

# Lessons in Survival: The De-funding of Restless Dance Theatre

Lektionen im Überleben: Mittelstreichung für das Restless Dance Theater

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## *Abstract*

In March 2020, Michelle Ryan, Artistic Director of *Restless Dance Theatre*, an Australian dance company that includes both disabled and non-disabled dancers, was awarded Australia's highest dance honour by the Australia Council, the federal arts funding body, for her transformative leadership of the company. Almost simultaneously, the very same Australia Council removed funding support for *Restless*, threatening the company's survival. This essay examines *Restless's* response to the fundamental incoherence of the Australia Council's decision and situates it within the broader context of the company's own evolving practice in disability art, which in effect saw it attempt to create policy in the field. I outline the government policy contexts that underpin both the funding cuts and *Restless's* pivot to an alternate source of funding: the ideologically driven 'culture wars' underpinning the Coalition government's hostility to the arts sector, and the establishment of a National Disability Insurance Scheme that enables individual 'clients' to access money for arts training. Finally, the essay examines the implications of a dance company receiving funding from a disability service provider rather than from a mainstream arts funding body, questioning whether this is a further 'ghettoization' of disability art.

Im März 2020 wurde Michelle Ryan, künstlerische Leiterin des Restless Dance Theatre, einer australischen Tanzkompanie mit behinderten und nicht behinderten Tänzern, vom Australia Council, der staatlichen Kunstförderorganisation, mit der höchsten australischen Tanzauszeichnung für ihre Leitung der Kompanie ausgezeichnet. Fast zeitgleich strich der Australia Council die finanzielle Unterstützung für Restless und bedrohte damit das Überleben der Kompanie. Dieser Essay untersucht die Reaktion von Restless auf die Entscheidung des Australia Council und stellt sie in den breiteren Kontext der sich entwickelnden Praxis des Unternehmens im Bereich der Kunst für Behinderte, die einen Versuch darstellte, Politik in diesem Bereich zu machen. Ich skizziere den politischen Kontext der Regierung, der sowohl die Finanzierungskürzungen als auch die Umstellung von Restless auf eine alternative Finanzierungsquelle beabsichtigt: die ideologisch geprägten „Kulturkriege“, die die Feindseligkeit der Koalitionsregierung gegenüber dem Kunstsektor untermauern, und die Einrichtung eines nationalen Versicherungssystems für Behinderte, das es einzelnen „Kunden“ ermöglicht, Geld für künstlerische Ausbildung zu erhalten. Schließlich untersucht der Essay die Auswirkungen der Tatsache, dass eine Tanzkompanie eher von einem Anbieter von Behindertendienstleistungen als von einer regulären Kunstfördereinrichtung finanziert wird und stellt die Frage, ob dies eine weitere „Ghettoisierung“ der Behindertenkunst darstellt.

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### *Keywords*

Kulturfinanzierung / financing the arts, Tanz / dance, Diversität / diversity, Entwicklungsprozesse / development or transformation

In March 2020, choreographer Michelle Ryan was awarded the Australia Council Award for Dance. The Australia Council for the Arts (Australia Council) is Australia's national arts funding body. Its prestigious annual awards are given in recognition of significant contributions to specific artforms. Ryan's award was an acknowledgement of her thirty-year career as a performer with Meryl Tankard's companies in Canberra and Adelaide, her work as artistic associate and rehearsal director with Queensland-based contemporary dance companies *Dance North* and *Splinter Group*, but most importantly as artistic director and choreographer of Adelaide's *Restless Dance Theatre (Restless)*. *Restless* is Australia's only fully inclusive dance company that includes dancers with and without a disability. Since taking on directorship of the company in 2013, Ryan has transformed it from an amateur to a professional troupe. Ryan's own performing career was derailed at the age of thirty by multiple sclerosis and she has used a wheelchair for the past few years. Her determination that dancers with disability be recognised as professional artists is thus deeply personal, and it has been ground-breaking in Australia. The profound impact of her commitment to the inclusion of dancers with a disability within mainstream dance was reflected in the award citation, which described Ryan as using "her lived experience of disability to inform her artwork, with humour, warmth and searing honesty" (AUSTRALIA COUNCIL, MICHELLE RYAN AWARD 2020) and praised her work with *Restless* as defined by "her engagement with dancers, and her commitment to showcasing humanity, emotion and individual experiences", noting also that she had "grown the scope of audience engagement, touring works nationally and internationally, to the extent that "Restless is now Australia's leading dance company working with artists with and without a disability" (AUSTRALIA COUNCIL 2020).

