

This interview was conducted as part of a University of Newcastle research project entitled 'Creativity

Creativity and Cultural Production in the Hunter: An Applied Ethnographic Study of New Entrepreneurial Systems in the Creative Industries'. The research was funded through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project grant undertaken in collaboration with TehnicaCPT and Newcastle Now.

Interviewee: Timothy Gordon

Interviewer: Claire Williams

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Location: National College of Dance and Junior Academy

CW: Thank you, Timothy for agreeing to this interview.

TG: My pleasure.

CW: Could we begin by learning what your job here is at the college, your role and responsibilities?

TG: It's hard to consider that what one does is a job, but it is on paper! It's never been like that for me - hence my longevity. The main role that I have is being able to be fluid. I have since being here opened up my own role in order to infiltrate into the school, into the college at large and broaden out what I do, to the most expansive place possible so I'm not locked into any specific role... This year I have been responsible for taking the Diploma which is the last year that they do here and that is a semi-professional standard of dance training. Basically finalising their technical ability and also their versatility in the different genres that they have access to here. It also gets them ready for a professional environment, like a traineeship or an apprenticeship. Some of them have been fortunate enough to go directly into a junior company which they have now in Australia. Sydney Dance Company has a pre-professional, like a junior company apprenticeship. I think Queensland Ballet are doing that as well. They are the two that I know of in Australia. It's become more and more prevalent in Europe too. These new structures are occurring which are the bridges from being a student and going into a company...When you finish your training, you are not ready to go into a company. You can't because you have not had that bridging, that year or two of being in that world, the big world, and knowing how things really operate. When you are a student you don't know how things operate because everything is done for you. The systems are different, the behaviours between people are different, your responsibilities are much more complicated. Having that year or two that people are starting to do now is the best idea for the dance profession so that people do not feel panicked. There has been this unreasonable attitude by the profession to insist that everyone who joins their company has five years professional experience under their belt. And so, all these young people lining up for auditions, all trying to get a job. Some extraordinarily gifted and talented but there is discrimination about age and experience. Rather than saying, why don't we take five of these young people, bring them on board, just get them to do what we do, and let them hang out for a year or two and scrub the boards, do classes with us and watch rehearsals and be part of the family. That's a great way of getting loyalty as well. Once you introduce those systems you introduce the value of loyalty and the value of understanding what's behind the organisation, what really makes it tick.

CW: Timothy, you have worked all over the world in a number of companies and in different roles, I think?

TG: Yes and different places see you differently... In New Zealand I'm seen as a particular thing, having had my own dance company. In Australia I have had more of a choreographic position, and also teacher. In Europe I was very much a teacher and coach.

CW: And tell me, Q11 here, what are your personal goals for your work?

TG: Well my work is intertwined with everything I do here really. So as far as collaborative work, thoughts and creativity goes, it's all about that. There's really nothing that exists in a singular way.

CW: Tell me some more about that.

TG: Well, I work very closely with the Artistic Director here, Brett Morgan, who was the Associate Director of the Sydney Dance Company and was also a muse of mine - if you can call it that -when I was a choreographer for the Australian Ballet. He was a dancer. I worked with him, I choreographed on him all those years I was there and we formed a creative alliance. You have a couple of people in your life that you have this immediate rapport with, that can bounce off each other. You just have to look at each other and you know exactly what the other person is thinking, the other person knows exactly what you are thinking. It's a like-mindedness, an astuteness, trying to key into something that will make something shift from being very dull and ordinary to being extremely invigorating and exciting.

CW: And he's owned the college now for ...?

TG: Four years, yes, with his wife, Vicki who is the CEO.

CW: What do you think he's wishing to achieve here?

TG: ...Well, it is very artistically-focussed here rather than overly technically-focussed and that is a huge difference. Even though it's rigorous, the rigour, the way things are produced here, is very different. I think the rigour of production is exemplary here. It's very different to other places because the investment is in artistry. They learn very early on what it's like to collaborate with a choreographer so a lot of students here have things made on them from a very young age, even from 13, 14, not in ballet so much even though it does happen but in contemporary dance. All sorts of different choreographic languages, people who have had careers outside as well, so they have these diverse languages of contemporary dance. They become very adaptable, they become very quick on their feet. They can pick up information very easily. They are extraordinarily coordinated because they learn that early on from working with different people and different ways of moving, so they don't become brainwashed. I'm not saying technique isn't tremendously important but if you can't move out of that, you are stuck, you are really stuck, and then you spend the rest of your career trying to get unstuck but it's too late unless you go through some sort of transformational process and see several shrinks! You do have to go through a letting-go as you mature.

