

PRODUCING A Passionate Commitment

Part 2

By Francesca Horsley

What makes a good dance producer? Passion - is the key ingredient. For this second article on producing, Francesca Horsley talked to experienced producers Felicity Letcher, Lauren Hughes and Clare Needham. They all agreed that what fuelled their passion was the joy of seeing an idea become a reality, the thrill of seeing a work reach its full potential and the sense of achievement in being part of a team supporting an artwork.

Also discussing the role of the producer is choreographer Malia Johnston, who successfully self-produced before forming her own companies, and former dancer Helaina Keeley, now senior programme adviser for Creative New Zealand.

Felicity Letcher who produced Michael Parmenter's 2008 work *TENT* says, "For me the most fulfilling thing is that I work with a big group of people and make something that is bigger than the singularity of what I could achieve by myself. You are supporting the creator's vision, making sure it is articulated well."

Clare Needham, a member of the production team of Tanemahuta Gray's highly ambitious and successful *Maui: One Man against the Gods*, and producer of Sam Trubridge's successful *Sleep/Wake* dance theatre work agrees. "I get very excited by people's ideas and seeing them grow and transform; seeing a creative vision realised; seeing the spark and how big it grew, that is extremely thrilling. Passion is a key element, because you work very hard and long hours for low pay."

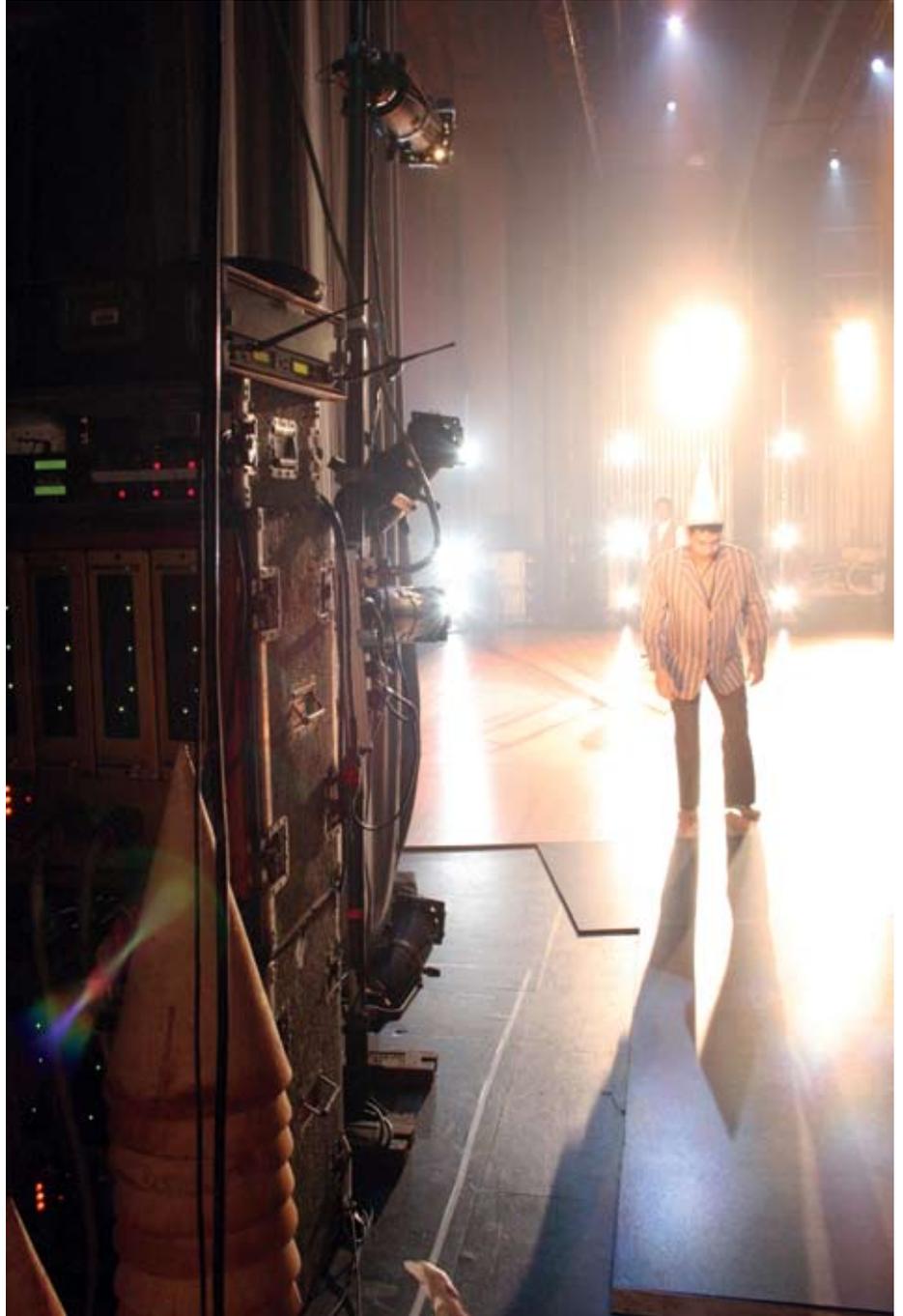
"When people ask me what the role of a producer really is, as distinct from directing, I say it is a business manager – managing an artistic process – so you have to have business management skills."

"I think it helps to have the kind of mind that can see the whole picture and can see it broken down into parts including marketing to an audience, selling the tickets, the opening night function, raising the funding – they are all separate bits but are all part of a whole. You can save money or save time by getting one to relate to another, for example, how an opening night function will be a way to service the sponsors."

