

SNEAK PEEK: DANCE AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIPS DURING OPEN REHEARSALS

Anja Ali-Haapala

Doctoral Candidate, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Audiences are increasingly being invited behind-the-scenes of mainstream dance companies. Online videos, open classes, open rehearsals and backstage tours all provide insight for audiences about daily life in a dance company and how dance work is made. This article focuses on studio open rehearsals where general audiences are now being extended an invitation (traditionally, only private supporters would attend a studio rehearsal). Using Clare Dyson's (2010) scales of audience engagement, I analyse two open rehearsal models that I observed as an audience member in 2013: *Friends Open Days* with English National Ballet (London), and *Inner Workings* with Chunky Move (Melbourne). In opening the studio door to these audiences it also opens up possibilities of new relationships between audience and dancer.

I use the term 'open rehearsal' to encompass a range of audience events that are practiced in dance companies around the world. As a central element, open rehearsals provide some insight about creative and/or rehearsal processes for an audience. This includes creative processes that occur in studios through to dress rehearsals in theatre spaces; even online rehearsal videos fall within this broad definition. The audiences that are invited in to watch open rehearsals range from the general public to specific audience groups such as company members or subscribers, commonly referred to as 'Friends'. The broad spectrum of audience events captured under the rubric of 'open rehearsal' far exceeds the scope of this article. Therefore, in this discussion I focus on open rehearsals, by mainstream

dance companies, which are held in studio spaces and can be considered, what I term, 'working rehearsals'.

The terms 'working' and 'performed' relate to the authenticity of the rehearsal. I consider these terms on a continuum and, in doing this, acknowledge that all open rehearsals have aspects of both rehearsal and performance. In other words, an open rehearsal cannot be completely authentic, as the presence of an audience inherently effects the rehearsal. In light of this, a working rehearsal, for the most part, operates like a normal closed rehearsal. Characteristics of working rehearsals can include the event being held during usual rehearsal working hours, dancers wearing casual rehearsal attire, repetition of movement sections, and genuine developments in the dance work being made. In contrast, a performed rehearsal is a rehearsal that is significantly adjusted for an audience. Characteristics of performed rehearsals include theatre lighting in studio spaces, dancers wearing uniform attire, choreographers/rehearsal directors speaking to the audience throughout the rehearsal, and even audiences being shown a variety of sections or dance works. These adjustments for the audience can be subtle or more distinct, and this is why a continuum is useful in this concept. By deliberately adapting rehearsals for audiences they become a demonstration, or performance, of a rehearsal. The two open rehearsal models that I discuss in this article are considered working rehearsals as, overall, they operated as regular rehearsals.

Access to behind-the-scenes

In the past, access to rehearsals has mostly been restricted to private supporters of companies, such as the Friends, subscribers, and donor audiences. Historically, ballet companies were reliant on these audiences for their financial contributions (Wulff, 1998, p. 108). Forming relationships with the audience and

building a community for the audience is central to private fundraising, with many companies currently adopting this 'friends' terminology to further enhance this aspect. Through this relationship, supporters have gained access to rehearsals much earlier than general audiences. For example, Northern Ballet (Leeds) began inviting private supporters into studio rehearsals as early as the 1970s where they would watch run-throughs of completed dance works on the verge of performance. American Ballet Theatre (New York), Dance Kaleidoscope (Indianapolis), Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Rambert Dance Company (London), and The Royal Ballet (London) are just a handful of dance companies that currently open their studio doors to their private supporters.¹ The Royal Ballet's *Insight* program, for example, can be considered a performed rehearsal as there are several aspects that are prepared for the audience. The studio's mirrors are covered, theatrical lighting is used which cloaks the audience in darkness, the rehearsal directors explain aspects of the rehearsal to the audience, and the rehearsals start at 7:30pm. These are all aspects that are not common characteristics of regular working rehearsals within mainstream companies. This open rehearsal model does, however, provide insight into rehearsal processes for dance work as audiences observe the repetitive process of 'tweaking' movement.²

