

Rhaglen
Hyfforddiant
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Dance | Wales Wide
Training
Programme



Cai Tomos: Creative Practice Support Case Study



Introduction

The Wales Wide Training Programme (WWTP) aims to inspire and sustain community dance in Wales by providing training in a strategic way, responsive to sector need. WWTP responds to sector need and is primarily a training programme for those working in dance across Wales. It is managed by Rubicon Dance and creates and connects a network of twenty two organisations and three hundred and eighty individuals working together to support training and professional development for the community dance sector across Wales. The programme is supported through the Arts Council of Wales.

The WWTP was established in 2013 with seven community dance organisations as partners. In 2023 there are now twenty two partners that include not only community dance organisations, but venues, universities and national companies from across Wales including Powys, Carmarthen, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caernarfon, Vale of Glamorgan, Newport, Monmouthshire, Ceredigion, Cardiff, Llanelli and Flintshire. The WWTP began with four strands in 2013 and now has seventeen strands some of which have been established in response to need and developed throughout the pandemic.

Ongoing research, evaluation and consultation has continued to highlight strong demand for a training programme that responds to the strategic needs of the sector. The programme was largely delivered through CPD days each term which took place across Wales and were hosted by WWTP partners. But, as the pandemic hit in March 2020 every strand of the WWTP was adapted to meet the more immediate needs and constraints. The work with Cai Tomos was a direct response to the isolation and confusion faced by the freelance dance sector as the pandemic closed everything down and we moved into lockdown in 2020. It has evolved and developed to meet changing needs as we have begun to emerge from the pandemic and has become one of the most valued components in the WWTP.

The Artist; Cai Tomos

Cai is a dance artist, maker, and art psychotherapist. He has worked both nationally and internationally as a dancer, choreographer and movement director. He has presented his work in festivals in South America, Spain and mainland Europe. His work centres around participatory practice and facilitating arts and health work with people of all ages in hospitals, care homes and in theatre settings. His work is influenced by his preoccupation with the psychological and psychosocial aspects related to dance and dancing; it includes performance and installation. He works within the field of dance, performance, education, mental health and community arts in the UK. His work is deeply rooted in exploring notions of place, memory and the body with reference to the personal and the collective stories that the body holds. He runs an Elders Performance Company (CAIN) in north Wales and teaches workshops in the UK and abroad. Improvisational somatic based practices are at the heart of his work. His practice revolves around exploring imagination as key to sourcing our dances. He is a dance artist in residence at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London, and is an artist with Entelechy Arts

The Programme

October to December 2020

Creative Practice Support Sessions

12 individuals attended 5 group sessions

There was a total of 20 attendances

8 practitioners attended x2 sessions

January - April 2023

One to One Sessions

4 sessions

March - June 2021

Creative Practice Support Sessions

13 individuals attended 4 group sessions

There was a total of 19 attendances
5 practitioners attended x2 sessions

July - December 2022

Creative Practice Support Sessions

3 individuals attended 1 group session

One to One Sessions

8 one to ones were set up

In addition 3 Virtual Movement Sessions were offered in Autumn 2020 attended by 30 people.

The Elements of the Programme

***Virtual Movement Sessions** were open to all who are curious about learning from their own body and imagination with a light and playful attention. There is an inherent freedom that appears in movement when we begin to source and trust our own dance. The workshops focus on processes that support dialogues between our sensation and our imagination. In essence the sessions are a chance to move together by listening to what wants to move in us. For those of us who facilitate other people to find their own expression, joy and health, we can sometimes lose sight of the importance of connecting to that within ourselves. Workshop participants are led through a series of invitations, that support us in connecting to what feels good in our dancing body, and how we attend creatively to the moment to moment dance that unfolds.*

***Creative Practice Support Sessions** were a new element to WWTP and something we feel we should be offering to dance practitioners, many of whom have been severely impacted by COVID-19 through isolation, loss of income and work situation. Feedback for the support sessions came from practitioners who attended sessions led by Cai Tomos in July as part of Rubicon Dance' 5th annual summer CPD programme. Creative Practice Support Sessions are for those who facilitate creative arts activities within participatory contexts in settings such as schools, with young people, hospitals, care homes, schools and day centres. These sessions are based on offering a space that can support practitioners in reflecting on their practice and the impact of their groups and context/or organisation on what they do, how they do it, and how they feel about it.*