In a stunning reversal, in April 2020—less than a month after the conferral of Ryan's award—*Restless Dance Theatre* was informed by the Australia Council that its application for ongoing operational funding had failed. Losing its main source of funding was a devastating blow that threatened the very survival of the company. Feedback on the application did not specify the reason, but *Restless* was not alone. Nationally, several other long-established dance companies were defunded, including

*Tracks, Expressions, TasDance the Australasian Dance Collective and Shaun Parker & Company.* In Adelaide several other highly regarded theatre companies also lost their ongoing funding (WATTS 2020). To many observers, this across-the-board defunding had nothing to do with artistic merit or level of activity but was the consequence of the Morrison Coalition government's funding cuts to the Australia Council. The funding reduction is emblematic of what has come to be known in the Australian tertiary education and arts sectors as the Coalition's 'culture wars', which over the past nine years has seen reduced funding for universities, and the arts and culture sectors. Hostility to the arts sector can be attributed to the right-wing populism of the Coalition, in particular under Prime Ministers Abbott and Morrison, which aligned the arts with elitism, and poured money—instead—into sport. The de-funding of so many South Australian companies, including *Restless*, has also been attributed, by some in the industry, to a perceived bias of the Australia Council to companies along the Eastern seaboard. This perception is not based on politics but on demographics: it has long been felt by artists outside the densely populated states of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria that the Australia Council's funding is unfairly distributed, favouring the biggest population centres at the expense of the regions and the smaller city capitals such as Adelaide.

In this essay, I examine how *Restless* responded to the fundamental incoherence of the Australia Council's decision, and situate this response within the broader context of the company's own evolving practice in disability art, which in effect saw it attempt to create policy in the field. *Restless* is unique among Australian dance companies in its disability ethos, which it describes thus:

Our artistic voice is loud, strong and original. Restless brings artists with diverse minds, bodies and imaginations together to create contemporary dance theatre from everyday lived experiences; manifested into beautiful art, embedding inclusion into our screens, on our stages and in unexpected places. Restless Dance Theatre is a place where diversity is celebrated, and all artists thrive creatively (RESTLESSDANCE.ORG 2022).

As the only Australian dance company that provides professional pathways for dancers with a disability, *Restless* operates at the interstices of arts and disability policy. To better understand the pragmatic decisions taken by the company in order to survive, I outline these dual policy frameworks.

Remarkably, since federation in 1901, Australia has only had two national arts policies, both of which were produced by Labour governments.

The first, *Creative Nation*, was released under Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1993; it stressed the importance of contributions of First Nations, and immigrant artists and the practices of both to Australia's cultural life. The policy also injected a significant funding boost to the arts sector. After Keating's defeat in 1996, the Liberal-Coalition government advanced no new arts policy, and it was not until 2013, in the dying days of the Rudd-Gillard Labour government, that a second arts policy emerged. *Creative Australia*, as it was called, emerged from a consultation process underway since 2009, and contained five policy goals to drive future action in the sector. Goal One was to "Recognise, respect, and celebrate the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to the uniqueness of Australian identity" (CREATIVE AUSTRALIA 2013: 8). Goal Two was to "Ensure that government support reflects the diversity of Australia and that all citizens, wherever they live, whatever their background or circumstances, have a right to shape our cultural identity and its expression" (CREATIVE AUSTRALIA 2013: 8). Goal Three was to "Support excellence and the special role of artists and their creative collaborators as the source of original work and ideas, including telling Australian stories" (CREATIVE AUSTRALIA 2013: 8). Goal Four was to "Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to national life, community wellbeing and the economy" (CREATIVE AUSTRALIA 2013: 8). The final goal, Goal Five, was to "Ensure Australian creativity thrives in the digitally enabled 21<sup>st</sup> century, by supporting innovation, the development of new creative content, knowledge and creative industries" (CREATIVE AUSTRALIA 2013: 8). While the goals are general, Goals Two and Three are pertinent to my discussion. Goal Two explicitly gestures to a policy of inclusion, signalling that all Australians, including those living with disabilities, have the right to participate in art making, and Goal 3 implies that artists will be financially supported.

