

Choreographing the Future

A report on the 2008 World Dance Alliance Choreolab

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I was one of two scholars selected to observe the 2008 Choreolab held as part of the World Dance Alliance Global Summit in Brisbane, July 14-18. The Lab was a five-day intensive experience with choreographers Lloyd Newson, Founder and Director, DV8 Physical Theatre, and Boi Sakti, Artistic Director, Boi Sakti Dance Company, mentoring four choreographers and sixteen dancers. Lab participants were selected from a pool of applicants and had diverse trainings including ballet, hiphop, contemporary dance (in a variety of forms), Thai and Khmer classical dancing, and the Indian classical forms of Bharatanatyam and Orissi. While most were born in the Asia-Pacific region, many had trained and performed all over the world. I also attended the simultaneous Summit, giving a paper and enjoying the week's social, artistic, and scholarly offerings.

My report includes an account of my experiences in the Lab, entwined with some post-Lab research and reflection. The organisers of the Lab hoped to provide participants with an opportunity to meet with 'international peers and colleagues' with whom they might continue to collaborate, 'skills and professional development,' and 'a cultural diversity in choreographic approaches, movement material, and expressive encounters' (WDA Global Summit 2008).¹ I found myself especially drawn to the play between 'professional development' and 'cultural diversity' in the Lab, and to how the two were negotiated among the mentors, choreographers, and dancers, in the evolving structure of the Lab and in movement developed during the Lab.

My experiences in Brisbane left me with the sense that I had been missing something important about contemporary attitudes towards the arts; that a global shift had occurred that I hadn't noticed from my base in North Carolina.

In my report, I account for this shift in a discussion of the terms 'creative industries' and 'creative campus'. While I have found it useful to think across the Lab and these constructs, I don't mean to suggest a deliberate relationship between them on the part of Lab planners. I conclude my report with a discussion of professional conferences, labs, and other international events as means of choreographing the future of the dance professions.

Shifting perspectives: Creative Industries and Creative Campus

The WDA events were carried out with a degree of thoughtfulness and pride that I don't always see at academic conferences. The quality of the offerings and the public visibility and support of the events suggested that, in Australia, dance is understood as a vital cultural and economic asset and an important means of global exchange. Summit programmers presented artistry and scholarship in equal measure, and encouraged exploration of the many ways in which the arts and scholarship intersect and inform each other.² Australian and Asia/Pacific dance communities were highlighted as featured companies and speakers, while international exchange was cultivated through the structure of panels and social events that encouraged networking.³ The Summit was well integrated into the Brisbane cityscape, with events held at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Queensland Performing Arts Centre, and the Parliamentary Annex. The impressive number of national and regional organisations contributing to the event financially and organisationally suggested a well-established dance infrastructure.⁴ How, I wondered, was this sense that dance is important fostered?

Another event that left me musing about the current state of the arts occurred in the days just previous to the Lab when mentor Lloyd Newson initiated an email correspondence concerning the role of the observers. Newson wanted to clarify our interests, especially to know what we might write about the Lab. He did not want us to write about the exercises he would use, presumably exercises developed through his own artistic research, and that he might want to write about himself. At first I thought this an oddly self-protective move and certainly limiting to the observers. He was about to present these processes to twenty Lab participants. Would Newson ask them not to use his exercises in their own creative work and teaching? Was there something about scholarly use of these ideas – that they might appear in print and enter into the world of academic information sharing and debate – that was wholly different from their continued use by artists working in studios, where they might be endlessly passed along and elaborated upon? Artists in the United States copyright dances but it had never occurred to me to think of artistic processes – Martha Graham Technique being a well publicised exception⁵ – as a valuable intellectual good. Was this an attitude peculiar to Newson? Or did it stem from a new valuing of dance that was more broadly shared?

