

## Long read | Freedom of movement: what Brexit means for dance



*What does Brexit mean for dance, an art form that depends – in more than one sense – on freedom of movement? Dancers from many different backgrounds and who speak different languages routinely work together. **Chris Bannerman (Middlesex University)** traces the history of European and non-European dance collaborations during the 20th century, and asks what Brexit may mean for the future of the medium in the UK.*

Timothy Walker, the chief executive and artistic director of the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO), recently offered the [view](#) that Brexit may have a positive side, providing an impetus for the LPO to search for new opportunities beyond the EU. This might seem a reasonable perspective – especially given Walker qualified it by saying that this optimism should not be construed as unalloyed support for Brexit. However, as the article noted, Walker is almost a solitary voice amongst the wailing throng of an arts community united in their dismay at the Brexit project.

My dance background and current activities probably identify me as a member of that community. And yet I have attempted to observe Brexit with some sense of traditional academic objectivity, topped up by a philosophical non-attachment that stems from a renewed interest in Asian concepts: the world is in constant motion, and phenomena pass by like clouds in an ultimately empty sky. I confess that Brexit at times tests this objective, non-attached stance.



Studio Wayne McGregor workshop for choreographers, Moscow, 2017. Photo: [British Council Russia](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Walker's optimism stems from a growing awareness of the new opportunities for the LPO that lie beyond the EU's increasing bureaucracy. He cited the Commonwealth and particularly countries such as India and China. He also predicted that his EU counterparts would somehow find a way to navigate any new hurdles, demonstrating a commendably pragmatic approach. Having worked in India and, since 2008, in China, I appreciate this sense of exciting opportunities beyond the Eurosphere. It involves exciting collaborations, which fuel artistic innovation and take us beyond European traditions. But I am not sure if Walker's LPO will evade bureaucracy in these new territories.

Dance is not just about the large organisations that arguably have the capacity to navigate bureaucracy, but a wider ecology: from inception to the productions and the transactions of the arts marketplace. All of these depend on dance training and education.

The overarching narrative of dance – from the beginnings of the Ballets Russes in the early 20th century, to the present day – has been informed and formed by internationalism, and at times interculturalism. It is perhaps not surprising that dance, as a body-based art form, has moved across the borders of nations and languages. A Russian choreographer, George Balanchine, established the American style and a US choreographer, William Forsythe, contributed substantially to German and European dance. Of course, both American and German dance were also deeply influenced by the British tradition, particularly in America by Antony Tudor, with whom Pina Bausch worked, and in Germany by John Cranko who, although born in South Africa, emerged as a significant choreographic voice at Sadler's Wells Ballet before moving to Stuttgart in 1961.

As mobility increased and barriers were lowered in the 1960s, internationalism grew exponentially. It found fertile ground in the UK because of another development: social diversity. This led to artistic diversity and has significantly contributed to the development of dance. Early UK champions included agencies such as Akademi, which promotes South Asian dance, and ADAD (Association of Dance of the African Diaspora, now part of One Dance UK). Together they inspired successive generations of artists, funders and academics who each made the case for a wider, more inclusive art form.

Today the diversity bonus has extended and enriched British dance and reinvigorated the mainstream. English National Ballet has attracted sell-out audiences for works such as Akram Khan's *Giselle*. The Royal Opera House commissioned Shobana Jeyasingh's *Bayadère – The Ninth Life*. The Royal Ballet's resident choreography Wayne McGregor regularly tests the boundaries of the classical form; Canadian choreographer and innovator, Chrystal Pite's *Flight Pattern* focused on the plight of refugees and displaced communities.

Woven through all these productions has been the flow of people, practices, concepts and collaborations across Europe, providing a supporting context for artist and art form development, for co-productions, networks and incubation of new ideas for a new generation. It is hard to characterise this in words – it is like a village market full of debate, barter and exchange which stimulates ideas, creativity and development. The personal contact that dance embodies thrives in this context, and then enables the next project to emerge. While this can and does happen across the borders of non-EU countries, the European incubator and support system offers a stable base. I have seen this at first hand by attending [Asia-Europe Meetings](#) (ASEM) in China, where the collective efforts of EU colleagues and their Asian counterparts produces a multiplier effect. It is hard to see how this can be replicated by the UK alone, and difficult to envisage how our cultural offering can avoid being diminished.