Shortly after the release of *Creative Australia*, the Rudd government lost power, ushering in nine years of Coalition-Liberal government which neither implemented *Creative Australia* nor produced an art and cultural policy of its own. The neglect, and even hostility, towards the arts of the Coalition government is exemplified by its dismantling of the Department of the Arts, such that in 2020 it was subsumed into a newly formed Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications with the subheading, Office of the Arts. Under successive Coalition governments since 2013, federal government spending on the arts steadily declined; for instance, more than AU\$100 million was cut from the portfolio in 2014, a further AU\$52.5 cut in 2015, with

an additional AU\$36.8 cut from government-funded galleries and museums (PENNINGTON/ELTHAM 2021). According to Pennington and Eltham, Australia's funding for the arts is low by international standards. Out of OECD countries, for example, it is ranked 24 out of the 33 countries listed in 2019, allocating just 0.9 per cent of GDP to art and culture, below the OECD average of 1.2 per cent of GDP (PENNINGTON/ELTHAM 2021).

Even more egregious than the reduction in overall spending was the Coalition's undermining of the arms-length funding model that had always governed the Australia Council. Josephine Caust has outlined the turmoil unleashed within the sector by the successive interventions of Arts Ministers Brandis and Fletcher, which was compounded by the Australia Council's failure to advocate for the arts. According to Caust, this began when Minister Brandis was angered by an incident in which several artists objected to the Sydney Festival being funded by Transfield, a multinational corporation which at the time held the security contract for Australia's notoriously punitive offshore immigration camps. Brandis tasked the Australia Council with developing a policy to deny funding to any artist or arts organisation that refused corporate sponsorship, and the Australia Council's acquiescent response suggested that it "was signalling to the Minister that it was not going to publicly defend an arm's length position or any ministerial directions to the Council" (CAUST 2019: 768).

Perhaps emboldened by this bureaucratic passivity, in the May 2015 Budget, Brandis outlined the creation of a National Program for Excellence Arts Fund, which would be under his direct control, and for which AU\$104.7 million dollars was diverted from the Australia Council's forward budget. As the name suggests, Brandis's criterion for awarding funding was 'excellence', a term he never defined but apparently believed was entirely objective. He also directed the Australia Council to maintain preferential funding to the major performing arts organisation, thus undermining both the Council's independence and catastrophically affecting the most vulnerable part of the sector, the small to medium arts organisations (CUTHBERTSON/MEARES 2015). As Caust notes, while the Australia Council and most of the major arts organisations "remained silent" about Brandis's intervention, the rest of the arts community "rallied and protested, holding public meetings and demonstrating outside parliament houses outside the country" (CAUST 2019: 769). Such was the outcry about the Excellence Program, that a Senate

Inquiry was established to review arts funding, the first in Australian history, which received over 2,700 submissions.

However, Brandis was replaced by Mitch Fifield as Arts Minister, later that year, when Prime Minister Tony Abbott was ousted by Malcolm Turnbull. Fifield returned some of the money to the Australia Council, while keeping the largest portion (AU\$73 million) and renaming the Ministerial fund Catalyst (CAUST 2019). While Fifield claimed that his fund would reward innovation and give priority to the small to medium end of the sector, there was little discernible difference in the funding decisions made on his watch. The vast bulk of Catalyst funding continued to be allocated to large, already well-resourced organisations such as the Australian Ballet and the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

As Caust notes, although it had obviously not been consulted about the creation of both Ministerial programs, the Australia Council stayed silent about the usurpation of its role, while going about an internal restructure which rendered the grant application process more opaque than ever (CAUST 2019). However, the effects of the diversion of Council funds to the Ministerial funds became shockingly apparent in the 2016 funding round, in which sixty-five arts organisations lost their ongoing funding. Moreover, the maximum funding awarded to any company was drastically reduced to AU\$300,000. Despite this, the Council's Chief Executive office, Tony Grybowski, proclaimed in a television interview that "No company has been defunded" (GRYBOWSKI 2016). The funding cuts and the accompanying disconnect between the reality facing arts organisations and the Australia Council's rhetoric caused "widespread shock and distress in the sector" (CAUST 2019: 772), as well as confusion because some companies were being defunded by the Australia Council "because of the establishment of the Catalyst Fund" while others were winning funding *because* of the Catalyst fund (CAUST 2019: 772). Moreover, even though all funding ultimately stemmed from the same source, the Australian taxpayer via the federal government, organisations were now compelled to write two different funding applications to seek government funding, significantly adding to their administrative burdens.