The concept of 'creative industries,' important to public policy, arts policy, and academic planning in Australia, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in Europe and Asia, offers some explanation. Creative industries reconfigures the arts as an economic sector, putting them into relationship with businesses that thrive on new ideas and symbolic meaning rather than material utility. In the United Kingdom, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) is

responsible for the 'creative industries,' defined as those that 'have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (2005). This configuration draws pursuits as diverse as software design, fashion design, advertising, curatorial practices, television and radio, and the performing arts into one economic sector. Artists may worry that this designation runs roughshod over not-for-profit/for-profit distinctions important to public funding, but in the UK, the performing arts aren't abandoned to the marketplace, but supported by government as key players in 'creative cities,' described as diverse, tolerant, technologically savvy, and globally aware, where creativity flourishes. In an environment where creative processes might inspire people devising advertising campaigns and video games, Newson would be foolish to allow someone else to publish his ideas.

Queensland University of Technology, the setting for most Lab and Summit events, includes dance in a Creative Industries academic unit consisting of 'literature and print media, visual and performing arts, music composition and publishing, new media such as animation, games and internet content design, broadcasting electronic media and film, and heritage activities' (2008a). The Summit was held in the Creative Industries Precinct, a complex of high-tech performance, studio, office, and classroom spaces. This \$60 million dollar facility is a meeting place for industry, government, and the university, and designed to encourage new media-based businesses (2008b).

In the United States, the term 'creative industry' has been used rather tentatively and, to my knowledge, only in the title of the report *Creative Industries: Business and Employment in the Arts*. Sponsored by Americans for the Arts and published in 2008, this economic impact study considered for profit and not-for-profit businesses in the arts such as theatres, schools, museums, architecture firms, and film production companies and excluded businesses that develop computer technology (2008). More visible in the US is an idea called 'creative campus.'

The 104th American Assembly, a public affairs forum founded by Dwight Eisenhower and affiliated with Columbia University, met in 2004 to discuss *The Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts*. The summary document (McCulloch-Lovell et al, 2004) from that meeting suggests that the group discussed performing arts institutions and universities as leading parallel existences in American life, as not-for-profit centres of experience and learning that contribute to American values. While universities have played a major role as presenters of and training centers for the arts, members of the Assembly felt that the arts and universities would benefit from more consciously interdependent existences. Steven Tepper (2004, 2006, Ivey and Tepper 2006), who participated in the American Assembly, has remained a leading thinker on the creative campus.

Following the American Assembly was a 2006 grants initiative by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and the Doris Duke Foundation entitled *Creative Campus Innovations Grant*. Eight, one-to-two year grants totaling nearly \$1 million were given to community colleges, colleges, and

universities for remarkably varied projects. The University of Iowa's Hancher Auditorium, for example, received a grant to fund a series of collaborations between UI's Center for Macular Degeneration (CMD), the Writing Program of the UI Hospital, the Department of Theatre Arts, and performance artist Rinde Eckers. Grant activities included a multi-media performance exploring visual impairment and vision loss, and the creation of a documentary that will help train more compassionate physicians (University of Iowa, 2007).

The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, another grant recipient, created a project focusing on capital punishment, entitled *Criminal/Justice*. The university's press release (2007) announcing the grant, echoes familiar concerns – creative process, innovation, a concern with bringing together universities and communities:

The Creative Campus Innovations Grant Program challenges campus-based arts presenters to integrate their programming more organically within the academic environment, embedding creative practice and dialogue within curricular-based activities, and engaging faculty, students and higher education leaders in innovative ways. The programs funded by the grants will become the basis for a set of case studies to offer models that will be made broadly available to institutions of higher education.

Quoting Sandra Gibson, president and chief executive officer of Arts presenters, the release (2007) continues,

Colleges and universities have been leading patrons of the arts for more than 100 years, and despite their presence on campuses in many forms and dimensions, the arts are not recognised as a priority in the same ways that science, sports or foreign language teaching are. ...The Creative Campus Innovations Program provides an opportunity to fully integrate the performing arts into the life of the academy, higher education and the community.

That grant inspired an ongoing commitment to performance as a key element in campus-wide explorations of important issues. The 2008 Creative Campus initiative, sponsored by University of North Carolina's new Office of the Executive Director for the Arts, is titled *The Gender Project*. Activities include theatre, music, and dance performances, art exhibits, campus-wide discussions of literature, conferences, curricular links, faculty essays published as part of performance programs, and a blog (2008). An Honors Arts and Dialogue Program: Exploring the Creative Campus allows students to earn college credit for participating in interdisciplinary dialogues responding to events in this series.