CW: So Timothy, how is that Newcastle has been able to attract people of your calibre and Brett's calibre?

TG: Both Brett and I and the other staff here – there are other people here who have also had international careers - we come here because we all believe in the authentic artist, the authentic student, the authentic person above everything else. If you can't find that authenticity in yourself, you are going to be a fake. You are going to look like a fake and you

are going to dance like a fake. And it's really easy to see. You can't hide anything in dance. You expose every inch of your body. People can read you, even if they don't know anything about you, they will get a sense of your insecurities, your sense of trying to please, your sense of overdoing it, your sense of unease in yourself will come across, your lack of awareness will come across, your ungroundedness will come across, your breathlessness will come across, the way you view the world will come across. All these things translate to an audience without words. ...

When you see someone authentic – and I'm sure it's the same in theatre - there's a sense of peace that comes from the audience. They can relax. You have to build up a sense of trust and you don't have to do anything to impress them, hardly. That's the real role of the artist, to create a transformational place for people to mirror something in themselves that they might like to address or be in touch with.

CW: That's beautifully put. So is there something special about Newcastle that means our people here are more authentic than in a big city?

TG: Yes, I think so, I really think so. Isolation is great for creativity. Not all the time but it has its bonuses. Coming from New Zealand – and I've been over there for twelve years – New Zealand is a very isolated country and it has very little population and very little money for the arts but they produce incredible work, in theatre, in music, in writing, in painting, in dance – fantastic! They don't have any money and they do everything extraordinarily well, including film, and it's not fun. It takes tremendous intelligence which they have and incredible determination which they have and courage which they have. And all of those qualities are about the authentic self. In many other countries in the world, as you would know, in Europe, because of the state system, all of the arts are supported and subsidised. In dance especially there's an incredible amount of laziness, stultification, a sort of deadness in some of these theatres in Europe where they have their opera and their ballet, the drama, and that's fine, it's all part of their tradition but they just rest on their laurels. They offer nothing but what they are told to do, so they are great automatons. And if they are rich enough to bring in people who are brilliant at what they do to direct them or to produce something, or to coach or to bring them up again creatively... but in themselves most of these places are quite dull, actually. I'm not saying that's everywhere. In every country of course there will be a creative hub but it won't be the mainstream. It will come about because it has to come about. It can't be subdued.

CW: Timothy, have you had any jobs outside dance?

TG: Yes

CW: So how has working in the creative industries (if we accept that term) been different from other jobs you have had?

TG: Well, the main thing is the people. One has to move out of one's comfort zone occasionally. It takes a lot of courage, I think, because one is so used to one's own clan. The way of being with dancers is very comfortable. You miss it. It's a home base. The public at large is not necessarily favourable to the arts, you have to face that fact. Everything that's important to you can mean absolutely nothing to someone else. That's just the way it is. And vice versa. Everything that's important to accountants and lawyers means practically nothing to me! I couldn't care less about it. But it's not what people do that makes them interesting, it's how they relate to each other and how they see the world that makes them

fascinating. You could be anything, drive a bus and be a completely intriguing person because of the way you look at the world, because of your interest in other people and what they do and how they live.

Occasionally I've worked in a bar and I've done this or I've done that. I've enjoyed observing other people. Any artist enjoys observing other people and it's a great thing because you take so much from simply watching. You look at the characters in the different tribes that are around town, how people transform with stress and changes in their lives, and when they go out and they loosen up, what they become and then their dreams come out – what they really wanted to do, how they really want to be in the world which they are not, because they can't, how they admire people in the arts and what they do without realising how scary it must be not having the money or the situation they must have because they have security.

CW: It's difficult, isn't it, working in the creative industries?

[Then Brett comes into the room with another colleague. TG introduces CW and they exchange greetings. They mention it's a private company and an RTO]

Yes, it is, it's very difficult. The hours are extraordinarily long, the material rewards are not great and it is wearisome.