It is worth pointing out that although similar cuts to arts funding were being made in comparable OECD countries, these were enacted as austerity measures in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Writing specifically about Minister Brandis's initial intervention, Caust makes the distinction that:

This is not the rationale behind the actions in the Australian case, as Australia was relatively unaffected by the GFC. The actions taken by the Coalition government in

Australia the arts were about ideological issues, rather than a need to cut spending. The Minister justified his action on the need for 'competition' in government arts funding and his own belief in funding 'excellence' (CAUST 2019: 773).

The ideological culture wars waged by the Coalition against both the art and tertiary education sectors came into even sharper relief during the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, when the pandemic hit Australian shores, the Coalition government acted rapidly to shut down international borders, imposed a lock-down and instituted a temporary payments system to individuals whose employment had been affected. Called *JobKeeper*, the system paid via eligible businesses, including the self-employed, to the tune of over AU\$10 billion (PACELLA/LUCKMAN/O'CONNOR 2020). In a move that was universally regarded as an expression of hostility, universities were completely precluded from *JobKeeper*, leading to the loss of many thousands of jobs. The situation of artists was marginally better, but many were ineligible due to the insecure nature of work in the arts:

Very quickly it emerged that many artists and cultural workers would not be eligible for the new *JobKeeper* allowance because they could not show 12 months continuous employment with one employer. [...] The cracks in this rapidly assembled piece of emergency legislation, through which many cultural workers fell, might initially be seen as accidental; but the continued silence in the face of mounting concern, followed by denial and prevarication, suggest a deeper ideological issue (PACELLA/LUCKMAN/O'CONNOR 2020: 42).

It was not until Australia was two months into the Covid-19 lockdown that the federal government announced a rescue funding package for the arts, the so-called Restart Investment and Sustain and Expand (*RISE*) Fund. An initial AU\$250 million was allocated to the program, but its design meant that most of the money went to larger arts organisations rather than the small to medium sector or individual artists (PENNINGTON/ELTHAM 2021). Subsequent iterations of the fund increased availability to organisations in the small to medium arts sector. Tellingly however, *RISE* funds were administered through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (into which the Arts Department had been subsumed in 2020, as previously noted) with applications assessed by departmental bureaucrats. The Minister for the Arts retained the right of veto, and the Australia Council for the Arts, supposedly the federal body in charge of arts funding and advocacy, was completely sidelined.

It is within this context of a Covid-19 induced crisis within the arts sector, superimposed on a background of incrementally decreasing arts funding, a national arts and cultural policy vacuum, and governmental

hostility to the arts, that *Restless* was defunded. Even so, both the arts and the disability communities were shocked by the seemingly *ad hoc* decisions of different arms of the Australia Council, given that *Restless* had previously been a flagship for its funding of and support for disability arts. Indeed, in one of its own glossy brochures, the Australia Council proclaims:

Since its inception the Australia Council has supported arts and disability, including many memorable projects and initiatives. Companies, such as Restless Dance Company and Back to Back Theatre began and continue their significant contributions to Australian cultural life with Australia Council support (AUSTRALIA COUNCIL 2018: 6).

In a letter of protest addressed to the Chief Executive Officer of the Council, Adrian Collette, Ryan drew attention to the cognitive dissonance induced by the Australia Council's public avowals of support for *Restless*, such as the above-cited, that had culminated in the Dance Award, and the Council's decision to eliminate the company's funding:

.... I was awarded the Australia Council for the Arts Dance Award on 9 March 2020. A few weeks later on 30 March, Restless Dance Theatre was defunded. I was unable to make sense of the two opposing decisions. [...] I was shocked and confused by the messages the Australia Council sent when it was announced that Restless Dance Theatre, Australia's leading dance company working with people with and without disability (as introduced at the Arts Council's Award ceremony) had been declined four year funding.... (Letter from Michelle Ryan to Adrian Colette 12 April 2020, unpublished).