One of the key elements of *The Gender Project* was DV8's 2007 *To Be Straight With You*, performed on UNC's campus in October 2008. Newson's evening-length work explores homophobia, violence, and religious intolerance, and the hopeful – even joyful – ways people outlive or outsmart narrowness and cruelty. Grounded in life stories collected for the project, commentary from British human rights activist Peter Tatchell, and statistics about sexuality-based human rights violations around the world, the evening unfolds in a series of episodes. As the stories are told, the cast, set, and

music shift. A DJ's booth takes centre stage. A DJ spins violent Jamaican dance hall music at a dance club, and the dancers triumph, if momentarily, over the music's hostile references to batty boys. Later, a married Pakistani man living in London without his wife muses on inviting his white male lover to family gatherings and the differences between having sex to please a wife and build a family and the bodily encounters that fulfill him. Meanwhile, two men dance a Bharatanatyam sequence, mirroring each other's movement as they track back and forth across the stage. Amazing digital projections appear and disappear. Cast members write digital messages on chalkboards. A discussion of human rights abuses is delivered with the help of a giant, spinning globe.

Sitting in the audience, I glimpsed the possibilities of creative industries and creative campus philosophies. While funding this extensive project must have been difficult, and I have no idea if and how it might be deemed financially successful, Newson's project has put a lot of people to work and brought countless others into conversation with and through the arts. The concert program and the DV8 website list a large number of people that contributed to this project: researchers, members of gay and lesbian communities, dancers, and artist/technicians working in sound, lighting, digital video, and set design and construction. The cast worked with vocal coaches, I assume to prepare them to speak onstage and for the range of accents presented: Jamaican, Nigerian, Pakistani, and (to my American imagination) the accents of rural and urban/lower and upper class Brits. Surely, Newson's work inspires others to work across the arts and media. On the UNC campus, students are still thinking about *To Be Straight With You*, bringing that experience to bear in their classrooms and as they attend other arts events.

What do these concepts have to do with the Choreolab? Thinking back and forth between the activities of the Lab and the creative industries and creative campus constructs provides new questions. In the Lab, I observed a model for how people come together in a creative enterprise, and the possibilities and difficulties of working with people from different backgrounds and with different expectations. While cultural diversity was prized in the Lab and tolerance for diversity is a goal of creative cities, I question what kinds of difference are really workable in these settings. Too, as a dance scholar, I wonder how scholarship fits into both settings.

The Lab

Lab participants met over five days from early morning through the evening. Activities were held across two and sometimes four studios, allowing for intensive work with the mentors as well as time for the young choreographers to work with dancers. I observed the Lab daily for either four or seven hours. Rather than repeatedly observing any individual's or group's activity, I moved back and forth between studios and between the Lab and Summit. I spent my time fitting myself under barres and into corners, scribbling description and ideas or sketching quick portraits or movement studies into my notebook. The mentors, choreographers, and dancers were gracious, drawing me into discussions in the Lab or pausing for brief conversation in hallways. They'd

fill me in on activities I'd missed or ask what I thought about the work unfolding in the studio.

Lab participants started the morning with a technique class taught by a practitioner in some contemporary or new traditional form, among them Carole Johnson, whose class blended modern and Australian Aboriginal and Indigenous dance forms, and Boi Sakti, teaching a Silat-based class. I often joined the Lab for their morning meeting. Held just after the technique class, these meetings allowed participants to adjust schedules and discuss issues that cropped up in the Lab. The initial meeting was an orientation. The mentors shared their choreographic philosophies: Newson talked about the sociological and movement research processes that underlie his works; Sakti shared bits of his work through DVD and spoke about his mother, Guismiati Suid, who founded the company he now heads. Newson and Sakti also shared insights about how to develop and maintain a life in choreography during these sessions. Both men were concerned with the state of funding for the arts, especially funding that allowed adequate time for the research phases of choreographic projects. Newson discussed the challenges of working in film and video production, and Sakti lamented the pressures of maintaining a dance company, of touring, and of choreographing commissioned work for commercial purposes or as a guest artist.