And just looking overall at all this, one thing that I think is timely, as far as the future goes, for young people going into this field, is the package that one has to deliver to the world.

You have to be self-reliant and build into it everything you need to do what you do.

You need to make an effort to roll it all together, make the package look great, a bit like putting together a bouquet, find a way to put it out into the world online or whatever, find different platforms to engage with people who might be sponsors or give support you in whatever way they can... and there are ways online that allow you to do that. The most important thing is to build in as many collaborative forces as possible, even if they are very slight and simple and basic and then from there work the whole picture rather than relying on just what you do. "I'm a good singer. I'm going to sing. That's all I'm going to do." No! It's not possible any more. "I'm a great dancer. That's all I'm going to do". No! It means nothing. It's whether you've got the nous and the courage, the intelligence to make other people respect you... The fallout for all artists is that they believe in a very romantic ideal of what they do but it doesn't work anymore... It was a wonderful ideal but like all romantic periods they always come to a short, abrupt and often tragic end! Like the operas, La Boheme is one!

But then we have opportunity to engage with things like Patreon.com, the website, where people can put out an artistic idea and see if they can attract bidders. If you have a project, you want to write an opera etc... you put it out there and see if anyone is interested and will donate some money... That's how people can self-fund.

CW That's very interesting. I haven't heard of that one. Thank you. Now, Q8 Does working in the global environment change the way you work?

TG: Yes, it makes me more aware of the country that one lives in and how one has to establish strong foundations for people to build on here as well as having those overseas experiences but making sure that you come back and contribute because this is where you learned your craft originally so your loyalties must be there at some point... It would be

rewarding for all if you came back at some point and invested something of your experience.

CW: And teaching is that, isn't it? I love the way that people with a wealth of knowledge want to give back... It's a very noble and generous thing to do.

TG: ... It's two-way flowing. Young people without the historic knowledge or setting or experience or cultural world, they have nothing to share with you. You have nothing in common at all. All that you have in common is the desire to engage each other but in order to engage each other, one can't be in the past, not for a second. The challenge is to be with them in the moment, right now. To forget about the past, what you did, who you were, and see what they actually need because it's not always what you want to teach or communicate! And it's so painful to go down that road because you see that the needs of young people today are so different to what we had, what we needed... People have to be more versatile now and in a sense aggressive about their careers because there are so many more people doing the same thing. Like there are so many more people turning up to auditions. A muse of mine who went to London from New Zealand and he went to an audition of of thousands, that lasted for weeks. It was for one contract... a harrowing experience. These contemporary dance companies often very small, they might have 18 people or 20 people and everyone wants to do that.

CW: But the students here do very well, don't they? Many of them get positions even with international companies.

TG: But they are not professional companies that they go into directly, they are higher education establishments, not as in universities but professional schools. That's what they usually do or the alternative is that they go to an apprenticeship or trainee situation or a pre-professional year within a professional company...

CW: I get the impression – tell me if I'm wrong - that Newcastle punches above its weight in terms of dancers succeeding at the highest level. Is that correct?

TG: Yes, because there's nothing else to do here, except go to the beach! So everyone does this dance thing because it takes up so many hours, so much of their time.

CW:[both laugh] There may be a little more to it than that! Now, the fact that you and others have had global careers must really enrich the experience that the students have.

TG: Yes, it stops that parochial thing happening and it makes it more fun for the kids because usually people that have travelled a lot are more open-minded about everything, less fearful of their role in Australia because they have done the big picture, they have nothing to prove. So you don't have to try to be anything in front of them. They are not hung up on status... The traditional ballet is based on hierarchy, it is all about the "royal family". Ballet is the so called aristocrat of the dance world, based in the court and it has all its formalities from that and its protocols which are extremely old-fashioned, extremely controlled. It's completely off the map as far as today goes. We don't have to go down that alley. We can treat classical dance as something that is useful now and can change its position for the present world we live in and make it more practical, more contemporary, more personable too, less hierarchical for young people.

CW: Now the next question is "Does your business do things differently from others?" and I think you have started to answer that in that it seems to me there is a confident

commitment to artistic freedom and experimentation that perhaps is not true of other organisations.

