

**Performance**  
**Meanings and connections in dance experiences**  
**for young people of all ages**

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**Dance and the Child International and the Role of Performance**

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Dance and the Child International (daCi); 'is a non profit association founded in 1978 and subsequently entering the Conseil International de la Danse (CID), UNESCO, and is an autonomous, fully constituted branch of CID with the aim of promoting the growth and development of dance for children and young people on an international basis (*Constitution*, 2000). Throughout its history the international association has maintained its purpose to provide experiences of dance for young people as creators, performers and spectators with respect for the ethnic, gender and cultural identities of each young person. To that end members are encouraged to connect with dance in both the public and private fields of dance, to collaborate with members of other countries and make sure that dance is available to all young people. Within its mandate daCi provides a conference every three years at which dance educators, artists, researchers and young people are able to come together and exchange their ideas and experiences of dance. In this paper we present an overview of the organisation and the importance of performance in children's dance. Following this discussion three daCi members, Kathy Vlassopoulos, Karen Bond and Jeff Meiners, whose

work focuses on dance for young people, describe specific events and experiences they have created.

### **The beginnings ...**

At the first International conference on 'Dance and the Child', subtitled 'The Child As Spectator, Creator, Performer' held at the University of Alberta in Canada in July of 1978 the association was born. The Dance Committee of the Canadian Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (CAHPER), Alberta Culture and the University of Alberta sponsored this first conference. Joyce Boorman (1978), chairperson of the conference, wrote in the preface to the Keynote Addresses and Philosophy papers that it seemed from letters she had received that many dance educators were feeling isolated and that people really did feel the need 'to share their visions, dreams, aspirations, concerns, knowledge and problems'.

Both keynote and delegate presentations brought forward further issues: the importance of focusing on dance education in schools and colleges; the values and justification of dance as an educational discipline and as a support in aesthetic development; the meaning of movement as a primary form of expression; the potential of creative dance to provide freedom to experiment and to create an individual voice; and the acknowledgement of the significance of social and cultural forms of dance in the education of young people. The discussion brought to the forefront the importance of young people becoming perceptive and responsive spectators as well as achieving skills and abilities in creating and performing their own dances together with learning dance studies and other pre-choreographed works.

### **Dance and the Child International ...**

daCi has continued to this day with triennial conferences and a vibrant and interactive membership. Since that first conference in 1978 the selection of the theme that reflects the daCi aims and purposes has been the decision of the hosting country and the respective conference committee. Over the course of the nine daCi conferences held to date (1982 Stockholm, Sweden, 1985 Auckland, 1985 New Zealand, 1988 London, England, 1991 Salt Lake City, Utah, U.S.A., 1994 Sydney, Australia, 1997 Kuopio, Finland, 2000 Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, 2003 Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, 2006 The Hague, Netherlands) over 3500 presentations have been given.

There is a general pattern to the conference program in that the presentations include: scholarly papers and poster presentations; lecture demonstrations; workshops; panel presentations and performances for and by young people. The program is divided between sessions for the adults who present their work and research on dance for young people and the young people who are provided with workshops and choreography sessions that lead to a final performance given

during the closing ceremony. The young people's days also include rehearsals for their own performance.

### **The importance of performance ...**

One of the most discussed parts of the conference by both the adult and youth delegates is the role of performance within the conference. Quite often the teacher has led the choreography but there are some groups where the students have had an important role to play in the creating of the piece. There are rare presentations of the young people's own choreography. It seems that performance is an important component of the conference for the young people. They are excited to perform; in some instances, young dancers are not involved in the Youth Program provided by the conference – they spend their time rehearsing their work. This leads to many criticisms of the event: 'that the conference has become a festival'; 'that groups are not interested in anything but their performance'; 'that there is too much competition'; 'that it does not appear that the young people are interested in learning anything new'; that 'teachers and/or artistic directors are not explaining the purpose of the conference'; and 'that we do not see enough of young people's ideas and choreography'.<sup>i</sup>

In the research specific themes related to performance have surfaced; markedly that the focus of performing for young people is to develop skills, to gain confidence, self-esteem and personal satisfaction, to spend time with friends, to tell a story, to learn about the world, nature, social issues and politics and to learn about other artists. It is accepted that performance is an important part of students' lives. The values placed on the skills of performance and the opportunities to perform are mentioned in many papers where educators are talking about the value of dance education and training, specific programs, development of curriculum and assessment. There are many examples of experiences for young people that include: the benefits of creative dance; the role of traditional and vernacular dance forms; the importance of their own compositions; the value of performing dances of well-known choreographers; the importance of viewing dance performances and the significance of the ability to provide an interpretation of a performance.