As the Lab unfolded, different mentoring styles surfaced. Sakti took a distanced, and to my mind, more traditional approach, observing movement set by the four choreographers and offering discussion and suggestions. Newson presented a series of research problems, worked out variously through movement experimentation, writing, and with the help of simple technologies that engaged the choreographers and dancers in isolating and clarifying potent, meaning-rich images in movement and in words. In these exercises, he made no distinction between choreographers and dancers, working with them all equally as one might in the workshop phase of a choreographic project. After observation, discussion, and coaching from Newson, the dancers reworked their solutions, striving to strip their movement of unnecessary mannerisms. I came to see these sessions, along with the social and artistic encounters of the small group choreography projects, as the week's pivotal experiences. Lab participants were enormously energised and focused by these exercises. They served an immediate purpose – providing participants with common experiences and ideas that could be built upon – and as a form of long-term mentorship. Newson's preparation, clarity, and purposefulness provided a standard of professionalism for the younger artists.

The activities and outcomes of the Lab were adjusted throughout the five-day process. Sakti's schedule did not allow the mentors to meet before the Lab, so the men were faced with getting to know each other on the fly. The Lab operated in English and while Sakti speaks compellingly in English in discussing his life and work, he uses a translator to manage ongoing conversation. I often saw Newson, Sakti and the translator with their heads together during breaks. These must have been delicate exchanges, with all three negotiating between artistic and organisational points of view and navigating culturally shaped patterns of communication. Besides sorting out

their own ideas and priorities, they must have been adjusting their plans as they got to know the choreographers and dancers better and to respond to their requests. For example, an early strategy they tried, running parallel Labs headed by each mentor, was abandoned when participants made it clear that they wanted to work with both men.

By mid-week, the choreographers were assigned four dancers each and they worked to set movement motifs. Some began with themes, such as consumerism, while others tried to get at bodily states such as the drama that unfolds from public displays of grief, violence, or pique. By the end of the session, both mentors observed and discussed this set movement. I especially remember Newson helping choreographers see what might be added or stripped away in order to get at, to use terms heard in the Lab, the 'truth,' the 'telling' aspect, or the 'potent image' conjured up by postures, timings, spatial relationships, movements chosen from everyday life and established dance vocabularies, and words.

The Lab participants had their own set of adjustments to make as they began working. The choreographers and their dancers didn't immediately understand each other. Some choreographers were interested in exploring minimal tasks like pouring water, which frustrated dancers interested in moving. Having to get to know their choreographers and fellow dancers quickly, most dancers wanted constant feedback – 'that's good,' 'try it again, but this time never let go of your partner' – but some of the choreographers preferred to watch silently or give more cryptic comments ('this time, move from your soul') that left dancers without affirmation and direction.

I listened to one interesting discussion about the meaning of the term 'contemporary dance,' during which I heard different definitions: 'It has to do with bringing different styles together,' 'It is an imprinting of living on the body,' and 'Anything done in the present is contemporary dance including the performance of traditional dance.' I found these answers remarkably pertinent to the work going on in the Lab, especially for the dancers with backgrounds in Khmer and Indian dance styles and the ballet dancers. With the exception of one choreographer, I didn't see styles coming together or traditional performance recognised as belonging in the contemporary scene. Instead, I saw individual dancers struggling between movement approaches, the process of bodily change, of 'imprinting,' unfolding in the Lab.

Perhaps inspired by the work they'd done with Newson, many of the choreographers built movement that relied on everyday gestures, postures, and bodily tension to get at emotions and human encounters. The most successful solutions, at least for the choreographers I observed, involved a full-bodied commitment. The dancers were variously equipped to work this way. Most of the contemporary dancers seemed at home, but others preferred to display emotions through the stylised use of eyes and hands. Others were uncomfortable getting at emotion at all, preferring to rely on their considerable skills as technicians. I could see them vying between their ingrained movement preferences and the work of the Lab, attending carefully to some experiences and hedging away from others. I wondered about the give and

take between the Lab's goals of 'professional development' and 'cultural diversity.' I wondered if some dancers felt their contributions were passed over too quickly, the choreographers searching for something that met their sensibilities instead of seeing the possibility in another way of doing things. I realised that some of the dancers were giving up, at least temporarily, approaches to movement that were important to them. I wondered how people used to more oblique, more stylised ways of expressing emotion would react to these vignettes. While the movement seemed 'naturalistic' or 'realistic' to my eyes, others might find it lacking in subtlety.

