

CrossPlay

The title provides the first clue to the conception of Maxine Heppner's music and dance residency project: both 'cross' and 'play' have a variety of meanings, all of which are intended. Her organization is called Across Oceans Arts, and her work over a lifetime in dance has involved crossings of various kinds, especially borders; geographical ones, but also those around various dance and music forms. One meaning, expressly stated in the project description, comes from gaming, when players using different systems can still play together, 'creating new shared worlds', as Heppner put it in her call.

Heppner wanted dancers and musicians first of all to cross the hall between Small World Music and her studio in IGAC and play – frolic, play – make music on their instruments, play – the dancer, the fool, around, a hunch, with fire, and keep doing that, even when it led to being cross with each other or working at cross purposes, because the crossing, that is, cross as in hybridization, or cross as in crossing a river, was so important – of styles, techniques, personalities, and art forms.

Fourteen dancers and sixteen musicians accepted the challenge of this residency. Since, as Heppner wrote, 'the best way to know each other is to spend time together', what participants were given is the gift of that time. There was no requirement of any other kind than that some number of musicians and some number of dancers come together for four sessions of three hours in the provided studio spaces. On April 16, they would share whatever they wanted to of their work to that point.

Feb 3 was the very first day when participants came together and introduced themselves. Every single person struggled, musicians and dancers alike, with the problem of putting themselves into some recognizable category, and explaining without taking too much time, what it was they did: saying a word, but hedging, paraphrasing, apologizing, justifying how they did and didn't fit within the term. The process of introduction became a vivid example of a phenomena that Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking pointed out, that there is a looping effect between the category and the person to whom it applies: we change in response to our labels. The artists in the room expressed their awareness of that pressure through their resistance to it: tugging and pulling, making the label change instead. Wacking, street dance, folk dance, fusion, butoh, contemporary, African, improvisation, all failed in being an adequate articulation of whatever they did. They only resorted to these words out of desperation at confronting the limits of language.

Once Heppner organized partnerships based on expressed interests and affinities she'd noticed, with Paula Sophia Morales and Neda Mohammadpour of Small World Music, smaller groups formed and the talk became more focused. The drum came out, then the piano, and a dancer who didn't care to be confined by the label 'bharata natyam' started to move, seated, using gestures. One dancer put on tap shoes and placed her board. The guitarist played something saying, 'I could start with this sort of melodic line...'. Some participants took out their

phones to show each other something they'd done, or something they liked, or to listen to something. I heard words here and there 'storyline...ritual...tasks...16 beats'.

By the end of the first evening, with Heppner's help and active interventions, taking into account the constraints of people's schedules, the number of artists, the needs of some instruments and the variety of techniques, working groups were finalized. Some came together like magnets, others were shuffled around into partnerships with which some were ecstatic and everyone was satisfied.

These are the groupings that finally emerged:

Dancers:

Aisha Sasha John, Alicia Grant
George Stamos

Brianna Maltais

Chantelle Mostacho

David Noseworthy-Shibatani
Rakeem Hardy

Lucy Rupert, Mafa Makhubalo

Newton Moraes, Pulga Muchochoma

Oriah Wiersma

Rachana Joshi

Rumi Jeraj

Musicians:

Ali Massoudi

Tarek Ghriri, Gandhaar Amin

Ori Chacon, Fedor Bondar

Patrick O'Reiley, Just Prince

Honey Paw (Jurgita Zvinklyte, Matti Palonen)

Andrea Kuzmich, Shalva Lucas
Makharashvili

Grace Scheele

Luis Anselmi

Divka (Alina Kuzma, Zoe Santo), Ooldouz
Pouri

Heppner invited me to join her as an observer, catalyst and partner in discussions, giving me the freedom to approach my role as I saw fit. I felt it made most sense to observe and document, while innocuously indulging my own obsession with trying to understand the choreographic process. Because two studio spaces, each with one group, were being used at the same time throughout the project, I divided my time between them and watched as long as something that held my interest was going on. I missed three days of the work, but was there for some length of time on all other days, so I saw a great deal but not all of what was happening. My observations were directed towards isolating methods and processes from the movement and sound. Therefore my writing here will not discuss particular groups and individuals except where it's

confusing to do otherwise, but will deal with a range of practices from which I will generalize.