Many papers address the above issues through the description of a particular program, a specific performance by young people or a specific dance group. In 1988 in her paper, *An eye for detail: Training the young performer within a comprehensive context*, Elaine Avison-Spiers describes the role of dance in the school and outlines the requirements of an examination course in dance. Also in 1988 Jo Butterworth describes the principles and practices of Youth Dance in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and remarks that for many young people dance is a part of their lives, a part of finding themselves as people, and performing is a normal end result.

In 1991 in her section of the paper, *What do young people say?* Connie Moker-Wernikowski presented her findings about performance from interviews she

conducted with seven girls, aged 10-13 years. There were several themes that appeared throughout the discussions she had with the young girls: 'enhanced self-esteem, achievement of competence/mastery, positive social interactions, and the importance of performance' (pp. 154-156). There were two key statements that summed up the importance of performance for them: 'I think performing is what dance is all about really' and 'If you didn't perform there would be no point dancing, so you wouldn't go to dance anymore but I love dancing so much that I wouldn't want to stop dancing' (p.155).

At the conference in Kuopio (1997) Mary-Elizabeth Manley encouraged young dances to 'choreograph and perform with critical reflection' (p. 230). In Regina (2000) Elly Broeren and Joan van der Mast, in talking about boys dancing, commented that many do not dance in a traditional educational or professional training context and that they obviously loved to perform. At the same conference in Regina during a keynote session, the Youth Panel, four young dancers from Canada, Croatia, Japan and New Zealand informed the delegates of their passion for dancing and the importance of performance in their lives. Canadian Samantha Kiely (2000) encapsulates the significance of performance in her poem when she says:

It's a gift from you to the audience.  
In opening them you discover the power a dancer can possess from the depths  
of skin, muscles and bones.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Comments taken from the Journals of the Writers, Conference 2000

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## **Case Study 1: The Children's Dance Festival (CDF) initiated by Dance and the Child international (daCi) from Melbourne, Australia**

Kathy Vlassopoulos

The Children's Dance Festival following the key objectives of daCi to involve young people as creators, performers and observers of dance takes place annually, usually in May, in Melbourne, Australia. Children from the ages 2 to 18 have participated in this event. The CDF provides an opportunity for children to experience dance through a collaborative process with professional artists.

The festival was initiated in 1996 and took place in the Melbourne Royal Botanical Gardens, the beautiful gardens providing many sites to create and inspire dance and to move away from the conventional theatre space. Since its inception the festival has continued to select sites that inspire unique choreography, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens; Montsalvat – an artists' retreat with medieval style buildings and spaces; Como House – a federation style homestead; CERES – a Community Environmental Park; the Melbourne Museum; the Abbotsford Convent; Birrarung Marr – parklands along the banks of the Yarra river; and the Carlton Gardens – federation gardens near the Melbourne Exhibition buildings. Since 1996 there have been 10 festivals and it is estimated that over 3000 children have danced in the various locations. Accompanying the children are parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family and friends. These people make up the audience that over the years has exceeded 10,000.

The event has always been organised by volunteers until 2007 when daCi Australia and Ausdance Victoria were successful in receiving a \$15,000 grant to fund the CDF and a series of dance workshops at Artplay, an artistic space in the heart of Melbourne committed to children and art. For the first time in the history of the CDF all choreographers, musicians and the photographer received a fee for their work. Costumes, props, advertising were also paid for.

This site-specific event has continued to provide the opportunity for children to experience dance through a collaborative process with professional artists. The participating choreographers are daCi members who work with the children for about 4-5 weeks. Sites within a location are chosen by the choreographers – line, form, colour, texture, dynamic and expression are the key aspects that the choreographers look for – like an architect. The young people are actively involved in the choreography, choice of music, costumes, and make up/face paint. There have been various themes and ideas, including historical and educative ideas with particular respect for the environment and the Indigenous land danced upon. Some parents are actively involved with creating music, costumes, photography, transport, general support crew and ushering.

