



Scottish Arts Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION

It should be noted the views expressed in this evaluation are intended to represent, as far as possible, an objective aesthetic judgement. Specialist advisors and officers should avoid making judgements based on their own personal tastes and preferences.

Artist/Company: Plan B

Venue: Dancebase

Title of Event : Parallel / Parallels

Type of Event: (e.g. performance, exhibition, informal showing, work-in-progress, workshop, screening, lecture etc) **Performance**

Date of Visit: 16 August '08

Overall Rating: 4

(Please rate the event overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses. If the management of the event affects the overall enjoyment of the event, please comment, but the overall rating should be based on the artistic merit of the event.)

Parallel/ Parallels did not demystify my understanding of quantum theory and I was left unconvinced by certain choices McConnell's took as a director. However I did leave the venue feeling uplifted by the affirming power of exquisitely performed dance, accompanied by an excellent live score from Michael Marra.

Name: Jean Cameron

Date: 03 October '08

Specialist Advisor

Scottish Arts Council Officer

Please circle the relevant title

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named above. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or an officer of the Scottish Arts Council, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report will form evidence for the Artistic Leadership and Public Engagement sections of the Quality Framework and be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Joint Board to report on the overall performance of its funded organisations.

Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:

- 1 - Very Poor** – standard falls well below what is acceptable.
- 2 - Poor** – not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation.
- 3 - Competent** – routine rather than especially interesting.
- 4 - Good** – well conceived and executed
- 5 - Excellent** – conceived and executed to a high standard.

1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the artistic quality of the event, with particular reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the following:

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Vision and imagination of work - Quality of ideas, skills in execution; if you've seen the work of this artist(s)/ company before, please comment on the comparison.</p>	4	<p>Parallel / Parallels is the long awaited new piece from Frank McConnell, one of Scotland's best loved choreographers and dance pioneers. The concept of exploring parallel universes through a dance piece in which his assembled brilliant company of dancers move their eloquent bodies through (parallel) space(s) sounded promising and intriguing concept, accompanied by a new score by maverick musical maestro Michael Marra.</p> <p>The piece was produced and performed by an accomplished ensemble, most of whom (if not all?) have collaborated with McConnell previously, and was presented with finely-honed skill and craft.</p> <p>McConnell noted that the concept for the piece came from Plan B's previous show Double Helix and his idea was to relate the theory of quantum physics back to something that the non science buffs amongst us felt spoke to us on a human level. Where this piece really succeeds is through the connection that all the performers make with the audience by giving convincing nuanced performances filled with authenticity. This absolutely is a testament to McConnell's abilities and integrity as a director. However, for me, Parallel/ Parallels did not demystify quantum theory and I was left unconvinced by certain experiments and choices McConnell's took as a director: his use of the set/ performance space (which I felt held the choreographic possibilities back) and the juxtaposition of narrative styles (sometimes dry academic text at others confessional human stories). The piece would have been more successful if it had decided to go with either one of these narrative styles and really pushed how far the company could go with it. The choreography in the piece, albeit beautifully executed, did not explicitly generate any new departures in McConnell's choreographic language.</p>
All (if relevant)	<p>Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection Please indicate how the event originated eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, artist-led or commissioned.</p> <p>If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme.</p>	5	<p>Parallel / Parallels was presented as part of the Dancebase Fringe programme which consistently presents a confident Festival programme of Scotland based artists alongside international counterparts, giving much needed exposure for these artists to new audiences, especially peers, promoters and critics from outside Scotland. The piece was programme into a 9pm slot – a nice option for dance fans perusing the Fringe brochure for a late night option.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Success of event against stated aims - in the programme or other printed material, including how well it communicated the artistic themes.</p> <p>Education events – see ¹below for guidance</p>	3	<p>As a producer, I came to this piece excited about the potential of it bringing a great team together who would deliver what the brochure promised to be “cutting edge performance”. The gravitas of the ensemble and the individual performances, especially Michael Marra shimmying in silver, was a joy but I didn’t feel the choreography was taking the company in any new directions and I didn’t feel that the piece succeeded totally in making connections between the narrative and live action.</p> <p>My piece flitted between styles – sometimes abstract sometimes familiar. My feeling is that the piece had a choice to go down one of two routes, either to become more abstract, conceptual and experiment more with form – the dance form and the construct of traverse style ‘parallel’ audiences. Or to have settled into the other style explored in the piece – the personal and warm tones that writer John Harvey and these particular performers do so well – and to stick to with one clear tone and form of delivery. Unfortunately the piece flits in tone between sections of the show being delivered up close to the audience (almost directly addressing us) contrasting with using of narrative that at times was remote and disembodied. I struggled with navigating these shifts.</p> <p>I would have liked to have felt challenged more by the dance material and to have revelled in the fantastic dance abilities of the assembled performers but the physical set up of the space and the design of the piece didn’t lend itself to choreographic potential being explored. On reflection, I feel the construct of splitting the audience on two sides of the performance space and using barrier like screens to delineate the performance space hindered the piece rather than supported the vast potential of the subject matter and did not allow the choreography to satisfactorily expand.</p> <p>By the end of the piece, I didn’t feel any more reeled in by quantum theory however I did leave the venue feeling uplifted by the affirming power of exquisitely performed dance.</p>
All	<p>Performers/tutors - technical standard, performance skills and ability to communicate and engage.</p> <p>Where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.</p>	5	<p>Frank McConnell elicited compelling performances from his gifted ensemble of established performers. Individual performances from Chris Devaney, Libby Daye, and Tom Ward were highly expressive and performed to the highest technical standard. Special note should be given to Malcolm Shields versatility as musician for most of the piece before</p>