For example, the award-winning *zero degrees*, first performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre in 2005, was initiated by discussions between Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan based on their shared experience as sons of Islamic families brought up in Europe. The collaboration also involved British artist Anthony Gormley and musician Nitin Sawhney, and the result could be seen as intensely personal, minimal, or even, as Guardian critic [Judith Mackrell](#) wrote, 'unfinished' and '....provisional and exploratory'. This sounds almost like a workshop event, but in fact such a daring and stripped-bare production arguably required substantial support, which in this case was provided by a group of [ten EU venues as well as two in North America](#).

This gives an indication of the landscape of the dance ecology and the partnerships that lie behind the creation of new, innovative work. There are countless other examples, but it might be useful to move beyond one-off projects to a broader initiative which illustrates the networks that operate at a more granular level, connecting and feeding the art form. An example is [Aerowaves](#), a programme focused on generating and presenting new work by emerging artists, which now has members from 33 countries and has received co-funding from EU's Creative Europe Programme. It emerged from personal connections between John Ashford, who was then director of The Place Theatre in London, and some EU colleagues. Ashford asked for their help in selecting dances to be performed at a festival for emerging EU choreographers and was surprised to find that they did not know each other. Over a dinner table in London in 1996, the (irrepressible) Ashford persuaded the group to meet again the following year, each paying their own travel costs.

Today the network is larger, more organised and better supported, but it still embodies the same sense of the personal on which it was based. This trend toward cooperation and collaboration was enhanced through another development which was also predicated on personal links, shared values and concerns: the [European Dancehouse Network](#) (EDN). This started as an informal network with seven members in 2004 and today has 37 members (five from the UK), and is also co-funded by Creative Europe. Broadly, its mission is to '*cooperate in securing a sustainable future for the dance sector and to improve relevance for diverse dance among society*'. To some, the description of these networks may seem to imply an EU superstructure operated by bureaucrats. In fact, these are organically-formed networks of individuals from what might be called arts SMEs, who have pooled expertise and resources in a way which seems extremely difficult to replicate through bilateral agreements between individual organisations.

Underlying these interwoven strands is the community of dance students who move across national boundaries to find the right context for their training, education and development. Once again, the (often) non-verbal realm of dance and the diversity of many EU societies mean that, watching a class, you have no idea of the national or cultural origins of the students. They are sharing and exchanging developing ideas, movement languages and trust. This last point is worth stressing: your dance partner may be required to fall backwards, and you are required to catch them before they hit the floor. Try this (carefully!) at home with someone you know well, and discover for yourself what trust means in dance. This embodied, shared knowledge inhabits another realm of human experience, and develops broader and deeper understandings of others – and of course, of oneself. This does not erase national and cultural identities – it places them in close proximity, enabling a rich exchange.

Interestingly, these collaborations often depend on a version of 'just in time' mobility, with dance artists commuting between jobs via Eurostar or short-haul flights. This development receives surprisingly little attention. It is simply accepted as part of the milieu: the open borders of the art form reflect the open borders of Europe.

This is the context and the culture that Brexit may endanger. It is hard to see how this level of exchange and debate can be replicated without the free movement of people – and I fear that, like damage to an ecosystem which is invisible at first, only later will we see the price we have paid. Of course, the EU is not a perfect organisation, and I understand the significance of the principle of democratic representation, but the choice to burn all bridges that seems to be prevailing is particularly worrying. I do not understand Walker's point that we have somehow been inhibited from developing partnerships outside the EU. I see no evidence that the professional dance community regards partnerships elsewhere as undiscovered territory, or see a binary choice between the EU and the rest of the world.

In fact, almost a decade ago I founded the [ArtsCross project](#) in collaboration with the Beijing Dance Academy and Taipei National University of the Arts. The project has supported UK-based choreographers and dancers to work with their East Asian counterparts and then to present the results in theatres in Beijing, Taipei and London. On a larger scale Farooq Chaudhry has presented work from China such as [YANG Liping's Under Siege](#) and worked with English National Ballet.

