Analysing numbers is probably as appealing to an artist as gouging out his eyes was for Oedipus. But in both cases, there are times when it must be done.

Let’s begin with a quick review of some statistics collated by DANZ over the last five years that specifically look at the dance works included in six festivals from 2012–2016. The festivals included in this snapshot are: Auckland Arts Festival (AAF), New Zealand Festival (NZF), Christchurch Arts Festival (CHC), Festival of Colour (FoC), Nelson Arts Festival (NAF) and Dunedin Arts Festival (DUN).¹

It’s also worth noting that aside from the fact the pool is very small, the majority of festivals within this case study are held in alternate years and only recently has AAF made the decision to go annually. Moreover, it is only when further segregating the data according to different classifications (for example, local vs international; the number of Māori/Pasifika² works; and the number of female key creatives behind the projects) does the landscape begin to take some initial shape.³

1 There are other festivals that do programme dance including regional festivals in Taupo, Hamilton, Tauranga, and Taranaki and this list is by no means exhaustive.
2 Māori/Pasifika is a term chosen in this article not to blur the differences between tangata whenua and tangata Pasifika but to highlight that the number of contributions from indigenous communities of this land and the Pacific.
3 Increasing the timeframe to examine not just five but ten or 20 years of programming in dance would offer a far more comprehensive landscape as would increasing the number of different variables.
Let’s roll the clock back.

In 2013, four festivals (AAF, NAF, CHC, and FoC) programmed ten dance works. These included four Māori/Pasifika works as well as international works from Ireland, Colombia, Belgium, and a collaboration with China. Interestingly, it wasn’t the international works but our own Black Grace’s Waka and Sarah Brodie/Ross McCormack’s Faultlines that were the most toured productions with the former featuring in Wanaka and Christchurch, while the latter featured in Nelson following a visit to Christchurch.

If we contrast those figures and the broad geographical spread to the following year, the numbers alone don’t suggest things changed dramatically. In fact, across the six festivals, 2014 saw nine distinct dance works programmed and looking solely at that data it wouldn’t be unsurprising to suggest that programming dance had achieved some consistency over the 24 months.

However, that’s just the prologue, not the full story. In 2014 the NZF featured six dance works in their programme: three from New Zealand (Stones in her Mouth, Crimson House and Age) and three international (Spain, Ireland and Israel). In comparison, Dunedin’s three dance works were also all from New Zealand but included KAHA, Sei ‘O Fafine and OneOne. This made 2014 a pretty fab year where six distinct local works made it into the festivals’ programmes. As far as numbers go, last year seemed to follow the growing trend with twelve works programmed across AAF, NAF, CHC and FoC, with eight of those recognised as distinct New Zealand dance works. However, only two of those eight (I AM and Falesa) were Māori /Pasifika.

This year however the dice has decided to roll out of the cup. At the time of collecting data (July 2016) only NZF and AAF had taken place but across these two arts festivals (admittedly the largest) twelve dance works were showcased in Auckland and Wellington, again with only a small number of Māori /Pasifika works (Changes, Ruamoko and Marama). AAF’s decision to go annual has also contributed to the spread of international dance works including productions from Singapore, Germany, Switzerland, Canada and Australia across both festivals.

The number of female creatives has also, albeit slowly, increased. Sarah Brodie’s Faultlines (2013) and Sesilia Pusiaki’s Sei ‘O Fafine (2014) were the sole examples from their respective years. However, last year Carol Brown (PAH), Malia Johnston and Deirdre Tarrant (30Forward) and Sacha Copland (The Wine Project) were all at the helm of their respective dance works, carving a space and voice for female choreographers. In contrast, this year it was the

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4 Hou, Waka and Kaha were the three key works, and four including Black Grace’s collaboration with China to create Faultlines
international works that featured women leading the charge with Pina Bausch’s Café Muller, Anouk van Dijk’s The Complexity of Belonging, Christine Devaney’s Chalk About and Nelida Rodriguez’s mjlonga with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. From New Zealand, Nina Nawalowalo was the only creative lead for the Conch’s production of Marama, a dance theatre work that featured at AAF.

Of course, we all want to see more dance programmed in our city and regional festivals but it may be worth remembering that in 2012 there were just five dance works programmed in festivals across New Zealand. These were shared between Wellington and Dunedin and featured MAU and Okareka Dance Company’s Nga Hau E Wha, making them also the only two New Zealand works created by our Māori/Pasifika communities. Reflecting upon this year, we have already had more than twelve dance works programmed but these do not include the Dunedin and Nelson Festivals so the numbers are guaranteed to rise.

A few key indicators of what success for our festivals could look like includes greater representation from local artists, more work by Māori/Pasifika and increased visibility of female creatives. But that’s not all. Stepping back and looking at this broad brushstroke image of New Zealand’s current festival matrix, there are a few other factors to be taken into consideration. Due to limits of space and time, the chosen classifications provided little opportunity for in-depth examination of various other facets of the landscape. These could have included how many productions represented our own cultural diversity in New Zealand including ethnicity, age, sexuality, ability; the central or suburban location of these works; and the broader implications of touring and sharing shows regionally as well as internationally.

However, these points are raised to reiterate the fact that engaging and exploring the current trends and demographics of our dance is the starting point of a much larger conversation. In addition, it is also worth noting that in recent years a number of changes have also been seen in the dance history of this country. The demise of the Wellington Dance Festival, and most recently The Body in Christchurch, leaves Tempo now as the only contemporary dance festival in New Zealand. These changes suggest that there is an even greater urgency for the arts festivals of New Zealand to ensure that programming dance is not merely an afterthought.

But it’s not just me saying this.

Festival Directors, Carla van Zon, Shelagh Magadza, Philip Tremewan, Charlie Unwin, Nicholas McBryde, as well as Creative Projects Manager, Angela Newell and General Manager, Vanessa Thompson have been encouraging and optimistic and I am grateful to these voices from across the country for making time for this important conversation.

This korero began in the middle of winter as I made my way around the country following a map drawn for me by Jimmy James Kouratoras (see inset). This visual navigation enabled me to distil my understanding of the vast amount of knowledge that I received over the phone, skype, email and in person, and choreograph it into a contribution to our community that I hope others will take further.

Perhaps then, the most appropriate way to conclude this article is to look forward to the bright future of dance as described by Artistic Director of the New Zealand Festival, Shelagh Magadza:

“New Zealand dance is in a space with enormous potential to grow strong dancers and choreographers but also support the increasing ambition of our artists. A key to growing this is engaging audiences with dance across the country and welcoming the world, to ensure that both now and in the future, there is a range of experiences on offer here in Aotearoa New Zealand that will continue to draw people to this art form.”

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