¹ Education is a bridge between artform excellence and increased access and participation, and it is people centred. Providing opportunities for learning and progressing in an artform or using an artform to address other, non-artistic, outcomes are equally valid; in either case a high quality strategic approach is required in order to benefit the participants and the organisation. Delivery can be through workshops, post/pre-show discussions, outreach work, etc aimed at any age group.

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			<p>performing an exquisite dance solo at the climax of the show, with an almost spiritual quality.</p> <p>Michael Marra provided magic moments in the show, performing with his trademark couthy and quizzical style.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	3	<p>Overall the choreography in Parallel/ Parallels Dance vocabulary was safe and did not break any new ground.</p> <p>The dance vocabulary, although beautifully performed, was restricted to a limited choreographic palette and was squeezed by two ambitions within the piece. Firstly, to incorporate narrative and dance and secondly by constructing a performance played across an audience split across two sides of the room. This necessitated the dancers to interweave movement between the screens in the performance area, which hindered the potential for expansive phrases or much travelling across the floor. This resulted in choreography that tended to be restrained, with movement mainly performed on one level with minimal floor work or lifts. There were exceptions and at times the choreography worked well with the set, revealing parallel viewpoints, as performers manipulated and turned the screens to quite literally change our point of view.</p> <p>Where Frank McConnell's choreography had special quality was when the dancers' created motifs to illustrate particular phrases within the narrative, such as "plucking things from our head" or "atoms of hand". At these points, the choreographer's skills sharpened our focus and connected us to the text in a meaningful way.</p> <p>The main preoccupation with the theme in the first half of the show seemed to stifle the possibilities of the choreography however the second half was more successful. Here, the different aspects of the production worked in harmony more with the choreography – direction, groupings, solos, duets. The placing of the dancers in relation to the screens and to one another was stronger and the movement choices seemed more intentional. Choreography became more fluid, showing off the dancers' capacities and created sequences rich in strength, tension, intimacy and tenderness.</p>
Theatre	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.	3	<p>The threads of the different narrative styles explored in Parallel / Parallels failed to weave into an interesting whole over the course of the piece.</p> <p>The first time we hear the voice-over in the opening section of the piece I'm drawn into its musical texture and reflect on the deep quality of the Scottish accent and like how the sounds of other</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			<p>languages – Italian and French - weave into this vocal score. However I don't lock into the philosophical musings of the narrative and find similar content distracting as the piece evolves. The script sits slightly apart - too disembodied - in a piece that is performed with great presence and warmth by a cast who are brilliantly talented at story telling and expressing ideas, whether through their movement vocabulary, facial expressions or songs.</p> <p>Fragments of text are stylistically often at odds with each other and an incongruity exists in how different narratives are delivered, flitting between highly personal and accessible speeches delivered to the audience to listening to the literally disembodied voice dealing often with remote lofty concepts.</p>
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	3	<p>The text came in really too early for me to appreciate it so I never quite caught up with it again. Overall the opening section was too busy, throwing out lots of possibilities and suggestions to the audience all at once and it was confusing. I would have settled into the piece more if the director had been more decisive in selecting one particular style from where to deliberately move the piece forward. Clarity was needed in the direction to underpin the choreographic themes. As it stood, the show meshed part performance-installation, lofty text, elements of musical hall and dance theatre.</p> <p>The second half was more successful.