***One to One Sessions** were a way of offering more private sessions to those artists who wanted to benefit from some of the elements of the Creative Support Sessions but in a more private context.*

The Impact

The Creative Practice Support Sessions were an invaluable lifeline to me during the autumn term. Work was scarce and I was losing faith in my creativity, skills and knowledge. I was looking to a career change away from the arts as I couldn't see a viable future for myself. The dancing and talking sessions were so valuable to remind me of why I dance, why dance is important (and essential) and that there is always a way to make it work. Moving creatively allowed me to think creatively again, to see the ways through this difficult period. The sessions were expertly led and I felt supported and in safe hands throughout. They are so important to know they are there and that we can access them if needed. Being a freelancer is lonely at the best of times, and the pandemic has exacerbated this problem. The Creative Practice Support Sessions brought us together, to move together and the power of that cannot be underestimated.

It is interesting to consider the impact of the programme on participants in two parts. Firstly, the impact of the work that took place during the pandemic and secondly that which took place once we were emerging from it.

During the pandemic and the initial lockdown, we were all isolated in our own homes and this created further isolation for a workforce that was predominantly freelance. The importance of the offer from WWTP was crucial in many ways for dance practitioners well-being, connectedness and mental health.

A Safe Space

This was such a lovely space to have and to know that it was there throughout the term. My nervousness has gone and this was such a safe space. I am so thankful and grateful for the opportunity. We can sometimes hide behind what we do.

This safe space is so important for lone practitioners.

Cai knows exactly how to hold the space so that people can be heard and so we can speak from where we are.

.... In our own spaces

Really found the first session with Cai so rewarding. Total release (tears within first ten minutes) and then finding a place to settle in to that and participate with full self. The way Cai welcomed us into the space (encouraged us to arrive in our own space) was particularly wonderful. It felt more like it would arrive in a studio space - in reality when would we land in a studio or meeting and immediately stand and look at each other?! Felt like a revelation to be encouraged to organise self and space for a while first before he began to 'lead'!

I always get so nervous before a session and I am a wheelchair user and joining the sessions from a very small flat. The sessions have lifted me. As a writer I love this part of Cai's work as well – movement and words. Cai takes me on a journey through my restrictions. Through being in a small space at home I have found new ways of moving through Cai's sessions.

A little pocket of self-care. View from the eagle's nest over the landscape to the horizon. Gaining perspective. Noticing what matters in my practice. Finding stillness. Shared wisdom in a safe and supportive space. Reflective. Tucked in and held. Thank you!

Well Being

Cai just invites offer – I can sometimes arrive in a space stressed (from being in my own home) – the pre covid journey to a session is no longer happening and this can often be the space where I clear my head before a session/training begins. The sessions with Cai have helped with my mindfulness, emotionally and physically. I was able to realise the potential in my body at that time. The Creative Practice Support Session yesterday broke some boundaries for me as a recipient - thank you.

Being at home and working at home through lockdown has been difficult. The language that Cai has used has enabled me to open up and to connect to myself in terms of mind and body. The sessions have helped me with my personal wellbeing.

Connections

A lovely consistent connection for practitioners across Wales. The connections were able to feed and enhance the experience.

I am grateful to be able to participate and hopefully a stronger and resilient network can come out of all this craziness.

There was a lovely link throughout in terms of working with other practitioners – some that I hadn't known before the sessions took place.

A really useful opportunity to reflect together and share the challenges and joys of this moment in time.

As we began to emerge from the pandemic, the programme shifted slightly to meet the needs of practitioners to reconnect with one another and the addition of one to one sessions with Cai added a new level of support that was massively important. The privacy of the sessions was commented on frequently in feedback and there is no doubt that they helped individuals to address concerns, fears and loss of confidence after the trauma of the pandemic.

Addressing Professional Concerns

A rare opportunity to consider my path as a creative practitioner – writer, performer, mover – holistically. Cai's approach is in fact the very best I've come across. The most gentle, the most empowering.

An understanding of my path from a new perspective. Gentle skills to cope with the pressures of this sort of practice, but also how other personal issues recently have impacted my professional work. As above – no other one-hour session with anyone has ever given such concrete and gentle skills with such understanding and knowledge.