"I think you need to be able to apply quite a range of skills; financial skills, the ability to raise funds, marketing, publicity, self-presentation; knowing how to target people with what you are offering them."

"Then good people skills and good HR management skills – I think they really help because it is good to have a happy cast and a happy crew and have people working well."

Felicity says trust is another important ingredient. "You have to trust each other that you are going to do your job to the best of your ability." Clare agrees "Trust is integral; a mutual



DANCER JUSTIN HAIU, THE ARRIVAL (PRODUCTION WEEK), PHOTO: ROBIN KERR.

respect. As a producer having respect for the creator, and for the work that they are creating; this has to be at the heart. It's a real understanding – the producer understanding and respecting the creative process of the person that they are working with – and also the creative person respecting and knowing the producer's role."

Helaina Keeley says that in the past there was a tendency for choreographers to view producers as administrators. "I think they were missing the fact that a really good producer can be so much more."

"For years I watched wonderful choreographers trying to juggle being a general manager, an HR person, bookings, as well as being a choreographer and the lead creative – all at once – it is just too much."

She says Creative New Zealand is moving to the point that part of their requirement for funding is that companies have to have a credible experienced or appropriate producer for their project. "Obviously if you are an emerging company, then more than likely you are going to be working with an emerging producer – that's fine."

"Only a couple of years ago we would fund without a producer attached. We still find ourselves in a slightly unusual position today because so many people have self-produced for a long time they have acquired producing skills so we do an assessment on a case by case basis. But it's definitely our position now that people need to be thinking much more seriously about getting a producer on board to help them bring their work to fruition."

She says that ideally a producer would have a track record of producing and touring New Zealand work, a good record of being able to source funding, and the confidence of presenters (ie festival directors) that a work was going to succeed. "This is really important because producers do a lot of negotiating with presenters. Art practitioners don't necessarily know how to negotiate, get back on deadlines, or know how to talk about the logistics of their works. They want to talk about the art; which is what they should do because that is their forte. A producer can be the interface between the outside world and the inside world of the art; the translator, the enabler."

Helaina says often it was the money factor that made a choreographer reluctant to take on a producer. "Funding is very tight here and the idea of putting another person on the payroll who is generally getting as much as the key creative can be a bit hard for people. But when they get into the process and start working, they realise very quickly that they can't do it all."

A producer is essential once a work tours. "The producer will negotiate with venues, talk to the media and arrange interviews. The choreographer and dancers should be able to just concentrate on the work."

Malia Johnston, who worked successfully with Michele Powles, co-producing in both their companies, Outlaw Creative and Rifleman Productions, says a good creative and producing partnership is hard to come by but when these are successful they are very successful.

She says compatibility is a vital ingredient. "I do think that they need to be the right person. There has to be synergy there; it doesn't have to be all lovely. They have to have skills that you don't and different contacts."

"They are more than just a producer when it is a dance work. They have to really believe in what you are doing and be passionate about it otherwise it is quite hard. The producing relationship is just as important as who you would have dancing in your work – it is just as personal."

"When you self-produce you know what you are doing, you are really enthusiastic about your work, you put it out there and it happens. Your producer has to have the energy for it; the more you are really clear about what you are doing, the easier it is for the producer. If they can see your vision and understand what you are doing, it just makes it so much easier for them."

"I guess the producer's role is to understand the work so well they know where it can go. I think it is really good to know where the work can sit and why and how – and then half the work's done."



BODY FIGHT TIME, MALIA JOHNSTON. DANCERS: CENTRE FRONT JING ZHANG, LEFT TO RIGHT IN BACKGROUND: MARIANA RINALDI, KILDA NORTHCOTT, FRANCIS CHRISTELLER, PAUL YOUNG, JOSH RUTTER, NATALIE HONA
PHOTO: ROBIN KERR

And what about picking up the dry cleaning? Malia says she and Michele shared all the hard jobs that nobody likes doing. "It's not a producer's role to do that – but it's not a role that anyone really wants to do. If a producer and you are sitting down and talking about what you are going to do and you haven't got enough money to pay someone to do all that stuff, you have to share it. I think as a choreographer you don't want to just dump all of that extra work on the producer – they will be out of there in a flash."

Lauren Hughes is a very experienced producer who, among other projects, has worked on Auckland venue The Edge's public programmes, in particular STAMP. She says producing is a very creative role. "There is creativity in every aspect of how you manage the company – whether it is their branding, or where a company is positioned in the market place."

All agreed that maintaining a good producer in the dance industry was a real problem as a producer's life was as precarious, if not more so, than the artistic creative. Lauren says, "You don't see many independents stick around because their sideline tends to be producing or project managing elsewhere in the creative industries where there is more money. They tend to get sucked back into that world – or with a full time job with TV or whatever – we lose them."

She says, "A couple of years ago in Auckland I started a producer's network but now ninety percent of the people we started out with are no longer doing it anymore."

Helaina agrees "It's incredibly tough for producers to make a living in New Zealand. A lot of them have ended up putting their own funds into a work in order to balance budgets or forgone their fee so that a work gets on stage."

Clare says that a meeting of producers from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch held last month discussed ways of creating a stipend or fund to keep producers going – so that they could take a bit more risk on projects.

Despite these concerns, producing is without doubt the way forward. Helaina says "From what I have observed I would recommend pretty much everybody try and find somebody that they can work alongside to help realise their vision. Doing it by yourself is just extraordinarily hard and why would you? They don't try and do it overseas – so why do we?"

Recommended reading: The Arts Council of England and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation have published a book - *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible*. This book tells of fourteen extraordinary individuals working in the arts and aims to provide inspiration to an emerging generation of arts practitioners who see themselves reflected in the qualities and attributes of the producers described here.
www.the-producers.org