



## 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:** X Factor Dance Company

**Venue:** Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh

**Title of Event :** Query

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

**Date of Visit:** 18<sup>th</sup> February 2009

**Overall Rating:** 3 - Competent

As a cross-Atlantic collaboration between two quite different choreographers – Edinburgh's Alan Greig and New Yorker Gerald Casel – this brought fresh energy and physical attack to X Factor's usual body of work. Casel's dancers who joined Greig's company for the tour – have a technical range and a broad movement vocabulary. Partially improvised it doesn't always hang together. But the end result is far dancier and more pacey than the gesture-laden material that Greig has majored in over his long career. What lets Query down is the subject matter and the way it is handled. Loosely based on Gore Vidal's twin novels Myra/Myron Breckenridge – about a male to female transsexual whose gender swap leads to schizophrenia – it is a confusing exploration of a complex issue. Dressed in suspenders and black PVC and striking pole-dance poses the seven-strong cast the roughly hour-long piece is mostly entertaining to watch. But it comes over more floorshow than any exploration of transgender or identity issues – whether abstract or otherwise. While the proposal to use two choreographers (with help from the company thrown in) is original and bold – the lack of overall direction and singular vision here is clear.

Name: Ellie Carr

Date: 13.03.09

**Specialist Advisor**

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	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.	2	<p>There are many ideas in X Factor/Gerald Casel's collaborative work, 'Query'. So many it is hard to pinpoint a central theme. The source material – Gore Vidal's hyper-real novel series featuring psychotic transsexual Myra Breckenridge/Myron – is intriguing if wildly ambitious. But as the choreographers' state, the twin novels are a jumping-off point; we are left to 'create our own stories and interpretations'.</p> <p>Greig's hallmark with X Factor over 19 years has been a wonderfully direct and accessible approach; most notably using gesture, spoken word and soundtrack to draw a roadmap through his work. Here we get a mish-mash of Euro-dance performance styles gesturing at rather obvious clichés of transgender lifestyles (PVC, suspenders, pole-dancing, stripping). I have no problem with the sexual content but the overall feel is more seedy strip joint than the challenging but sophisticated exploration of gender identity and transsexual politics expected. Greig is no stranger to strong sexual themes – and it is good he has the bravery to tackle them through dance. But in terms of both ideas and execution this is confused and confusing.</p>
All (if relevant)	<p>Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection</p> <p>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>	3	<p>Billed as 'a New York/Edinburgh collaboration' this is an artist-led initiative that originated with Alan Greig's X Factor Dance. The idea to work in tandem with another choreographer arose in 2005 when Casel visited Scotland to work on Stephen Petronio's 'Lareigne' for X Factor. The resulting work is a co-production between X Factor Dance and GerardCaselDance. The tour is supported by the Scottish arts Council and Dance Base but it is not clear if there is support from the New York side. There is no mention of the event on GerardCaselDance's website, even though there is a US date at the end of the tour.</p>
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 <sup>1[1]</sup>below for guidance</p>	2	<p>The stated aims could have been clearer in printed materials available. The glossy gatefold programme has a foreward each from Greig and Casel. But these are not so much 'aims' or an outline of any kind; rather musings on the artistic process with a few personal acknowledgements tagged on the end. The less is more approach is fine; but this</p>

<sup>1[1]</sup> 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

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			<p>work leaves you scrabbling for programme notes.</p> <p>Greig writes that Query is ‘inspired but not based on’ Vidal’s twin novels Myra Brekenridge/Myron. He describes the piece as an ‘abstracted’ version; the audience being invite to create their own ‘stories and interpretations’.</p> <p>Leaving things to audience interpretation is all very well. But the central theme here – Myra has a sex change to become Myron and the male and female sides of her body embark on a schizophrenic battle – is a complex one that demands a more explicit approach.</p> <p>There is a general aura of moody sexuality stalking the stage. There is cross dressing. There is dressing and undressing. There are impassioned and sweaty tussles between male and female dancers (presumably representing the battle between male and female identities within one body).</p> <p>Yet it boils down to a fairly shallow exploration of gender/transgender issues. With such an emphasis on the sexed-up PVC-clad side of transgender culture – it begins to feel like an extended drag act.</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>	4	<p>This was by far the strongest aspect of the show. The cast of seven comprised dancers from both X Factor and GCDC and the injection of fresh bodies raised the technical standard overall. The GCDC dancers (particularly Lindsay Mackay Ashmun) have an energy, attack and physical commitment that fed through to the whole company. Though there was a slightly throwaway quality to some of the sequences there were moments when sheer energy onstage was infectious and a joy to watch. X Factor’s Stuart Bowden engaged most fully with the subject matter; his come-hither eyes and animalistic prowling lit up the stage.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	3	<p>The movement vocabulary is strong, muscular and satisfying. Here Greig’s dramatic sensibilities come together with Casel’s gift for creating flowing contemporary sequences and complex, sinewy duets and trios. However there is a fragmented look to the piece overall. At times the material looks like simultaneous solos rather than cohesive whole. It is noted that improvisation was used during performances; you get the feeling it wasn’t tightly managed enough on the night.</p>