After such an exciting event, parents, family and friends inform the choreographers that their children have had a wonderful dance experience. Such

feedback is usually verbal though sometimes by letters or cards that the children have designed. This gives the choreographers an impression that the children grow in confidence. They become socially interactive and dance critics. They are enthusiastic, and develop the ability to interpret their environment through dance. The children grow as choreographers and develop musical understanding and a sense of their world. They gain insight on the role of dance within the community, stretching the boundaries of dance and creating a new generation of artists. The CDF is an event that everyone gets excited about each year.

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## Case Study 2: *Out of Many... a daCi performance*

Karen E. Bond

In keeping with its location in Philadelphia, the historic American 'city of pluralism,' daCi USA's 2<sup>nd</sup> Intergenerational Gathering (2006) was titled *Out of many, we are One*. Over an intensive three-day period, participants explored a progression of dancing and performing related to themes of self, community, and the future. The following research summary focuses on the sub-text of gender performance that occurred in the 8-10 year olds group over the first two days of small group work. With six boys, the 8-10s had the largest number of male participants in the Gathering.

### Demographics

Two hundred people (ages eight to 92) from 13 states attended the Gathering held at Temple University. A majority was of Anglo-European descent with a minority coming from African, Latino and Asian backgrounds. In both student and faculty cohorts, females outnumbered males, with ratios of 155:19 and 16:6 respectively. Participants worked in age groupings: eight to ten year olds (23); eleven to 13 year olds (26); 14 to 18 year olds (28); and adults (102).

### Overview of content

Day One: *Who am I?*  
Day Two: *Who are we?*

Morning: Dance elements/technique\* > Improvisation/dance making.\*  
Afternoon: Flamenco, African, or Indonesian class > Fusion dance making.\*  
Sharing of the day's work for the entire 'Gathering'.  
Evening: Repertory performances > Workshops: hip hop, salsa, swing.

\*Four classes per session according to age groups. Classes were taught by teaching pairs.

Day Three: *Where are we going?*

Morning: Age groups recombine into three intergenerational bodies to create outdoor performances.  
Afternoon: Final performances: Bell Tower, Great Teachers Courtyard, Subway Pavilion.

Research: The Gathering was documented by a team of student and faculty researchers from Arizona State University, Brigham Young University, Hunter College and Temple University. Data collection included video recording, photography, interviews, and field journals.



## Why focus on gender?

There are three key reasons for the research focus on gender:

- Published research on gender relationships in young people's dance is scarce (Anttila 2007, Bond 1994, Bond 2000, Bond, Frichtel & Park 2007, Richard 2009, Risner 2007).
- Many continue to see gender as a function of biology and cultural fixing (Lorber 2005). At the same time, many believe in gender equality. What role can dance play in illuminating these ambiguities?
- Gender relationships appeared significant in the 8-10s group, which had the greatest number of boys (six out of 23).

## Findings

Following is a brief overview of gender phenomena observed during the workshops.

Day One: *Who am I?*

First impressions were that most girls had at least some dance background and many appeared to be experienced dancers. The skill range of the boys appeared wider. When asked to 'join up with the person next to you,' most children made beelines for same-sex partners. Another bustle of negotiations occurred when children were asked to form groups. Teachers reconfigured groups for 'gender balance.' On both days teachers made conscious decisions to create diversity (including gender) in small groups.

When the children created 'signature phrases' – short sequences of movement that answered the theme question of 'who am I,' we observed notable differences in male and female movement choices. Overall, girls showed more bodily containment, less dynamic range and velocity, and more complex phrasing and gestural detail than boys. Two boys refused to show their signature phrases to the class. During small group work (with one boy in each group), girls appeared more engaged than boys in collaborative dance making. When all the 8-10s were on stage at once for the late afternoon showing for the entire Gathering, the two boys who refused to show in class performed B-boy floor spins. Other boys took up a lot of space, moving on extended vectors. Overall, girls highlighted circular pathways moving around and through their small groups.

One context in which we observed an easy-going interaction and cooperation between males and females was in the intergenerational African class, especially during the traditional dance game of *Fighting Lizards*.