One choreographer chose to create passages of movement around the theme of consumerism. She preserved her dancers' movement approaches, ending up with passages of hip-hop, Bharatanatyam, and contemporary dance. This solution was certainly satisfying to look at and helped me think about the global circulation, especially of hip-hop and Bharatanatyam, through films and television, their connection to fashion trends, and the clothing, equipment, and training demands made on their practitioners. While forms like tango and Irish step dancing might have also worked in this piece, other forms might have required a different approach or led to different meanings. What might have shifted if the Khmer classical dancer or a dancer invested in Aboriginal forms had been assigned to this group? How facilely do dance practices become unmoored from painful histories, sacred traditions, or ethnic or national identities to circulate comfortably, and be marketable, as global forms?

Lab participants had been scheduled to do a final showing for Summit attendees, but elected to show among themselves instead. Set movement was shown in the studio, with a final work shown at the campus transit center. This performance experimented with the possibilities of interacting with an impromptu audience. The showing was followed by a final Dance Dialogue for Lab and Summit participants. Occurring throughout the Summit, Dance Dialogues featured invited speakers in conversation with a provocateur. This session included a discussion of the Lab with all participants and then an interview with Newson and Sakti conducted by Nanette Hassall, one of the organisers of the Lab and Head of the Dance Department, Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA).

Near the end of this presentation, Newson discussed his research for *To Be Straight With You*. This sparked impassioned conversation about how gender and sexuality are constructed in various religious and cultural communities and, ultimately, hard questions about why intolerance towards sexual difference is overlooked in an attempt to honour religious difference. Interesting as this discussion was, I regretted not concluding the Summit with movement. I especially wanted to know what other scholars saw in the moving bodies of Lab participants, and what the dancers and choreographers might say about their own bodily cultural negotiations.

Discussion

In many ways, the Lab was a positive model in how to bring disparate people together. Lab citizens seemed to value shared experiences that made them a community and gave them a common project and language. The shared experiences provided by Newson's exercises were balanced by small group

work in which other opinions and strategies could come to the fore, and in which Newson's ideas could be played out in individual ways. Newson's and Sakti's willingness to let the Lab emerge as the needs of its participants became clear was also important to the Lab's success. This is known as 'emergent design,' a strategy recommended in sprawling, diverse settings where top down, pre-planned initiatives are impossible to enact. While the Lab mentors were successful in facilitating work in a culturally diverse environment, the Lab did not allow for a mutual sharing of diverse 'choreographic approaches' or 'movement material' (WDA Global Summit 2008). Delving into the creative practice of one well-established choreographer seemed enough to do in a five-day period.

The real good of the Lab occurs, not in five days, but in the continued experiences the Lab opens up. At the final session, all of the dancers said they were inspired and informed by the Lab. Some of that information had to do with their own facility in developing new relationships and in adapting to and finding good in the unknown. Several of the dancers I spoke with were already veterans of international tours and transcultural dance festivals or had traveled abroad to further their dance educations at colleges and universities and professional schools. No doubt these dancers will continue to encounter each other and to build intercultural projects and relationships.

I wonder what values will underpin these exchanges and what their intercultural nature will produce? The creative industries construct suggests that creative practice, use of technology, and the making of work that is internationally marketable will be emphasised. Creative campus programs will call on dancers to use dance to inspire creativity in other fields and to promote critical discussion of social issues. Contemplative practice, another prominent strand of inquiry in contemporary academia, suggests yet another alternative, the use of the arts and movement practices to promote personal intellectual and spiritual development.⁶ Will individual, social, or cultural goods be emphasised? Will dancers value experimentation or the maintenance of traditional practices? What kinds of diversity will be fostered or diminished?