Beginnings involved figuring out how artists across disciplines could talk to each other. The search for a common vocabulary that could be used between two or three art forms, each with their own vocabulary, became the first imperative. Early conversations were also directed towards learning about each other as individuals. The labels that were hesitantly applied in the first round of introductions, were now expanded and made worthy of the person in the room. They discussed their training and life experiences, and what they wanted to get from the four sessions. Musicians played to show each other what they could do, dancers moved to show what they could do. Words like improvisation, structure, riffing, jamming, score, games, song, gestures, phrase, seemed to have different meanings for musicians and dancers; they had to find where those meanings intersected, or find other words.

It turns out this is not easy and can't be taken for granted. Sometimes it was by showing not telling that the connections were made. Many times the early conversations went on at cross purposes, neither side actually able to understand the point the other was making, while I, as an outsider could grasp it from both directions.

Heppner had made the point at the end of the first meeting, that she wanted music and dance to meet without one dominating the other. But in practice that is easier said than done.

Some dancers questioned what it might mean, 'to follow the music – the rhythm? the texture? the tonal qualities? the notes?' Nor was it only between musician and dancer that there was miscommunication. As one dancer said, 'Connecting with the musician is easy, it's connecting with the two other dancers that's hard.'

Other generalizations came out of conversations with Heppner, who observed from her vast experience as a dramaturge and outside eye. Both of us agreed on three fairly distinct, identifiable ways that both musicians and dancers started creating a work: from image, from internal feeling, or from structure. Since artists didn't normally put their process in precise language, or necessarily realize which one they were using, or stick to one throughout, confusions arose and seemed almost unavoidable. The dancer strictly focused on following an inner intention, to the musician looked like images with meaning – happy, open, pained, which would then evoke a musical response, some attempt to match that meaning. But the dancer was not thinking of images or trying to create images, but was following an internal impulse or feeling.

Both musicians and dancers had structures to which they could turn in a moment of stasis, especially those art forms with techniques that emphasized structures – folk singing, tap dancing, classical forms.

Image appealed to certain groups too: 'Change the key – B is chaos, F is love'. They were avoided by others, or used only as a starting proposition, as a compositional aid.

As all the groups finished their first sessions, I would isolate the one aspect that determined if a group had cohered into a unit, in the sense of being coherent to each other, was the degree of openness, the degree to which each one was able to accept that another person's way of doing things was as valid as one's own.

The middle phase brought out more clearly the differences in the three ways of working: image, internal feeling or structure. I say this while conceding that most groups resorted to all three in varying degrees. Another clearer demarcation emerged, between those focused on the process, and those with a clear goal in mind.

The groups each found a way to work. The group that valued structure could often map it or write it out. One group drew a spiral on the blackboard which became a way to organize their time together, talk about what they were doing, and make decisions. Music and movements were fitted into that shape. They established markers within that structure for specific moments: Death, Birth, Joy, Grief. They discussed and found how to begin, how to end, what the transitions should be.

Another group took structure to be a more organically developing element. They turned to writing, and reading what each of them had written, found themes that inspired improvisation, which then led to a shared world within which a certain quality of movement, and a certain system of sounds worked. Once that solidified then it was possible to move freely, because the thematic connectedness would hold across whatever they did.

Yet another group started to make a dance right away. The dancers learned a folk dance from the musicians, and also learned to sing the song as a way to not have one art form dominate the other. It was very important for this group to know each other in a deeper way, so telling life stories was very much part of the process. They used images as the basis for long improvisations: 'You are talking to your mother.' The images influenced the quality of the music.

Other groups were much more focused on process, but here also the development might start with an image or a decision about an internal cue. Each of these groups also found methods that made the working together satisfying. For example, one group brought in objects, wrote about them and used those observations as the basis for improvisation. One group used tasks and scores. Dancers imposed constraints, deciding to move only on the floor, against the wall, while seated. One dancer followed another, or gave instructions that could be interpreted in a number of ways: pay attention to the eyes; responds to the time signature; try to be one energy in two bodies; dance with a delay, to the memory of the music, not the music as it's playing.