TG: I think what is really interesting here – and I've discussed this with Brett - is that the whole place is really a choreographic institute, a home for choreography. Every single teacher here is a choreographer. Most of them are professional, most are international, have worked in different areas as well, like I've worked a lot with opera.... That changes everything. It also changes the way people are trained in a technical way because it's done through a choreographic base rather than in solely a syllabus or a step base. The choreography here is threaded together in a way that is sophisticated and sinewy and physically connected and coordinated in a way that makes it flow and makes it work. Young people pick this up very, very quickly and go with it. They can see that everything we do here has a sense of clarity, of authenticity and choreographic sophistication.

CW: And you mentioned before collaboration between the choreographer and the dancer which surprised me in a way as I would have thought of choreography being quite prescriptive...?

TG: Yes, it's much more collaborative here. It depends of course on the choreographer and everyone is different. One thing that is very different from any other school is that we have a collaboration with live music every year. Brett encourages composers and musicians to collaborate on our end of year production. *[Choreographer Debbie enters and TG introduces her to CW]*

CW: Do you have any connection with the University of Newcastle, the School of Creative Arts?

TG: Not presently, perhaps in the future, would be interesting. Brett has connections with different musicians and composers from Sydney Dance Company days and that is brought forward into what we are doing right at the moment. Last year we did a production of Romeo and Juliet with a new score by Michael Hindsmith, one of our top contemporary classical composers.

CW: At Civic Theatre main stage?

TG: Yes, great venue... We had a narrator. We had violins and cellos. It was very very good. We sell all the tickets. We have about 300 students...

CW: I was going to ask you how many students you had. And how many staff are there?

TG: 12 or 15, mostly all casual with a few full time staff...

CW: Quite a big operation, then. And you are a Registered Training Organisation. I know how much work is involved in that.

TG: Yes, we have a wonderful woman, a couple of people actually, who organise all that, look after the RTO work, audits etcetera... We give all of those assessments and examinations. All of the teachers have done their RTO training...

CW Up to Diploma level, isn't it?

TG: Yes

CW: And are there credit pathways to degrees or Advanced Diplomas?

TG: Yes, I think with this Diploma it's at university entrance... The Diploma course is one year... And it's a lot of hours a week... They work 8.15 in the morning until 5/6.30 at night and often they do night classes after that and weekends sometimes they are performing or there's all these competitions that happen during the year. We just won in Sydney at the Opera House. We won the jazz and the contemporary dance sections

CW: So it's not just classical ballet, it's also contemporary dance and jazz

TG: Yes, it depends on what the intake is. Sometimes we get a goodly amount of classical students and so we nurture them on their path ...And we have a good amount of outstanding contemporary dancers because they start very early. Some of them are extraordinary in an expressive and powerful way, way beyond their years. And we have a small number who go into the commercial area. We have students auditioning for all the big shows and Disneyland and the big film houses and also Moulin Rouge.

CW: And are they very successful?

TG: Yes, just about everyone is placed, 98% or something.

CW: And your fees, I guess they are on the website?

TG: No, nobody puts their fees on the website! [laughs] That means you can't put them up!

CW: Can you give me an idea of the fees.

TG: I actually don't know what the fees are for next year.

CW: And you offer VET Fee Help?

TG: I don't think so, not at the moment. We are looking into that... as the college grows, I am sure we will do it.

CW But people are obviously willing to pay whatever you charge because of the reputation and the outcomes.

TG: The students work as well, some of them. I have one girl in my class who's outstanding. She's just about to go to Salzburg, to a place called SEAD, which is a four-year contemporary dance degree. Very sought after in Europe. In Salzburg, 300 people auditioned and she got a place. She works at a pharmacy, she babysits, she does her own theatre in the streets, you name it, she does it. And at the same time she is around here helping all the young ones, teaching as well, doing all she can for everyone, also being an incredible student. These things are very inspiring. You won't find that in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. You were talking to me about the differences between Newcastle and say, for example, Sydney or elsewhere. They are another animal. These kids in Sydney, you can tell from the way they look, the way they walk, how snooty they are. And how their parents mollycoddle them, driving from this thing to that, never working, never having to lift a finger, living in their pink palace of privilege! Whereas these kids come from the country, way out in NSW, Coffs Harbour, Mudgee, Orange, the outback, all of that western country area. They would rather come to us than go to Sydney. And their parents would rather them be here than in Sydney. By far. And one of the good things about Newcastle - and there aren't many good things, ha! - is that one feels safe. The kids feel safe here. They can wander around and do all sorts of things outdoors. They don't always have to be around shops and having to compete with each other's clothes and shoes and handbags, all that junk. They don't have those distractions here. They look after each other. They have an amazing camaraderie. They hug each other, they get into groups before they perform, they encircle each other, hold each