While all of these strands of activity seem possible and even desirable, our choices within arts and academic communities do have real world consequences. While social difference and new ideas might prosper in creative cities, for example, the poor, the uneducated, and the religiously conservative don't benefit. Darrin Bayliss addresses this issue in his study of Copenhagen, *The Rise of the Creative City: Culture and Creativity in Copenhagen*,

One indication of the city's diversity is that 18% of the population has a non-Danish background. However, the notion that Copenhagen distinguishes itself through its tolerance needs to be carefully considered. Whilst Florida and Tingali (2004, p. 41) suggest that Denmark is a top scorer in terms of tolerance and is "actively working to attract foreign-born talent", the Liberal-Conservative coalition government, in office with the support of the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party, has since 2001 instituted increasingly stringent immigration policies. Immigrants, especially if they lack skills and qualifications suited to the knowledge economy, are by no means necessarily welcomed to the

country and, as the Municipality notes, it will be an important task to maintain the image of Copenhagen as an open and tolerant city (Københavns Kommune, 2004).

(Bayliss, 2007, pp. 899-900)

Bayliss concludes that the creative city, while positive and forward looking, can result in displacement for those in inner-city neighborhoods and greater social and geographic polarisation.

Academic conferences, dance labs, and other professional gatherings are more than opportunities to share research and connect with colleagues. The goals put forward for these events, the people invited into the room, and the topics introduced, allow us to have a hand in choreographing the future of the dance professions. One future meeting should bring together dance practitioners, scholars, and policy makers to discuss creative industries and creative campus initiatives and their impact on dance communities. Of special interest are the implications these programs hold for dance as an interdiscipline within academia. Working within a Creative Industries configuration seems to encourage collaborations across dance, technology, and entrepreneurship, but not across dance, education, and the humanities. Creative Campus programs emphasise major arts events as catalysts for projects in the arts, humanities, and sciences that bring together university and local civic constituencies. Their import for ongoing educational and research missions in the arts within universities is less clear. How will these initiatives, which often include professional artists, impact the spectrum of scholarly, creative, and pedagogical dance activity that already occurs on college campuses? The experience of dance at Queensland University of Technology should provide valuable insight. In her writings Cheryl Stock, Dance Head at QUT, reports a new investment in practice-based research and in major projects such as *Accented Body*, a two year long complex of performative and research-based explorations into the body (2008a and b). In addition, it seems important that the extended dance community discuss intellectual property from many perspectives, including the rights of individual dance artists and scholars, the possibilities of protecting processes as well as products, and the rights of Indigenous communities that might want to protect traditional knowledge or cultural expression.

Notes

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² See Program in WDA Summit (2008). While this paper stems from another project, Stock 2008 a, contains a helpful discussion of 'theory/practice outcomes'.

³ The unique character of dance in Australia was evident in the Summit and the Lab. Dance activity is distributed across major cities, perhaps encouraged by Australia's geography, rather than emanating from a New York-like hub. Australia enjoys traditional and contemporary dance communities that stem from its cultural mix, including people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and people of European and Asian descent. Australian dancers and dance educators have had a long history of contact with dance communities in the United Kingdom and the United States, benefiting and learning from the methods and histories of those dance communities. The Australian dance community has emphasised an integration of university dance education and professional dance, not common elsewhere (Nanette Hassall, Interview, 30 January 2009). Also see Stock and Dyson.

⁴ Among these organisations was Ausdance, the national dance service organisation with national and regional divisions; the Australia Council and Arts Queensland; and the Brisbane Festival, a citywide arts festival held just after the Summit (see WDA Summit, Partners 2008). In my interview with Nanette Hassall, she discussed the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia as also important to the infrastructure of Australian dance. Founded in 1985, the Council creates policy that unites dance departments in colleges and universities, and helps foster integration between university and professional dance scenes. My sense of Australia's dance community was shaped by one impressive event, and should be tempered by a more thorough investigation of ongoing activities and funding.

⁵ Internet News: Martha Graham Center Entitled To Copyright To 45 Dances Choreographed By Martha Graham, Court Rules <http://www.artscope.net/NEWS/new09102002-5.shtml>

⁶ In the United States, the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society (<http://www.contemplativemind.org>) fosters the integration of contemplative practices, among them yoga and traditional and contemporary ritual and arts practices, into academic settings. The Center offers fellowships that help academics add contemplative practices to academic courses as well as retreats. Other Center programs focus on contemplative practices in business, law, social justice settings and on research and philanthropy.

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http://www.ausdance.org.au/global_summit08/wdaAP_summit.html
See links for Conference themes, Programs, Choreolab, Partners.

Biographical statement

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