Inviting general audiences into studio rehearsals has gained momentum over the past decade. Since the late 2000s companies such as Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Australian Dance Theatre (Adelaide), Houston Ballet, National Dance Company Wales (Cardiff), and West Australian Ballet (Perth) have opened their studio doors to general audiences.³ While most companies show their audiences rehearsal processes that take place towards the end of a rehearsal period, National Dance Company Wales is one of few companies to open early creative processes to

general audiences. Beginning in 2010, the company opens the last hour of rehearsal every Friday afternoon during the creative and rehearsal periods for new dance works. Depending on the choreographer's preference, these open rehearsals can be either working or performed rehearsals.⁴

There are three main reasons cited by companies for offering open rehearsals to their audiences. The first is to build and strengthen the company's community, as mentioned above. The second reason is audience development. By inviting audiences in for a 'sneak peek' of an upcoming performance, companies hope to encourage audiences to make the next step of purchasing a ticket for performance. The final reason for offering open rehearsals relates to education. For non-expert audiences in particular, the process of creating and rehearsing dance work is 'mysterious'. Attending open rehearsals gives audiences insight into 'what dancers do'⁵ and offers them a 'point of view of dance that they don't see when they are in a 2700 seat theatre'.⁶ While private supporters have gained access to rehearsals for several decades, general audiences have only recently been invited into the studio of mainstream companies. Before discussing the open rehearsal models in this paper, I will examine the theoretical discourse on audience-dancer and audience-dance work relationships and introduce Dyson's scales of audience engagement.

Previous audience relationships

The traditional presentation format, the most common performance format used by mainstream dance companies, separates the audience from performer through the architecture of theatres, such as the dominant proscenium arch design. Lynne Conner (2013) attributes the introduction of electrical lighting in the 19th century as the key development that led to the 'quietening of the audience' (p. 59) as it moved the audience into complete darkness and therefore a 'secondary

relationship with the arts event' (p.59). As a result, audiences are perceived by some authors as 'passive' (Kattwinkel, 2003, p. ix) 'beholders' (Thom, 1993, p. 13) of performance. In contrast to this position, Judith Hanna (1983, p. 17) posits that watching dance demands creative participation through the process of meaning-making. In this sense, the performance is merely stimulus for the audience to create their own interpretation and understanding. Furthermore, Daly (1995) argues that dance performance is 'constructed dialogically' (p. 17), that the audience's presence innately affects the performers and performance.

Conceptions of the audience in non-traditional performance constructs – such as site-specific performance, performance outside of theatres, and non-traditional uses of theatre spaces – extends the audience relationship from meaning-makers and subtle contributors to co-performers (Stock, 2011, p. 2) and even co-creators (Dyson, 2010, p. 50). In non-traditional performance constructs the line between the stage and audience is blurred, providing opportunities for audiences to enter the performance and, as a result, become collaborators.

In this article, I apply Clare Dyson's (2010) scales of audience engagement to open rehearsal events. These scales highlight five aspects of performance that exist in both traditional and non-traditional performance constructs: site, liminality, audience agency, performer authenticity, and proximity.⁷ Developed to be used as a choreographic tool, the scales enable choreographers to 'map the process of audience engagement' (Dyson, 2010, p. 210) within their work. They also provide a framework to analyse the presentation of their dance work (Dyson, 2010, p. 210). An important aspect to note about Dyson's framework is that it is intended to highlight the way in which dance work is presented, as opposed to the content (Dyson, 2010, p. 216). In this article, I apply Dyson's scales from an audience participant

perspective rather than a choreographer perspective. The breadth of presentation models that these scales encompass, from the traditional to non-traditional, presents an array of engagement possibilities. When applied to open rehearsals, these scales provide a new lens in which to view open rehearsals and can provide insights into possible audience relationships.

