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Interview with Timothy Brown about *Message Me*, presented as part of The Dance Makers (2009)

By Ashleigh Wheeler

Expressions have been lucky enough to have you on board since *On Thin Ice* in 2008, but this is the first time that you have choreographed for the company. Can you tell me a little bit about how that came about?

Since leaving Queensland Ballet, I was interested in moving, choreographically, into a more contemporary field. I was really excited about working with dancers from a complete contemporary background, and I knew that that would take my own choreographic journey, and style, and career in a new direction as well. I also like the idea of being quite diverse with the artists that I work with. So it was a change from working with a ballet company to a contemporary company, but one that I was really looking forward to and excited about, especially in terms of the creative process and the way that Expressions dancers work to find a product - the choreographic process is really interesting.

You have choreographed both ballet and contemporary works now. Do you find one more challenging than the other?

For me, this one has been the most challenging so far and that is because I have been given more time to create it. There was a longer creative timeframe. So I was able to be a little bit more experimental. I tried various approaches as to how I choreographed, particularly in terms of the collaboration with the dancers. I really wanted them to put their own stamp and mark on the work as well because I believe that they are all quite unique dancers. Ballet dancers often strive to have a similarity across the board. In contemporary dance, I like drawing on individual dancers strengths. I do that in classical dance as well, but there is that component where if you've only got six dancers as opposed to twenty on stage, it's more interesting to draw on the individual and unique things that they can bring.

About *Message Me* specifically, it's an exploration of very contemporary issues – messaging and technology, and its broader implication for how and why we communicate. What inspired you to create the work?

Yes, so the things you mentioned is more of a broader perspective on it, and I wanted that because I wanted everyone to be able to appreciate the work in their own personal ways - how they have been experiencing modern day lifestyles and encroaching technology and a faster-paced means of communication and expectation of that communication. However, for me, there was also a personal approach and that came from when I was overseas. I was on tour with friends and we had to very closely communicate when we were overseas, relying heavily on our phones and the Internet. There was a time when I lost my luggage and I only had my phone on me and I had to organise what I was going to do through organising different checkpoints with people in different cities and different areas and that's sort



of where I got the inspiration from - that point in time when I was relying heavily on what was in my inbox and what was in my outbox. So I got the dancers to record a lot of their messages to each other when they were on tour to get that same dynamic and from there we created a little bit of a map or a pathway in terms of how the movements connected and how they connected with each other. Also, there was this sense of a group finding a dynamic together and then that dynamic working in a strange way, dysfunctionally and beautifully, and horribly, and then eventually the group having to disperse and go their own separate ways, which in my life happened and in this piece it happens as well.

So do you have a Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Bebo, etc? Are you as obsessed with social networking sites as everyone else?

I use Facebook, but I don't think I use it any more than anyone else does. I wouldn't say that I'm any more obsessed. I think that there is this general shift that everyone has taken on board in terms of how they not only communicate, but how they express themselves, and I think that I definitely reference of the concepts of imagery that Facebook creates. For me, it [Facebook] is about images. It's about what images you can put out there to communicate with, and that's a little bit like what dance does as well, and I like that because that's how I communicate too. So, for me to see photographs shared, I really enjoy that. Even in this piece, I tried to get the sense of a snap in time or almost a photograph in time and then pull that photograph apart and see what really is happening in that image. There's also this thing that people now are a more aware that their images are so accessible, and sometimes there is this concept of having a dual layer of what they try to perceive for an audience, shall we say, and then what they really might feel. So, there is a mask behind what people really feel in terms of imagery and photos as well and that's been an inspiration too.

On *Message Me*, you've collaborated with a local musician, Danny Rhodes. How did that musical partnership come about?

It's actually been quite a long one so far. I worked with Danny on *thread*, which is a work that I created for Queensland Ballet and the Brisbane Powerhouse in 2003. That was our first project together. Since then, we've kept a fairly good musical relationship going. He is really interested in dance and there seems to be quite a good communication between us in terms of expressing our ideas and what it is that we want to create. I met him through a mutual friend who worked in administration for Queensland Ballet - she put me in touch with him. His world is not really ever anywhere near mine. He works with a band and composes with other artists and is deep within the music industry. So it was quite a creepy thing that we got to meet up, and that the relationship connected and that something really worked between us, which is a really good thing.

What can you tell me about the music for *Message Me*?

The actual pieces of music I don't think are that well known. They were pieces that I'd never heard before in other dances, so I thought that was quite unique because often you can't find things that aren't overly played - it is getting harder and harder to find music that you haven't heard before! But that's where Danny comes in, and that's



where his artistic input and his own composition, and his ideas and my ideas together were able to create, hopefully, a soundtrack that is really unique to the actual piece. We have tried to make it like that. For instance, we came up with idea of flying data sounds so that the soundscape matches the concepts and the imagery as closely as we could. There is also an element of traditional Islamic music that has been interwoven into the score, because I wanted a sense of worldliness to the music. So the traditional Islamic pieces gives it that depth, this feeling of coming back to people and religion, and of politics and race being more exposed in the sense that we know more about what's happening around the world a little bit more and that we are more aware of worldly issues.

So, where will see one of your works next? Do you have any other projects on the boil that we should look out for?

I hope to do works for Expressions again and, hopefully, my own my independent work as well. Something that is just under my own umbrella. I want to step outside of working in a company environment and try doing things on my own, but I've been really fortunate that I've been able to work with really great dance companies in Australia. It's been great.