Day Two: *Who are we?*

Early in the day, boys were assigned to female partners to explore 'scarf sculptures.' Here one child would create and hold a body shape, and the other would drape the shape with a colorful scarf. Distinctions between boys' and girls' movement preferences appeared less pronounced when they worked with props such as scarves and ribbons.

In the intergenerational Indonesian dance class, participants learned a Balinese female walk and elements of a Javanese male warrior dance. Most males (children and adults) appeared to find the hip isolations required in the female walk challenging. When asked to describe male qualities, girls contributed 'brave,' 'strong,' 'smart,' and 'important.' A boy added, 'perseverance.'

During small group work, children made dances relating to the day's theme through the structure and imagery of Japanese haiku (from Henderson 1958). Each group was asked to elect a leader whose job was 'to make sure everyone's voice is heard,' but this did not appear to happen. Most boys worked in isolation from or parallel to their female peers, creating solos that were then integrated into the group dance. The 8-10s performed five pieces for the end-of-day assembly in Conwell Theatre.

### **Gender commentary on five dances**

1. *Fireflies* (Onitsura, 1660-1738 – written at age 8)  
Although I say  
'Come here! Come here!' the fireflies  
keep flying away

This all-girl quartet has no lead performer. The piece projects an egalitarian quality – a performance of social unity.

2. *Summer Night* (Shiki, 1867-1902)  
A lightning flash  
Between the forest trees  
I have seen water

This quartet has three girls and one boy with no lead dancer. The boy maintains a subtle separateness throughout the piece and shows reluctance to hold hands during the bow.

3. *Heat* (Shiki)  
The summer river  
Although there is a bridge  
my horse goes through the water

This quartet has three girls and one boy. There are two lead performers, a girl and a boy. The boy dances horse; the girl has multiple roles.



Figure 1: Cheetah mother and cub, Conwell Theatre, Temple University

4. *The Storm* (Chora, 1876-1958)

A storm-wind blows  
Out from among the grasses  
the full moon grows

This quartet has three girls and one boy. The boy dances storm and the girls dance grasses and moon. The boy projects a strong solo presence while maintaining awareness of others.

5. *The Snake* (Kyoshi, 1874-1959)

A snake! Though it passes  
eyes that had glared at me  
stay in grasses

This quartet has three girls and one boy, with a strong female leader of the girls. The boy dances a snake solo throughout, bowing separately (after the girls). The piece incorporates elements of African and Indonesian dance.



*Figure 2: The Snake, Conwell Theatre, Temple University*

### **Conclusions/Questions**

Throughout this intensive experiment in social creativity, gendered decision-making was evident in spite of a pedagogy of inclusiveness and 'structured equality' on the part of teachers (Lorber 2005). Most boys claimed special roles in contrast, if not opposition, to girls. Was this expressive individuality, or gender performance...or both? Girls demonstrated more role flexibility than boys, but both cross-gender and same-sex competition arose around areas of leadership and role allocation. Is gender therefore, an unavoidable issue in dance education (Stinson, 2005)?

The study lends empirical support for Young's (2005) assertion that in contemporary urban, commercial society, females do not make full use of their spatial potential. At the same time, many girls danced with whole body engagement, expressive complexity, and clear spatial intention, which Young might view as elements of 'bodily transcendence' (p. 36).

Girl-boy integration and rapport were observed over the two days, pointing to the value of performance and the incorporation of dance games, props, and animal metaphors in cross-gender dance education. The study affirms notions of gender as fluid, shifting, and performative (Butler 2004).

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### **Case Study 3: Working with very young children**

Jeff Meiners

This paper focuses on a group of young people often forgotten in dance discourse – very young children. My work in early childhood education (ECE) over the past six years at the University of South Australia (UniSA) spans the years from birth to eight. My recent interest has been the creation of work for young children specifically in the dance theatre genre. It includes two focused areas of attention: the nature of the work being created and the responses of the young children as active audience members.

#### **Movement and the body as foundational arts activity in the early years**

Early childhood professionals recognise that the arts offer very young children significant ways of knowing about themselves, others and the world (Edwards, 2002; Wright, 2003). Essential to our understanding is acknowledgement that they use their bodies as a sensory base for meaning making. The link between mind and body is evident in young children's embodied thinking. Their thinking bodies express thoughts, ideas and feelings through mark-making which manifests itself as embodied thoughts (Wright, 2003).