Dance may prove more resilient than other forms of art. It has developed from a relatively low base in recent decades, and dance practitioners have traditionally been forced to be self-sufficient and adaptable. *The Guardian's* David Walker [cited an OECD report](#) to suggest that civil servants will need to accept that the 'chaos of Brexit may be the new norm'. Walker noted the growing usage of the acronym, VUCA, to express the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity which characterise our new operating environment. An earlier [OECD workshop](#) discussed the new approaches that VUCA required: learning by doing, adaptability instead of uniformity, embracing emergence, diversity, open-ended processes and reintroducing empathy into the system. This sounds like debates that have been going on in dance for decades.

The word 'empathy' is particularly apposite. Arguably, dance – and perhaps the arts as a whole – failed to reach into and reflect the concerns of those communities that voted for Brexit. Should the arts give voice to those who feel excluded, angry and forgotten, even if expressing these feelings might exacerbate community tensions? Dance has traditionally worked to enable expression, but also to develop communication and understanding across groups and communities. Has this approach been naïve, or have we simply not done enough of it?

So, after the data, the intellectual gymnastics and arguments, what is the mood? How does Brexit *feel*?

Colleagues overseas are for the most part baffled and bemused. This may be because overseas news coverage has struggled to come to terms with the hyperbole of the pre-referendum positions of both sides in the debate and, since then, confused by the febrile atmosphere and sometimes overtly anti-intellectual rhetoric that has emerged. This does not tally with their traditional view of Britain.

In summary, this does not feel good.

I said at the outset that Brexit was a challenge to my ability to be objective and non-attached. On the other hand, it is probably best to be clear about my perspective, so that readers can better evaluate the views presented. So I carefully refrained from any comment before asking two arts sector colleagues for their views. The first was Alistair Spalding, Chief Executive and Artistic Director at Sadler's Wells Theatre (SWT) and, to gain insight on Brexit from the viewpoint of emerging artists and the EU networks, Eva Martinez, SWT's artistic programmer.

Spalding began by expressing the hope that any future visa regime was not overly bureaucratic for artists. Interestingly, he then said that he feared the economic impacts less than the 'feeling' about the UK that was being projected, and perhaps internalised. He felt that he was seeing a country not wishing 'to take back control' as much as trying 'to move back in time'. For Spalding, that sense of what the UK represents, how we feel about ourselves and our relationships with the world, form the key Brexit battleground.

For Martinez, the situation is even more acute. She is a French national who came to the UK some time ago and has participated in and contributed to the arts sector for many years. Her role at SWT involves working with developing artists and she promoting SWT participation in networks such as the EDN. For her, the Brexit project threatens to undo decades of partnership development at a time when there is a new energy in the EU, and when the UK's wider creative industries have contributed significantly to the country's economic growth. Dance is a vibrant sector, able to capitalise on its ability to communicate across language barriers and on a growing and dedicated workforce that is now adding generations of 'elders' to its traditionally youthful profile. This mobile, international population has harnessed intergenerational energies to move into arguably its most productive phase in half a century.

This adds to the sense that we have somehow taken a wrong turn: that in a moment of madness and frustration many of us crossed the wrong box on one stormy day in June 2016. Recent debates seem to have hardened in tone; those presenting the case for Brexit appear at times to have aligned themselves to a discourse woven from selective and intellectually dubious positions. This places them not as progressives determined to enhance social and economic equality throughout the UK, but rather within what New York Times columnist David Brooks and Yale University Diplomat in Residence, Charles Hill, termed the anti-[Enlightenment](#) project led by those who do not 'see history as a gradual march toward cooperation' and who shun the multilateral world.

This febrile state looks set to continue and perhaps even intensify as we approach the point of no return. Whatever the outcome, my hope is for a dance sector that is engaged with, and reaches out to, people both inside and beyond the UK; that expresses national, cultural and artistic identity/ies in forums that welcome diversity, and celebrates the power of the arts to express these things in productive ways. Dance as an art form is of and in the moment. I hope it will help us move beyond present divisions to find a sense of collective purpose.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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