All these exercises seemed designed to create a deeper listening or watching and furthered the connection between musicians and dancers. For example the last one, of dancing with a delay, is an effect in music that can be created with a device, and therefore not necessarily one the musicians immediately found very interesting, But it forced the dancers into such a state of active listening that it was visible, a felt intensity that carried into the movements. It also led the musicians to watch what the dancers were doing, to see if they could recognize how particular movements related to what they had played a few seconds before. I would not have known from just watching what the task was; the delay was not obvious, but it was a vivid reminder that one does not have to be able to do the task for it to be useful. Maybe the more impossible it is, as long it is interesting and one wants to do it, the more effective it actually will be in acting as a stimulus.

When questioned before their final sessions, dancers spoke to me about their goals, which may have been vague at the beginning, but sometimes became quite specific.

They wanted to

‘... work with live musicians. But in the process I realized I wanted to learn to listen deeply. Because we didn’t have to produce anything. I could concentrate on being fully present.’

‘...participate in a dialogue with different art forms.’

‘... find out what an improvisation practice is for me.’

‘...work with this particular dancer.’

‘...enjoy the inherent goodness of dance and music coming together, just that simple.’

‘...find a way to physicalize the music, not necessarily by making a dance.’

‘...meet people who would push me further in my practice.’

‘...make music as a dancer, keep developing a compositional skill.’

‘...make every choice purposeful.’

‘...enter a collaborative process in which I know my voice would be heard.’

‘...find out if I can sustain a practice as a working artist, find nuance, find a way out of my comfort zone.’

Challenges they had:

'Dancers have always worked with musicians, or at least with music, but musicians don't necessarily work with dancers. We are more culturally aware of how music affects the body, but dancing is not so well known – how watching dance affects the body.'

'Find it within myself to match the situation, not come with expectations, but go with the flow. That's not necessarily in my nature, so I had to learn that.'

'Figure out a set of rules we make for ourselves, rather than fall into the habit of a pre-existing code.'

'Understand the restrictions that come from being in classical forms, and figure out whether we had the ability to break out of those restrictions.'

'Working across disciplines is hard, especially if both are supposed to be equal.'

'Keeping the momentum between sessions was sometimes difficult.'

As the last session came before the sharing on April 16, process-oriented groups had a much harder time figuring out what to show. They had stayed away from decision making in their sessions, concentrating only on the practice of dancing and music-making. Since structure to some extent is unavoidable, they were at that point forced to make decisions at least in the sense of having a beginning and an end.

By the same token they were more relaxed. What they showed was fifteen minutes of their normal three hour sessions, and nothing more needed to happen.

For the groups who had created a structure, the showing was performative, embryonic, the first draft perhaps, but with all the elements of a composition in place. The audience could get a sense of what the finished piece might look and sound like, and even how well it would work on stage.

Having watched so many sessions I am able to say that the showing did not necessarily bring out the best and most amazing music and dance that had been produced over this time, but since that was not the point of the evening, it is something I note only to establish that the value of the residency lay elsewhere.

I witnessed many, many moments of exquisite dancing and music during the residency, and can testify to the exhilaration that creating those moments produced in the participants. That exhilaration was present at the showing, which became a joyous celebration of the connections that had been established through Heppner's gift of supported space and time.

What the various pairings showed most clearly is that there are connections on much deeper levels than can be figured out intellectually by the labels, since these are merely the superficial entry into a form. Rituals all over the world have a similar purpose and structure, so Finnish musicians and an African dancer can

find deep, meaningful ways of working together. Rhythm connects. Stories connect. Aesthetic values connect. As one of the dancers said, when I asked about how he formed the connection with the musicians, he said, 'The earth, the air, the water, they already connect us.'

CREDITS

Gitanjali Kolanad, Across Oceans Arts Associate

Maxine Heppner conceived, produced and facilitated CROSSPLAY 2026 in partnership with Across Oceans Arts, Small World Music and Dancemakers January-April 2026, in T'karonto (Toronto) Canada