The session enabled me to voice some of my concerns within the direction of my career with an artist who knows me and my capabilities. I was able to reflect on my value as an artist and reconsider what boundaries I might set to help me to feel a better sense of self worth. Much of my work shows little progression over the 20 years in terms of the pay I accept and as a result I often feel that my experience has little value. We also discussed other interests and projects not necessarily connected to dance and Cai floated whether my passion in these areas was something to follow in terms of some potential retraining opportunities to research further.

The session enabled me to focus for one hour on addressing areas and aspects of my professional practice that cause feelings of fear. Learning to recognise when I'm working in projects where I feel I'm working on something outside of my comfort zone but an area I am wanting to grow confidence in. We discussed what the fearful unknown aspects are, and explored coping strategies for turning up. Who I might imagine is in the room with me and where I would position them for support. We focused on where in the body I was feeling physical sensations of the fear and allowed time to acknowledge and name those places and sensations. Working with the body in this way enabled me to begin to really recognise the challenges I'm feeling the impact of, and begin practically to work with positive coping strategies. A place and the time to let that fear be heard and shared in a safe professional environment.

Personalisation

It was personal holistic and grounding. Very valuable to a lone practitioner.

I found most supportive Cai's presence and quality of attention is very supportive and holds space for you to find your way. Super interesting. I didn't know what I wanted from the session but he just kept reflecting back to me like signposting so I could find my way. Like you can't sense yourself in a vacuum... finding the edges of one thought to help me to put all the others in their context.

I didn't know what I wanted to explore but I came out with a lovely simple guiding principle and an action which embodied it to which I have returned in my thinking since on several occasions...

Being one to one I felt more secure being able to talk about my professional questions and career concerns. Cai knows me and understands careers in Contemporary dance/performance as well as specialising in work with older people and so I trust his listening and feel that I can pose questions about my practice to an informed listener. These questions also enabled me to look into the value of my practice and experience and has drawn my attention to perhaps where some of my concerns are stemming from.

I would always prefer one to one sessions where possible, as I feel exposed sharing personal questioning in front of my peers in the industry. Although this is sometimes helpful as you realise you are not alone on your experience, it's less desirable for me to have group sessions with a group of artists whom I may work professionally with.

Building Confidence and developing new Strategies

Freelance work is often a lonely place... there's no set structure for how to support your practices and as someone who doesn't often ask for help, this becomes a problem for me in progressing as an artist or in as a human. Feeling stuck in a cycle of lacking confidence despite the opportunities that are presented to me each year through word of mouth. The one to one is very important for me because I trust that I can really let myself explore why or what it is that I am finding difficult... without judgement and with genuine care... to hopefully build my confidence in a right to have a voice, place or simply that I have something of value to offer from my experience in the arts in Wales in different contexts and environments.

Some tools to enable me to turn up at a new project this evening, in a role outside of what I would usually call myself, with hopefully the capacity to embrace the fear and embrace the role and it's challenges without compromise of my experience as an artist, or as me, and giving value to my capabilities and experience and style, even if that's different to what I imagine is expected of me. Sitting with the discomfort of the idea of leading anything and recognising how hard any of that has been and still is when working in new areas or with a variety of unknowns. Acknowledgement of when rest is a necessary strategy.

Conclusion

The approach used by Cai Tomos is described as follows:

“Creative Practice Support offers a psychotherapeutic and trauma-informed supportive framework in which to look at the delivery of arts-based activities, and ways of caring for oneself inside of the practice demands. It is an opportunity to share both the joys and the challenges of your practice with colleagues who know what those are. During times of challenge adapting to change is necessary, and it is a great skill of many participatory dance practitioners, but within all the change we must also be able to access security and familiarity.”

It is apparent that this approach was needed by practitioners at this particular point in time and also as we come out of the pandemic.

Moving into the future it is likely that WWTP will need to continue offering similar provision to support a sector whose personal and professional sustainability and well-being was impacted so deeply by the pandemic.

It was often said that life would never return to the same place and that we would all need to continue to adjust and adapt to the changes brought by the pandemic on our ways of living and working. **Artists play a crucial role in this ‘recovery’ and Cai Tomos’s work with WWTP has supported more than 40 artists in both their own ‘recovery’ and that of the people with whom they work. The impact of this is almost impossible to measure.**

This short case study was produced by Dr Susanne Burns drawing on data gathered by Tracey Brown of Rubicon Dance during the programme of work.

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