'Site' (Dyson, 2010, p. 83) encompasses performance location, including how audience and performers coexist in the space; for example, numbered seating, no seating, and promenade. 'Liminality' (Dyson, 2010, p. 83) focuses on the maintenance or manipulation of existing performance codes and conventions. Where disruptions to these codes occur, possibilities open up for liminality in space, time or performers (Dyson, 2010, p. 83). While this can unsettle audiences, liminality also opens up the 'possibility of something new' (Dyson, 2010, 83-84) for audiences. 'Audience agency' (Dyson, 2010, p. 84) relates to the amount and type of decisions that are offered to the audience within the performance structure. 'Proximity' (Dyson, 2010, p. 84) concerns the physical distance between audience and performer which can be fixed or variable. Finally, 'performer authenticity' (Dyson, 2010, p. 85) addresses the real-ness of the performance, whether the performer is playing a character or presenting themselves as a 'real' person on stage. Through applying Dyson's scales to two models, open rehearsals emerge as events that incorporate aspects of both traditional and non-traditional performances.

Introduction to the open rehearsal models

In 2013, I travelled to several cities in Australia and the United Kingdom to visit companies as part of a broader research project.⁶ During these visits I attended open rehearsals that were part of the companies' regular practice. My observations as an audience participant inform this analysis. The open rehearsals selected for this

article – *Friends Open Days* with English National Ballet (ENB) and *Inner Workings* with Chunky Move (CM) – are both open rehearsals that take place in the companies' studios, as opposed to theatre spaces, and offer audiences opportunities to experience rehearsals that operate as regular working rehearsals.

As a touring company, ENB has extended absences from London stages. To maintain the company's presence with local audiences throughout the year they offer audience events with open rehearsals being part of the company's practice since the mid-1990s. I consider these open rehearsals to be working rehearsals as audiences witness dancers and choreographers in real working situations where they practice and polish dance work. Linda Darrell, Individual Giving Manager at ENB, explains: 'The rehearsal goes on as it would do without us. There's no alteration made to it. There is no special accommodation.'⁹

As the title of the event suggests, the audience have a membership relationship with the company. By only opening rehearsals to company Friends, the event becomes an exclusive benefit or reward for their membership. The audience is invested financially, and likely emotionally, in the wellbeing of the company. In addition, audience groups are limited to ten, due to the size of the studio space, which extends the exclusivity of the encounter. The ENB audience is an invested friend that is rewarded with an exclusive behind-the-scenes experience: the open rehearsal is 'bought' by the audience.

In contrast, CM's open rehearsal practice began recently. As part of a broader exhibition initiative in 2013, the company opened their doors over five days as a way for audiences to have 'artist encounters'. Artistic Director Anouk Van Dijk¹⁰ considers the open rehearsals to be a valuable addition to the company's practice. One that she would like to repeat, as it is 'inclusive' of audiences into the creative process. I

also consider CM's open rehearsals to be working rehearsals as the processes that I witnessed – improvisation and developing set movement sequences – genuinely contributed to the overall development of a dance work.

CM's open rehearsals were open to general audiences. By this I mean any person, regardless of whether they had attended CM's performances before or made financial contributions. In contrast to ENB's audience, the CM audience did not necessarily have an existing relationship with the company. While most audience members had at least attended CM performances previously, there were some audience members that came across the open rehearsal by chance. During the two CM open rehearsals I observed, the majority of audience members were professional independent dancers who had participated in the open class that proceeded the rehearsal: a dominantly industry audience emerged. Using Dyson's scales for audience engagement, I now analyse both of these open rehearsal models.

Site

Both open rehearsal models situate the rehearsal in each company's studio spaces. Both sites can be considered typical dance studios as they have sprung vinyl flooring, unobstructed space, mirrors, ballet barres, and a piano in the ENB studio. While dance studios are a common and familiar site for dancers, it is an unknown site for many audiences. As a site for open rehearsal, studios place audiences and dancers in the same space. This dissolves the stage-auditorium framework and significantly impacts on potential interaction between performance and audience (Dyson, 2010, p. 96). However, in these spaces the audiences sat on chairs positioned along the wall that the dancers used as their front. Similar to performance, the audiences were limited to a one-sided, front on view. There was

still a sense of separation between audience and dancer. The size of studio spaces, however, placed the audiences within a few metres of dancers and, therefore, proximity emerged as a significant aspect of these open rehearsal models.