The dance world's range of embodied practices offers the field of early childhood rich opportunities to inform and support a renewed focus on dance alongside the other arts. Brain research highlights the development of 'sensing pathways' set in the first three years of life – the pathways of vision, hearing and touch (Mustard, 2008) and the embodiment of understanding and physicalisation of meaning through movement is fundamental to healthy growth.

The burgeoning area of dance writing in the past thirty years has given much attention to the notion of the 'lived body' (Fraleigh, 1987) as an integrated whole which aesthetically apprehends (Gardner, 1983). Coupled with the body as its instrument, movement is the raw material of dance giving weight to the importance of dance experiences in the early years (Schiller & Meiners, 2003).

Whilst I claim a space for dance experiences in the early years, working in the arts with young children indicates that they often do not discern between different art forms (Meiners, 2005) and move spontaneously between moving, singing, making sounds and visual mark-making, in their literal and expressive symbolising via the arts (Wright, 2003). Such early responses to the world around them have a sensory base and are essential to aesthetic development in feeling, perceiving and apprehending (Abbs, 1987) and artistic ways of knowing (Wright, 2003). Play-based arts experiences encourage creativity, succinctly defined as 'imagination in action' (Robinson, 2006) and the realisation of imaginative ideas.

Recognition of the child's body and movement as fundamental to creative and cultural learning is vital (Meiners & Schiller, 2008). Early performative practices have provided an essential focus for my work with young children, linking dance, theatre and education.

### **Performance for very young children**

My recent work in the area of performance centred on a five-year arts industry partnership between UniSA and Windmill Performing Arts (Schiller, Wood, & Meiners, 2004). Windmill Performing Arts is a leading Australian company dedicated to innovative professional performances for children and families. The partnership included a series of sequentially related projects stimulated by the director's interest in children's first experience of theatre. Cate Fowler had long been interested in the creation of work for babies and toddlers, as children who are far too young are often forced to attend in-theatre performances with older siblings. She was interested in creating a memorable and engaging 'first' performance for a very small child.

The first project *In the beginning*, explored and investigated interactions between artists and preschool children in childcare centres. The director decided to use the picture book by Mem Fox: *Where is the Green Sheep?* which led to a performance experience for very young children called *The Green Sheep*. Fowler's (2007) concept of 'installation theatre' was defined here as it had become increasingly apparent that small children are more comfortable in a flexible space rather than being restricted to formal theatre seating. I worked with the cast as movement advisor. *The Green Sheep* engaged young children in using visual-spatial, kinaesthetic and musical literacies in a 'first' performance, providing a foundation for 'performance literacy'. The work sustained the engagement of babies even as young as nine months (Meiners & Fowler, 2006).

Following this success, a further practice-based research project was undertaken for the creative development of a performance based on a new children's book by Mike Dumbleton: *Cat*. I was invited to direct the movement and highlight the physical nature of very young children's responses. A creative development period was held in a children's centre with performers, a composer and designer working with the target audience age range of babies, toddlers and preschoolers. A new installation space was designed and further creative development led to the production of *Cat*.

*Cat's* creative process included a number of considerations, which honoured the world of 1-3 year olds. First was the creation of a safe space, which did not restrict children with chairs and was lit naturally. The piece began with the performers arriving and moving around the children and carers as they waited in a prepared and welcoming book area, gradually making unthreatening eye contact with friendly, smiling playful interaction, then leading the children to the installation performance space, designed as a garden with gentle sound accompaniment.

Children were seated on the floor comfortably with their carers so that informal talk about the performance could occur. Performers could interact closely using clearly marked pathway spaces for performance at the same level as the children. Carer/child relationships were identified in the earlier research as building a vital bridge between the child, the performer and the meaning of the work. This approach acknowledges the importance of building secure relationships and the success of the performers in connecting gently and warmly with their young audiences has been commented on widely in audience feedback (Early Childhood Australia, 2008).