</p> <p>We come back in and the screens have moved by 90 degrees, giving a sense of the scene shifted but the band's performance having continued from the end of the first half, in some parallel performance. We are literally offered a fresh perspective on the action.</p> <p>In the final section of the piece, the two parallel sides eventually open up and the space is unified, allowing the different performers in the ensemble to meet. In the end, the piece culminates on a real high.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/recorded) to the production.	5	<p>The specially created score was performed live by musical maverick Michael Marra, with accompaniment occasionally by other cast members. This was a real treat. Music was playfully performed and added hugely to the intensity, rhythm, and dynamics of the show.</p> <p>Musical influences blended elements of world music and traditional Scots, creating a score underpinned by aboriginal like tones, a universal "Ohm" chant, Marra's 'moothie', the chanter and Marra's trademark poignant lyrics.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
Dance, Theatre	<p>Design – costume, set, lighting. Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.</p>	4	<p>The piece revolved quite literally around the elegant design of 4 large scale metallic screens which created borders between the audience on either side of the space and clearly defined a sequence of evolving temporary performance areas during the show. The performers could open up and close down slats to suggest parallel views and different perspectives to the audience. At times during the piece, these sculptural objects allowed very specific elements of the choreography to be revealed – a hand, a head, half a body but for too much of the performance I felt this monumental design determined the scope of the choreography and limited the potential to fully develop movement ideas.</p> <p>The performers moved gracefully in well designed elegant tailored costumes – shirts, skirts, suits in neutral greys. The exception was Michael Marra whose costume had a touch of lounge-lizard spangle that wonderfully emphasised his dapper onstage Band leader / MC persona.</p>
All	<p>Quality of Presentation/Engagement</p> <p>Performing Arts - technical presentation of the production (eg lighting and sound cues, etc).</p> <p>Crafts/Visual Arts - Use of equipment, space and overall layout/hang</p> <p>Education events - relevance/ appropriateness of presentation and teaching methodology (one to one, group, child centred); details of participant group and activity, including genre.</p>	4	<p>The overall production values of the show were high and professionally executed.</p> <p>The lighting in the piece worked well, particularly in the space within Dancebase where the lighting used the high ceiling of the venue and mirrors to good effect and added atmosphere. Specially created gobos featuring maths equations and membrane like patterns picked up the themes of quantum theory.</p>
All	<p>Audience</p> <p>Performing Arts - appropriateness of the production for the audience/participants; estimate the size and reaction</p> <p>Crafts/Visual Arts – time spent, interest, activity, and visitors' books comments, number of visitors/ participants at the time of visit</p> <p>Education/learning – pre-event involvement, participants/ schoolteachers reaction, understanding, commitment, enthusiasm, number involved, etc</p>		<p>The FOH staff presented us with a choice on entering the spaced asking whether we wanted to watch from side A or B, situated at opposite sides of the performance space. This was a quirky and engaging touch that created heightened anticipation about what was about to unfold.</p> <p>The show was full on the night I saw it with approximately 70 seated in two long parallel rows either side of the performance area.</p> <p>I chose to sit on Side A which I felt was slightly more 'performed to' than the other side...I wonder if they had a parallel sensation of that on Side B?</p> <p>There were moments during the show that I caught glimpses of the audience opposite, who seemed</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			engrossed in the piece, and the layout did succeed in making me wonder about what the parallel experience of encountering the action from that other side of the space would be like.
All	Additional Interpretative activity – what activities were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist’s talks, discussion groups? Please indicate age-groups targeted.	n/a	I wasn’t aware of any particular activity.
All	Outcomes of education activity – what learning/skills development took place? What did participants take away with them? Are education resources being provided for follow up work? Is it strategically linked to the curriculum (formal or informal)?	n/a	I wasn’t aware of any particular activity.