In addition to the dance studio, audiences also travelled through other spaces within the companies' buildings in order to reach the studio. On the day I attended, the ENB audience experienced two other sites. The first was the dancers' green room, a space filled with couches for dancers to relax. On this day it also used as a waiting area for the audience. In this space, audience and dancers shared seating, but not necessarily conversation. The second additional site was a staircase which dancers moved through with haste. While the green room showed the dancers in a relaxed state, the staircase was almost frantic with dancers hurrying to avoid being late to rehearsals. Experiencing dancers within these non-dance sites brings the audience understanding and relationship with dancers out of established dance spaces and into mundane sites.

Proximity

On Dyson's (2010) scale, proximity ranges from 'fixed' to 'variable' (p. 82). A fixed proximity, usually between ten to forty metres, denotes a traditional performance, while non-traditional performances give audiences the agency to choose their own physical distance to the dancers (Dyson, 2010, p. 162). At both ENB and CM open rehearsals, audience-dancer proximity was fixed at the perimeter of the space. The studio sites, being relatively small in comparison to traditional theatres, positioned the audiences as close as one metre in some moments at ENB. Dyson (2010) places this close, yet fixed, proximity in the middle of the scale providing that the distance is 'specifically connected to the content of the work' (p. 164). As stated, the close proximity of the ENB and CM audiences was determined

by the size of the site. ENB's studio is smaller than CM's studio and, therefore, the ENB's audience experienced a closer proximity to the dancers. In this sense, the proximity is not connected to the content of the dance works being rehearsed.

Audience agency

Within the traditional presentation paradigm, the audience's physical nature of agency, which implicates both the mind and body, is not typically part of the experience: audience agency is 'restricted' (Dyson, 2010, p. 136). The opposing end of this scale is characterised by open possibilities for audience agency. These are often provided through audience interaction in which audience members are performed to or even contribute to the performance of the dance work (Dyson, 2010, p. 136-137). In the middle of the scale are presentation models that could give audiences the choice of where to sit or promenade performances where audiences make choices about what they watch (Dyson, 2010, p. 137).

A significant distinction between the ENB and CM open rehearsal models was the level of agency offered to their audiences. ENB's open rehearsals are a common approach which is similar to traditional performance models; the audience enters the space together, sits at the front of the studio, watches the rehearsal for a duration between one to three hours, and leaves the space together. This model treats the audience as a group and limits each audience member to have the same rehearsal experience. ENB's audiences are also accompanied by a staff member who emphasises the importance of being quiet during the rehearsal. These audiences experience agency alike to traditional performances.

In contrast, CM's open rehearsal model provided audiences more physical agency. At its core the open rehearsal model is to simply open the studio door and, in doing so, allow audiences to come and go as they please. As Van Dijk stated, 'you

can be a fly on the wall and watch rehearsal all day or just a moment'.¹² At CM's rehearsals there was movement from audiences intermittently throughout the days I attended. Most audience members only stayed for short, twenty to sixty minute blocks while some stayed for a number of hours. Interestingly, no audience member, apart from myself, stayed for a whole day. This suggests that they either had a limited amount of time to observe rehearsal, or that they reached certain satisfied (or dissatisfied) in a relatively short period of time. Either way, CM's audiences experienced significant physical agency in regards to when they watched rehearsal and for how long. What both companies have in common, however, is that they pre-set chairs for audiences at the front of the room which limits where the audiences are positioned within the rehearsal.