Ryan also expresses her outrage at being used to bolster the Council's public image in relation to inclusivity and diversity:

I felt I have been mocked and the company disrespected after we have been presented merely three weeks earlier as an exemplary arts creator and organisation showcasing professionalism, inclusivity and the importance for artists with disability. [...] I cannot understand why I was placed in this situation. To be asked to do media publicity for the Australia Council awards with articles for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* now seems cruel, especially knowing that the result for Restless was known by staff prior the award ceremony. Restless and my reputation were exploited to benefit the Council's apparent appearance that it was serious about diversity and disability as per the strategic plan. I feel I was totally "wheeled out" by the Australia Council and to be blunt, this is not appropriate or fair and is tokenistic (Letter from Michelle Ryan to Adrian Colette 12 April 2020, unpublished).

For Ryan, "as an artist with a disability" to be publicly "recognised as a leader for outstanding contribution in a mainstream arts practice context", but then to immediately feel that in fact she had been tokenistically "wheeled out" to bolster the Australia Council's credibility in relation to diversity, was especially wounding (Letter from Michelle Ryan to Adrian



Colette 12 April 2020. Unpublished). Australia Council's strategic plan, to which Ryan alludes, *Creativity Connects Us: Corporate Plan 2020-2024*, released the same year that it de-funded *Restless*, concedes that:

Artists with disability and artists of non English speaking background continue to be underrepresented compared to the Australian population, despite growing audience appetite for work from diverse perspectives, and an increasing willingness to program diverse work (AUSTRALIA COUNCIL 2020: 24).

In light of such under-representation, the plan notes the “continuing need to actively foster equity in the arts—including in leadership and arts practice—to ensure our arts truly reflect, and benefit from, the breadth of our people and culture” (CREATIVITY CONNECTS US 2020: 24). Yet despite such noble public-facing rhetoric about disability and the arts, the same year *Restless* learned of its funding cut, the Australia Council also defunded Arts Access Australia (AAA), the peak national body for arts and disability in Australia, depriving it of its main source of funding. Similarly blindsided by this decision was Arts Access Australia, whose mission is to

increase equitable access and opportunities for artists, arts workers, participants and audiences with disability in Australian arts and culture [...] through systemic advocacy, sector development and representation, and information provision (ARTS ACCESS AUSTRALIA 2020: 4).

*Restless* marshalled a vigorous response to the Australia Council's decision, including orchestrating a public campaign to protest to the Council, and a community funding initiative to help cover the anticipated shortfall in its finances. Alongside Ryan's own letter to Chief Executive Officer of the Council Adrian Colette, a range of senior figures in the arts sector wrote in support of the company, including Robyn Archer AO, internationally renowned choreographer, Garry Stewart, the Executive Director of the Adelaide Festival, Rob Brookman, several arts academics and a range of international producers and arts administrators. Stephen Marshall, the then Premier of South Australia, who was also Minister for the Arts, wrote to urge that the company's funding be reinstated. A media campaign, in which Ryan was widely interviewed in mainstream media, drew attention to the company's plight. A community funding campaign raised a significant sum of money, approximately AU\$170,000, which drew matched contributions from Creative Partnerships Australia, a fund-raising platform for Australian artists. Internationally renowned musician Tim Minchin made a large, and very well-publicized donation, bringing further notice to the dance company's financial jeopardy.

Most powerfully, company dancers and their family members wrote to the Minister for the Arts, the Australia Council, and to state and federal politicians to protest the decision. These letters detailed the life-changing impact that *Restless* has had for dancers with disabilities. Letter writers included not only past and present dancers from the professional performing side, but others who had taken part in the company's workshops. These letters speak to the dual role *Restless* has played over its thirty-year history as both a performing arts company and a disability service provider. When it was established as *Restless Dance Company* in 1991 by Sally Chance and Tania Rose, the company was predominantly a service organisation offering workshops to children and young people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities, while also offering the most senior, skilled dancers the opportunity to perform publicly once a year. Under successive artistic directors, the performance side increased slightly but when Ryan took over the company in 2013, her vision was to transform the company. While maintaining the service component of workshops for children and adults, her ambition was to grow *Restless* into a professional performance ensemble with a national and international presence.