other, they are amazingly good. One thing I might mention. One of the boys here, very gifted young man. He's extraordinary. Everybody in Sydney knows him. He's got this aura about him. He's here. He's very young, in the Cert 4. He has time for everybody. Down in Sydney all these kids would come up to him. Could they have a photograph with him? No matter who they were, what they look like, where they came from, he was there for them. So lovely and generous and kind and without a single air about him that would make anyone feel uncomfortable no matter who or what you were. And I think this is the right way to go.

CW: And these are the ones who are likely to succeed?

TG: Absolutely! Of course they are going to succeed, because people want to work with them. Because they are so likeable, so unselfish about their talent and their abilities, and fun to be around.

CW: Timothy, are you familiar with the term 'creative industries'?

TG: Yes. It's not a very inspiring term. I don't know whether it means anything. It might mean nothing at all. I remember when it came about. I thought it was a translation of what would normally be called 'the arts' and it translated into the industry area. The academic world could suddenly put it under this umbrella of 'industry' as well as the political world where they felt they could take ownership of it which can be helpful. There's a role for that. But it also goes to diminish somewhat the power of the artist themselves. It's always the individual that makes a difference, that changes the world. It's nice to think collectively but it's not a group that changes the world, it's individuals whether it's Mahatma Gandhi, Rudolph Nureyev, Michaelangelo or Balanchine . They are the ones who changed the world and the way of looking at their own art form or viewpoint....

CW: Finally, can we talk about Newcastle and how you might describe the state of the creative industries here and what the future might be.

TG: Well, I don't really get a sense of it, to be honest. I think it is here and it's very underground. It's obviously not promoted well - or very little. In a very stagnant kind of way. There's no splash. There's no dynamic, even with festivals and things like that. It's quite hard to get information about what's actually going on. I look out for it, in the various magazines and magazines, websites but somehow it doesn't pop out. It doesn't have the presence it needs to have...The arts need to be in a different position than they are. They are in a very subjugated position. They need to be more splashed out, they need to be more dynamic because they are about dynamic. The mainstream dullness of everything around puts this blanket and cloud over us and you have to get out your microscope to see what's happening. So I think the way it's marketed, the way it's publicised is obviously poverty-stricken and lacks taste and imagination. They need a lot more funding for those things. It should come out of the pool, the wallet.

CW: Timothy, is there anything else you would like to add?

TG: Yes, there's one thing. It's very interesting. When I was a dancer, when I was in the Australian Ballet, I remember having a conversation with Dame Peggy van Praagh who was the founder of the Australian Ballet and a very learned, interesting, talented and audacious woman. She was prophetic in a sense and she said that the future of dance in Australia will not be in the main centres; the future of dance in Australia will be in the regional centres. And I believe that, I really do and that's my last comment. I think the future will be here and

will be in Brisbane and will be... well, I actually think in the smaller cities. It's going to happen but it's not going to happen where people thought it was going to happen.

CW: And why is that, Timothy?

Because it's had its day, it's had its ride. I think everything does. I think everything goes to the top, it has its resting place up there and then it falls out of touch with the new generations that are coming up. And this generation now, unless you are really up to date with them, they are not going to be interested in you.

CW: What is it about the regions that means this is possible?

TG: Because things are not yet set, you don't have politics driving everything, it's the true and hard working creatives that will drive everything, not the bureaucrats.

CW: And isolation, you said, can actually be a positive.

TG: Yes, isolation can be tremendously positive because you can focus and not be distracted by all the ridiculous nonsense that goes on in the huge big centres of economic privilege.

CW: Thank you very much!