would seem well placed to support alumni career development by providing a place for professional collaboration.

The dedication of Co3 dance company to supporting dancer wellbeing is highly commendable, but also exemplifies the challenges faced in the Australian creative industries. There is little financial motivation to become a professional dancer and career motivation often stems from a passion for movement and artistry. This research provides new insights into how the capital developed through the significant personal investment made by dancers can be retained and bolstered in the face of and underfunded, uncertain and casualised industry.

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