Coincidentally, the policy settings governing the disability sector, under which *Restless* had always operated, changed radically in the same year that Ryan took the helm. Social policy researchers Miller and Hayward have noted that the introduction of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (NDIS) in 2013 was a strange Australian anomaly in the context of international austerity politics (MILLER/HOWARD 2017). As researchers on the impact of the NDIS on the disability arts sector Hadley and Goggin point out, this was “the most significant change the disability services sector has encountered”, because it introduced “marketized disability service delivery in Australia for the first time” (HADLEY/GOGGIN 2019: 10): The NDIS created massive change for disability arts practice, providing over 400,000 disabled Australians “with funds to support their cultural, social and economic participation, delivered by hundreds of newly registered NDIS providers, at a cost of over \$AU20 billion a year” (HADLEY/GOGGIN 2019: 10). Highly pertinent to *Restless's* plight, Hadley and Goggin make the crucial observation that:

The roll-out of the NDIS means that disability arts organisations and the artists they serve will need to work in a new system, which provides funding through individual NDIS plans that fund whole-of-life supports and services via fee-for-service arrangements in arrears, rather than through direct-to-organisation block grants in advance (HADLEY/GOGGIN 2019: 11).

This change in funding arrangements is a crucial shift: whereas arts organisations and individual artists in Australia have always been funded in advance, whether through ongoing block funding or short-term project funding, the NDIS operates as a fee-for-service system that bills organisations and individuals for services rendered, in arrears. Furthermore, it has no distinct arts support category, but rather channels funds through its Social and Recreational Supports Category (HADLEY/GOGGIN 2019).

What are the implications of this for disability arts in Australia and for *Restless* in particular? While there is much research on the impact the NDIS has had on the broad disability services sector, to date there is scant research on how the scheme affects the arts and culture sector. Hadley and Goggin's study, published in 2019, was the first to address the issues posed by the changed funding landscape for the arts and disability. They argue that arts organisations that engage with disability will have to rapidly pivot, just as disabled people themselves will have to find new ways to work with organisations in order to achieve their artistic ambitions. Failure to adjust to the new economic reality, they argue, will mean that "there is a risk that organisations will start to cut or close programs" (HADLEY/GOGGIN 2019: 12). However, while this is undoubtedly true, I argue that there is another, less immediately obvious risk, which is that the fee-for-services model of the NDIS's instrumentalist paradigm undermines the notion of disabled people as artists.

This is partly semantic, in that in NDIS parlance, all those who benefit from its funding are deemed clients. More importantly, the NDIS model embeds the art-as-service paradigm in which NDIS clients are funded for art experiences or training provided by a registered service organisation. The language used by the NDIS is explicit on this point; funding for any kinds of arts training is described as "Help to build your skills to take part in social and recreation activities (NDIS 2022). The disabled client is implicitly positioned as a consumer of services rather than a producer of culture. It is instructive to reference Giles Perring's three categories of arts practise associated with disability arts: mainstage or main-stream-media representations of disabled people; therapeutic and recreational practises aimed at skill development; and post-therapeutic practises that involve disabled artists as practitioners of the arts (PERRING 2005). The NDIS funding model is fundamentally skewed towards Perring's second category of the arts as a therapeutic and developmental modality for disabled people. *Restless* has traditionally worked within categories two and three, but Ryan's aim to develop the company into a professional

troupe, in which the dancers are to be considered as professional artists, aligns overwhelmingly with Perring's notion of the post-therapeutic.

Where does the introduction of the NDIS funding model leave *Restless*? On taking over the directorship, Ryan's twin tasks for developing *Restless* into a professional dance theatre company with a national and international presence, were to increase repertoire and ramp up the dancers' capacities. Both aims took some time to realize. The performance ensemble had previously only trained for two hours per week, a practice significantly at variance with the situation of professional dancers in a fully funded company who attend a 1.5-hour class each morning, followed by a full day of rehearsal, except on performance days. Moreover, disabled *Restless* dancers do not have the benefit of full-time professional training before becoming company members, having for the most part come up through the company's workshops. Dance researcher Sarah Whatley has outlined the almost insurmountable difficulty disabled dancers have in accessing professional level dance training in the UK (WHATLEY 2019): the situation is arguably worse in Australia. While the non-disabled members of *Restless* have had tertiary dance or acting training, disabled dancers have not been able to access anywhere near the same level of technical training.

