

Touch Compass Boxing On

BY JENNY STEVENSON

Reaching audiences in new ways and accessibility are key approaches to Touch Compass's innovative box performance works and DanceBox films.

For Catherine Chappell, a woman who is accustomed to thinking outside the square, it seems somewhat ironic that recent works created for her inclusive dance company Touch Compass have been designed to be performed in a box. However, the production of the box performance works and the *DanceBox* films, which were made with film-maker/choreographer Alyx Duncan have certainly constituted innovative practice. They grew out of Catherine's desire to devise a portable mode of presentation that would enable the Company to take their dance "to the people" and to reach a much wider audience.

Catherine has consistently been at the forefront of international trends in dance. She was one of the pioneers of contact improvisation in this country and then became one of the earliest aerial dance practitioners, going on to include both practices in Touch Compass's repertoire. Her work with the Company has consistently broken new ground and now her focus is on finding different ways in which audiences can view the dance that the company makes. Catherine believes that there are "multiple ways of viewing art" and although it is "a risk taking a different direction", she would like to be "proactive in finding new ways of experiencing art and theatre".



PHOTO: VOTRE ARME

Catherine's thinking is that when creating new work, the company "spends lots of money for a limited number of people to see the show" and that in this manner "art becomes elitist". The idea of making a series of films that depict the dancers' personal narratives is "something that has longevity" she believes and that "sits well with the many different needs of the organisation". She says that it provides elements of both "professional development (for the dancers) as well as product development".

Catherine's concept for working with boxes was initiated in 2013 when Malia Johnston created the first flexible dance work for Touch Compass, entitled *Rogue*. This was presented as a "pop-up" performance along with other works as a "series of new, intimate portable dance events" in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington. The "box" in this case was "a padded square of Marley flooring which was taped down" in a variety of spaces including an airport, art galleries and Wellington's Civic Square.

Touch Compass then commissioned a new work *Undertide* from Olive Beiringa and Otto Ramstad for the *Acquisitions '14* company season. It was a very subtle work described as one in which "movements guide the dancers from within" and in which "we experience life from the inside out". The work also included a film, directed by Alyx Duncan, so the idea of using a box as "a creative space to contain the film" as Catherine describes it, gradually evolved. Everyone got together to design the 2-metre box which naturally had no fourth wall in the front. In order to be transportable it is a "flat-pack design which takes two to four people to erect", Catherine says.

Also in 2014, Touch Compass launched the *DanceBox Challenge* which was supported by the Ministry of Social



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Development “Making a Difference” fund. Catherine once again approached Alyx Duncan to make a series of what Alyx describes as “miniature dance/films in small boxes” with the concept being developed “in collaboration with designer Ian Hammond”.

Alyx, whose personal research “investigates human perception in relation to place, culture and political context”, proved to be the ideal collaborator. The “challenge” in creating the *DanceBox* works was aligned with earlier provocations posed by visiting British choreographer Marc Brew when he choreographed *Run* for the Company in 2012. Catherine and Alyx wanted to pinpoint “a pivotal time” in the dancers’ lives when “things shift and change”. Alyx describes it as:

“A seeding process where members of the wider Touch Compass community were invited to share their stories and work with members of Touch Compass (Company) to devise short theatrical stories or dances that could be filmed in the dance box”.

The filming began in Auckland and “we ended up trying to make a lot of films very quickly,” says Alyx, “with stories from Lusi Faiva, Alexander Hiles-Pervan and Jesse Johnstone-Steele and others”. Only two days rehearsal and two days filming were possible for each story, creating short films of two to four minutes duration. In Wellington,

Alex Smith and then Duncan Armstrong of Wellington Integrated Dance had their stories filmed, with Duncan subsequently going on to join Touch Compass.

As Catherine describes it “the premise was to film in one shot, with no trickery, using different size boxes and playing with scale”. She says that the result “is almost voyeuristic, like watching people’s lives through windows” with a huge variety of images on display.

The *DanceBox* films were then posted online and they can be viewed on www.touchcompass.org.nz/gallery. Several of them were used in Touch Compass’s *Acquisitions ’14* tour where they were screened in interactive boxes in the foyers of the theatre before and after the shows, and were included in the *Acquisitions ’15* tour to Hamilton (21 August) and Wellington (27–29 August).

Catherine says that “in the future we want to make a specially designed webpage (that) will contain the films and associated materials like a poem, or photos and information about the performers”.

She is currently developing exciting new concepts of the “box” element for future work in 2016. These will include a light cubic frame made of aluminium tubing that will allow the box shape to move with the dancers. It is anticipated that a short excerpt of this new work will be shown at *Tempo Dance Festival 2015*. ■