2. Management of Event

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and the venue, with reference to the checklist below, including additional comments/observations. Please try to view the venue and the services, and interpretative material as though you had never visited it before eg if you did not know the venue's location, how easy would it be to find your way there, and to find your way around once you had arrived?

Criteria	Comment
Suitability of the venue for the event	The large upstairs studio at Dancebase lent itself to the staging of the work and the traverse style seating. The fabulous roof terrace in Dancebase also provided a lovely place to spend the interval.
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	All of the shows featured in the Dancebase festival programme enjoyed good FOH presence in the venue. Plan B produced a programme for the show that included a personal welcome from Frank McConnell, the company's Artistic Director, which was a nice touch. The company showed a commitment to audience development by listing lots of useful websites in the programme, relating to quantum theory and welcomed audience feedback in a short questionnaire handed out with the programme notes.
Publicity/ pre-publicity – leaflets, posters, websites, etc. What is produced, is it easy to understand and where can you get the information? Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event and comment on the company/organisation's website.	Publicity that I was aware of included posters produced by Plan B. The full page in the Dancebase festival brochure was accessible and carried a friendly recommendation from Morag Deyes. The SAC website had a special feature on Plan B in the month leading up to the festival and the show was advertised in the arts newspaper The Skinny.
Ease of booking and payment	When booking tickets by telephone, around 4 weeks before the festival the receptionist at Dancebase was neither confident with the sale, nor efficiently familiar with the venue's Festival programme let alone this particular work, e.g. she couldn't give me a running time for the show (very important for a late night event) even though the approximate running time for the show is printed in the inside cover of the Dancebase brochure.
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	Excellent
External signage and signposting	Excellent
Internal directional signage	I didn't see any telling us that the show was in an upstairs studio but FOH staff were very helpful and pointed us in the right direction.
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	Excellent. Lift from ground floor access up to venue.
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	The 9pm slot is rare for dance during the Fringe and was a welcome addition to the programme.

Criteria	Comment
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	On the evening of the event the quality of FOH experience in Dancebase was excellent.
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding ²	SAC was clearly credited in the Plan B programme, posters and also in the ad for the show in The Skinny magazine. There was no acknowledgement of the SAC support directly next to Plan B's entry in the Dancebase brochure, although SAC was credited with general funding acknowledgements elsewhere in the brochure.

² In press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, company's website, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising, recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc.) Where the event is publicised in the programme brochure of another organisation (eg venue, gallery, etc) then SAC acknowledgement should appear against the particular programme entry for this event.

3. Organisation's Comments (optional)

This is the organisation's opportunity to respond to points raised within this assessment. Please do not feel obliged to fill this section in. In the spirit of the Quality Framework, we would ask that any comments are self-evaluating, providing an insight as to why, if there is, a major disagreement of response between the organisation and the evaluation, in a constructive way.

This will not alter the rating given by the assessment, but will allow the organisation the opportunity to give their opinion/feedback. The Scottish Arts Council reserves the right to edit comments if they are deemed to be libellous or defamatory.

As the Scottish Arts Council implements the Quality Framework internally, we intend to publish artistic evaluations on organisations that we support regularly on our website. The final artistic evaluation, including the organisation's response will be published on a quarterly basis on our website.

Please keep your response to max 500 words. If we do not hear from you in 15 days, we will assume that you do not want to respond.