Another legacy of *Restless*'s history of positioning itself primarily as a service-provider is that the dancers—both disabled and non-disabled—were never paid, either for performance, rehearsal or training. Remarkably, the company only realized how anomalous this was when they were invited to perform at Festival 2018, the arts festival of the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. *Intimate Space*, the site-specific work they performed, had been their Adelaide Festival debut earlier that year, earning many accolades and selling out sixty performances. But whereas, ironically, the Adelaide Festival—one of the most prestigious arts festivals in the world—had no policy on artist payment, the Commonwealth Games demanded that all performers be paid. This was a watershed moment, resulting in the company creating a policy that all their artists henceforth be paid award rates for both rehearsal and performance time.

Essentially, the linked decisions to provide the dancers with professional levels of training and to pay them as professional artists constituted a paradigm shift in *Restless*'s practice, and one with profound financial implications. Drawing from the operational budget, dancers were paid for performances beginning in 2018, and for rehearsals, as well, beginning in 2019. However, funding professional level training was impossible after the loss of Australia Council funding, so in 2022 *Restless* turned

pragmatically to the NDIS funding model, charging the disabled dancers for three days of training per week, which was paid out of their NDIS individual plans. As might be expected, the dancers' greatly increased training time has led to a noticeable improvement in technique and performance skills, with the added benefit of enhancing their career prospects should they wish to perform outside the company. While this is obviously a good outcome for individual dancers and for *Restless*, it has worrying implications, as I shall explain.

In the short term, using the disability scheme to fund what is essentially the core business of a performing arts company has been a godsend for *Restless*. It is celebrated by the NDIS itself, whose website features several articles detailing how its individual plans have supported Ryan and several of the dancers to function at the highest level, with supporting testimonies from Ryan and the dancers expressing their gratitude (NDIS 2022). Yet, I would argue it sets a troubling precedent, removing the onus for the Australia Council to fully fund the company's activities, and thus potentially ghettoising a performing arts company because some of its artists have a disability. Furthermore, by training the dancers in-house, the company removes any obligation for mainstream dance training institutions to accommodate dancers with a disability in a more inclusive model of dance education. The NDIS funding model also adds to the company's administrative burden, as the dancers' individual plans have to be billed, individually, on a regular basis.

The increased administrative burden is superimposed on the burden already generated by the removal of Australia Council's ongoing funding, which has resulted in *Restless* having to apply for multiple project grants from both the Australia Council and the state arts funding body, ArtsSA. In the event, these have been extremely successful, with the company being awarded large sums from later iterations of the Covid recovery RISE fund which were more geared towards the small to medium arts sector, as well as other grant schemes, enabling it to expand its activities despite the loss of Australia Council operational funding. In fact, the company's activity levels have increased dramatically, such that in 2021-22 it has appeared at the Adelaide Festival once more, co-produced a new work with mainstream dance company *Chunky Move* in Melbourne, appeared at the Dream Big and Womadelaide Festivals, developed a co-production with a Korean disability arts company, appeared in the U.K., and toured to regional South Australia and Brisbane, as well as presenting a record number of new works in Adelaide, with several other works in development. Although these successes might lead one to conclude that *Restless*

is no worse off since its defunding, the effort and time involved in applying to multiple funding sources is by no means neutral and has a significant impact on company operations. Extra administrative staff have to be employed, not only to write grant applications and manage NDIS plans, but also to chase philanthropic dollars.

In sum, the de-funding of *Restless* by the Australia Council, and its pragmatic turn to NDIS funding to support its dancers, raises interesting questions. While I acknowledge the NDIS has been absolutely transformative, improving the lives of hundreds of thousands of disabled Australians by giving them the agency and financial support to help realize their potential, the question remains: should a performing arts company be part-funded by a disability service organisation such as the NDIS? Indeed, should a performing arts company have to provide training to its dancers because they have been excluded from mainstream training institutions? Shouldn't there be pathways in Australian professional training institutions for dancers with disabilities? Shouldn't the Australia Council for the Arts meet its obligations to fund a company that it describes as "Australia's leading dance company working with artists with and without a disability" (Letter from Michelle Ryan to Adrian Colette 12 April 2020) in a manner that matches its public rhetoric? *Restless* has survived its defunding and has shown through its practice as policy that disabled dancers must be treated as professional artists: it seems the rest of the Australian arts sector needs to catch up.

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