The creative team's observations of responses in the children's centre were crucial in the development of the movement content for *Cat*. The director provided clear guidance that the work should have a strong physical focus and that the space should provide children with opportunities to respond spontaneously to the movement action and musical score. She envisaged that the performers at times would guide children and their carers to physically participate from where they were located in the installation space. Plans included opportunities to model examples of playful interaction between adults and young children, using simple movement ideas based on animals.

The director wanted the young audience to be introduced to the concept of dance performance during the work. Choreographed dances were presented and children were able to watch or respond in other ways directly. These included solos, duets and trios that introduced the animal characters in a non-threatening way, and also included abstract and sometimes narrative elements of the 35-minute work. Consideration was given to performers moving along the pathways safely and at varying levels (rather than always at adult standing height). I led a workshop with the performers to help them understand the emotional implications of particular movement qualities based on Laban's ideas of 'Effort' or dynamics (Laban, 1950); for example, whilst sudden, forceful movement might seem exciting for older children, using these qualities in the installation context in close proximity to babies could be frightening and upsetting.

The performers were required to take a multi-faceted approach to the audience, switching between performing to leading the audience in guided activity, then returning to performance. For the audience, this meant a sophisticated response to the performers in and out of character. This approach acknowledged the child's familiar world of dramatic play in which children switch from actor, to playwright, to stage manager within short periods of time (Dunn, 2003).

The informal yet structured arrangement acknowledged that children have not yet learned theatre conventions and might respond in a range of ways. Weddell's (2003) analysis of the 'different "entries" or styles of participation for understanding the multiple layers and texture of performance' were considered. Children's responses can be categorised as 'technicians', 'narrators', 'mystics',



'dramatists' and 'spectators' and this framework provides a useful starting point for understanding young children's responses.

Unconstrained by seats, children's physical responses to the performers and the work were also an important focus for consideration as these provide insight into their embodied thinking. Whilst some sat very still, following the performers with their eyes, others gestured with hands, arms and heads and some crawled or stood up and moved around using their whole body with vigorous actions, indicating their pleasurable sensory responses to the visual images of the performers in action. The unconstrained space meant that some children moved around freely in the available spaces and could return to their carers when they chose. It was observed that some children used a range of responses throughout the performance, indicative of sustained emotional engagement and concentration.

During the performance seasons, observations indicated that some carers (teachers, parents, grandparents or other family members) responded to children's spontaneity in different ways. Some sat and allowed their child/ren to respond without restriction whilst others appeared uncomfortable with the enthusiasm demonstrated physically as children responded to the multiple layered meanings of the work.

## **Conclusion**

This work led to further investigation with other companies whose work acknowledges the embodied nature of very young children's thinking. The ASSITEJ International Theatre for Young Audiences conference in Adelaide during May 2008 demonstrated that there is strong interest in theatre for the very young with papers focusing on early childhood and performance from Geesche Wartemann and Susanne Osten, <http://www.ityarn.org/minutes.htm>

My plans are to develop a tool to help me analyse pre-verbal children's responses to a range of movement-based work. I intend to undertake follow-up activity with parents/carers to track young children's responses post-performance and to conduct interviews with artistic directors and performers to reveal the multiple meanings of physical performance and its impact on young children.

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## Biographical statements

**Dr. Ann Kipling Brown** is a professor in dance education in the Arts Education Program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina (Canada). Her research and publications focus on dance pedagogy, the integration of notation in dance programs, and the role of dance in the child's and adult's lived world.

**Kathy Vlassopoulos** is a children's dance educator, and facilitator of the Children's Dance Festival, an annual event held in Melbourne, Australia. She is also a lecturer in creative dance teaching and Australian representative for daCi.

**Dr. Karen Bond** is a professor in dance at Temple University (Philadelphia USA). She worked in Australian higher dance education from 1976 to 2000, developing Australia's first Masters coursework in dance at Melbourne College of Advanced Education. Her research focuses on participant meanings of dance in education, therapy and performance.

**Jeff Meiners**, Lecturer, School of Education, University of South Australia. Jeff has worked widely in dance, facilitating programs with artists and teachers in Australia, England and Portugal. An Australian Dance Award finalist for Services to Dance Education and former member of the Australia Council's Dance Board, Jeff recently worked with Windmill Performing Arts productions of *The Green Sheep*, *Cat* and *BoomBah!*

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