Performer authenticity

According to Dyson (2010), the 'authentic' dancer is able 'to connect via immediacy, engaging their audience not by illusion, but through a visceral connect of the everyday' (p. 184). This scales examines the authenticity of the performer and considers aspects of technical virtuosity, embodiment, and performing as a 'real' person on stage (Dyson, 2010, p. 185-186). This scale within Dyson's framework is particularly interesting as within a working rehearsal the audience, by default, engages with the authentic dancer, as opposed to the performance qualities they see on stage during performances.

During the ENB and CM open rehearsal events, audiences experienced aspects of authentic dancers, such as the jokes they make, natural facial expressions, and relationships with each other. Most significantly, the dancer's voice was heard during rehearsals. Language such as 'ass', 'shit', and even gossiping occurred in front of an audience. Furthermore, the authenticity of the working

rehearsals also highlighted the humanness of the dancers as audiences witnessed some falls and even minor injuries. Open working rehearsals, such as the ENB and CM models, are positioned at the non-traditional end of Dyson's authenticity scale.

Liminality

Liminality, as described by Dyson (2010), 'looks to create a transitory environment for the audience in which their expected behaviours are relaxed, allowing them to experience something new' (p. 117). On this scale, the traditional presentation paradigm is characterised by the expected codes and conventions of performance, while the non-traditional end of the scale is characterised by presentation events that 'disrupt' (Dyson, 2010, p. 118) these expected codes, often through variations of site and audience agency.

As discussed above, both ENB and CM bring audiences into their studio spaces which can be unfamiliar for audiences, especially those without dance backgrounds. In addition ENB also provide audiences experiences with dancers in non-dance sites such as the staircase and green room. In regard to audience agency, while ENB provides traditional physical limitations on audiences, CM's open rehearsals provide audiences with physical agency. Both open rehearsals presented the authentic, human dancer. I suggest that these shifts away from the traditional presentation paradigm disrupt the codes and conventions which mainstream audiences are accustomed to. There is the potential for an audience to experience liminality through these new ways of engaging with the dancers, particularly in sites such as the staircase. With that said, the open rehearsals also retain conventions that are strongly linked to traditional performances, such as ENB's expectation that the audience quietly sits and observes the dancers.

Emerging audience relationships

As stated in the introduction, my interest is the audience-dancer relationships that might develop during open rehearsals. Dyson's scales provide a new lens in which to analyse and discuss these relationships. In regards to the ENB and CM open rehearsals, the scales highlight similar elements to traditional performance (the style in which the ENB and CM dance works were subsequently performed). Aspects of the open rehearsals that fall within the traditional presentation paradigm include fixed, front-facing seating, and little physical agency in the case of ENB. This indicates separation between audience and dancer, similar to traditional performances.

Non-traditional elements also emerge: the studio, staircase, and green room sites, close audience-dancer proximity, the humanness of the dancer, and moments of liminality. These elements suggest that, while there is a separation, there may also be an emerging relationship that is physically close and conceptually revealing. The close audience-dancer proximity within studio spaces enables a close-up view of the dancers at work. Aspects that are hidden by distance in traditional theatres are visible when dancers are only a few metres away, such as subtle facial expressions, sweat, and nuances of movement. Dancers' personalities, mannerisms, and mistakes can also be observed by audiences. These physical and conceptual details of dancers can be seen in open rehearsals and could impact on audience relationships. Vice versa, audiences can also become known to dancers. Where usually they would be hidden in a sea of darkness in theatres, studio spaces illuminate audiences, making each individual visible.

As a developing industry practice, companies around the globe are increasingly inviting their audiences into studios. This nascent investigation into two open rehearsal models suggests that these are neither traditional nor extreme non-traditional encounters. Overall, they fall somewhere in the middle of Dyson scales, potentially offering audiences new relationships with dancers. These are, however, just early musings into audience roles and relationships during working rehearsals. Further consideration and empirical research is required to develop robust praxis in this area.⁷ While some practitioners may prefer to keep their studio doors closed, open rehearsals offer audiences new ways to engage with companies and their dance work and present the possibility of deeper audience relationships.