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>That credit is given in the programme to the whole company as co-choreographers adds a note of caution too: the current fashion for creating a piece by committee can compromise vision.</p> <p>Seen at close quarters in the Assembly Rooms there is an intimacy to the piece; eye-contact is used to great effect. The open wings are exploited too. We see performers waiting and marking steps at the sides seamlessly become part of onstage action: the line between on and offstage blurred. With a strong group of dancers though the opportunity for ensemble sequences seems squandered; the piece takes on a collective energy towards the end. A pity the company weren't used to full effect earlier on.</p> <p>The length of the piece was about right for contemporary dance on this scale.</p>
Theatre	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.		N/A
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	2	<p>Alan Greig is at his strongest as a director-choreographer: he has a great eye for telling gesture and sharp comedy timing. Here – perhaps for good reason – he appears as a performer: losing the ability to step outside the work. This is an issue which has cropped up before and one Greig is aware of. A shame as more than anything Query lacked an outside eye pulling everything together.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/recorded) to the production.	3	<p>Music/soundtrack has historically been a particularly strong aspect of X Factor's work. Again this commissioned soundtrack is from longtime collaborator Tom Murray and it has the usual mix of atmospheric real-life sounds, samples and looping melodies running through. Though perhaps not the most memorable or outstanding of their collaborations it serves the dance well.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Design – costume, set, lighting. Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.	2	<p>Set and lighting design is fairly sparse and workmanlike: allowing the dance to take centre-stage. There is a clothes rail with a series of costumes that are worn and discarded through the piece. Clingy PVC and suspenders abound and do look good on the dancers' toned physiques. Along with plain white men's shirts they are worn by men and women alike. But as touched on before, the stockings-and-suspenders take on transgender</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			culture looks more strip joint than anything else.
All	<p><b>Quality of Presentation/Engagement</b></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>	3	This was an unconventional performance with aspects of improvisation in a non-permanent performance space. Given these factors the technical presentation on all fronts was very good.
All	<p><b>Audience</b></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>		On the night I attended the auditorium was near capacity. The audience seemed mainly comprised of regular dance attenders and local dance students. The response was reasonably enthusiastic.
All	<p><b>Additional Interpretative activity</b> – what activities were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist's talks, discussion groups? Please indicate age-groups targeted.</p>	N/A	None mentioned on programme; X Factor website or in other publicity materials.
All	<p><b>Outcomes of education activity</b> – 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)?</p>	N/A	

## 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?*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Suitability of the venue for the event	The Assembly Rooms has decent auditoria for dance of this scale; though limited in seating and not as welcoming as venues like Traverse or Dance Base itself. Those who have attended performances during the Edinburgh Fringe may be struck by the lack of atmosphere. Those who arrived with time to spare were disappointed to find no cafe, bar or even seating area and were left to stand about in the lobby or leave the venue to find refreshments/somewhere to socialise.
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	Window displays leading up to event were excellent and eye-catching. Inside the venue however you would not have known there was an event on – far less that it was dance and what the content was.
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 surrounding the event was pretty good. Attractive fliers/posters with a neat tagline 'A New York/Edinburgh Collaboration' adding a touch of both humour and glamour. Photography fairly striking – though not necessarily giving much insight to the content of the show. The warning 'not suitable for under-14s' adds a note of intrigue as well as a helpful guideline for parents.
Ease of booking and payment	Booking made online through Dance Base website. Very easy and efficient. Tickets arrived by post quickly.
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	Possibly the easiest venue to find in Edinburgh! Excellent bus and train links.
External signage and signposting	Despite its central location Assembly Rooms lacks decent external signage and signposting outside Festival time. The night I attended no effort had been made to alert the public the was in use that night. In fact on arrival the front doors were closed and locked with number of audience members waiting outside. This caused some confusion as there was no indication of when doors would open.
Internal directional signage	Very poor. Had to rely on two box office staff at an impromptu table to find out where performance was taking place.
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	The Assembly Rooms has ground level access, with lifts to the upper floors and wheelchair access to most of its spaces. No evidence of induction loops or other additional needs provision was obvious.

Criteria	Comment
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	At around an hour the length of the show was about right for medium-scale contemporary dance. The 7.30pm start time tends to be the norm for slightly longer shows but worked fine here as the venue is central and easy to get to.
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	The box office and front of house were friendly and professional. Although it was not made particularly obvious whether the staff behind the makeshift desk in the lobby were taking tickets or selling them – leaving some audience members confused.
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding <sup>2[2]</sup>	Prominent on printed materials and X Factor website.

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<sup>2[2]</sup> 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.

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