Endnotes

1. See American Ballet Theatre (n.d.); David Hochoy, Artistic Director, Dance Kaleidoscope, personal communication, July 25, 2014; Meredith Dincolo, ex-dancer, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, personal communication, July 30, 2014; Rambert (n.d.); Leadbeater (2006).
2. I have not attended an *Insights* open rehearsal in person however there is a video available online that I have based my comments on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAVd5IsbonE>
3. See Royal Winnipeg Ballet (2011); Australian Dance Theatre (2009); Houston Ballet (n.d.); National Dance Company Wales (n.d.); West Australian Ballet (2014).
4. I do not include this open rehearsal model in this article as National Dance Company Wales' regular rehearsal space is a 100 seat theatre, the Dance House, as opposed to a typical dance studio of which this article is focused. The National Dance Company Wales open rehearsal model is included in my PhD thesis which is forthcoming.
5. Interview with Anouk Van Dijk, Artistic Director, Chunky Move, 21 January, 2014.
6. Interview with Emily Molnar, Artistic Director, Ballet BC, 28 August, 2014.
7. Dyson (2010, p. 34) states that there is a sixth scale, 'ritual', however she does not analyse this potential tool due to the broad scope of the field and, therefore, I have not explored this aspect in this article.
8. Refer to my PhD thesis which is forthcoming.
9. Interview with Linda Darrell, Individual Giving Manager, English National Ballet, 12 September, 2013.
10. Interview with Anouk Van Dijk, Artistic Director, Chunky Move, 21 January, 2014..
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Refer to my PhD thesis which is forthcoming.

References

- American Ballet Theatre. (n.d.). Golden Circle Membership. Retrieved July 22, 2014, from <http://support.abt.org/page.aspx?pid=356>
- Australian Dance Theatre. (2009). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from Australian Dance Theatre website <http://www.adt.org.au/assets/PDF/ADT-Annual-Report-2009-.pdf>
- Conner, L. (2013). *Audience engagement and the role of arts talk in the digital era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Daly, A. (1995). *Done into dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dyson, C. (2010). *Performing the unutterable: mapping the experiential in contemporary dance* (Doctoral dissertation). Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD.
- Hanna, J. (1983). *The performer-audience connection*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Houston Ballet. (n.d.). Houston Ballet hosts Free Dance Talk on Friday Sept 6. Retrieved July 17, 2014, from <http://houstonballet.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/houston-ballet-hosts-free-dance-talk-on-friday-sept-6-politics-and-pop-music-in-ballet/>
- Kattwinkel, S. (2001). Introduction. In S. Kattwinkel (Ed.) *Audience participation* (pp. iv-xviii). Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Leadbeater, K. (2006). First Drafts Rehearsal. Retrieved from http://www.balletassociation.co.uk/reports/2006/First_Drafts06.html
- National Dance Company Wales. (n.d.). Open Rehearsals. Retrieved April 15, 2015, from <http://www.ndcwales.co.uk/en/get-involved/dance-house/open-rehearsal/>
- Rambert. (n.d.). Supporters Circles. Retrieved July 24, 2014, from http://www.rambert.org.uk/support_us/individuals
- Royal Winnipeg Ballet. (2011). *Royal Winnipeg Ballet 2010-2011 Annual Report*. Retrieved from Royal Winnipeg Ballet website http://rwb.org/sites/default/files/company/annualreports/2010_2011.pdf.
- Stock, C. (2011). Creating new narratives through shared time and space: performer/audience connections in multi-site events. *Time Together: Viewing and Reviewing Contemporary Dance Practice: Proceedings of the World Dance Alliance Global Dance Event*. USA: University of Wisconsin.
- Thom, P. (1993). *For an audience: a philosophy of the performing arts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- West Australian Ballet. (2014, August 1). Telethon Behind the Scenes [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://waballet.com.au/telethon-bts/>
- Wulff, H. (1998). Perspectives towards ballet performance: exploring, repairing and maintaining frames. In F. Hughes-Freeland (Ed.) *Ritual, Performance, Media* (pp. 104-120). Oxon: Routledge.