

ARTS  
NORTHERN  
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Australian Government

**Creative  
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 PATTERNMAKERS

# Dance Sector Uplift

NOVEMBER 2023

# 1 Introduction

## Background

Arts Northern Rivers initiated a Dance Sector Uplift project to regenerate the dance sector following the 2022 flood and storm events

In July 2022 the [Creative Industries Recovery Forum](#) was held in Goonellabah in response to the flood and storm events that devastated much of the Northern Rivers region. The Forum gathered over 200 artists and arts workers to connect and discuss the question: **'What's next in terms of creative industries recovery?'**

A total of 45 topics were raised and documented. These topics were compiled into a report by Patternmakers, alongside further interviews, a desktop review of relevant data, and the NSW Government's 2022 Flood Inquiry report. The Creative Industries Recovery Forum Report summarised the areas of need and made recommendations for the priority interventions required for recovery of the region's creative industries.

Following the release of the report, three areas of focus were identified as 'Recovery Streams' by Arts Northern Rivers (ANR):

- ▶ Public Art
- ▶ First Nations Arts
- ▶ Dance/Physical Theatre

**The Dance Sector Uplift is a targeted response aimed at reviving Dance in the Northern Rivers region**

The Dance Sector Uplift is a conversation-led research project initiated by ANR as a direct outcome of the Creative Industries Recovery Forum and Report. The broader project aims of the Dance Sector Uplift are to:

- ▶ Reactivate and regenerate the dance, physical theatre, experimental performance and embodied practice sector (referred to from here on out as 'dance') of the Northern Rivers region (which encapsulates Bundjalung, Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr countries).
- ▶ Give voice to a sector that includes cultural and contemporary practice that is rarely heard, seen or supported.

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There is an immediate need for connection and re-vitalisation across the Northern Rivers creative sector, and a long-term goal to create a vibrant future for the industry. This includes a dedicated and valued place for dance.

### The Northern Rivers has the largest cultural industry in NSW outside of Sydney, and high rates of engagement, but dance and other types of performance need support to flourish

Dance Sector Uplift Project Lead Philip Channells said, 'the floods devastated every single sector - but the opportunity has been to come together in the devastation, and look in an open and transparent way at who we are and what's important. It allowed us to reflect and identify that we weren't as connected and networked as we could be.'

'There is strong engagement from kids and families with dance schools – enrolment numbers. But performance in this region hasn't had support and it feels like we're 20 years behind. Film, screen, music and visual arts are much more developed.'

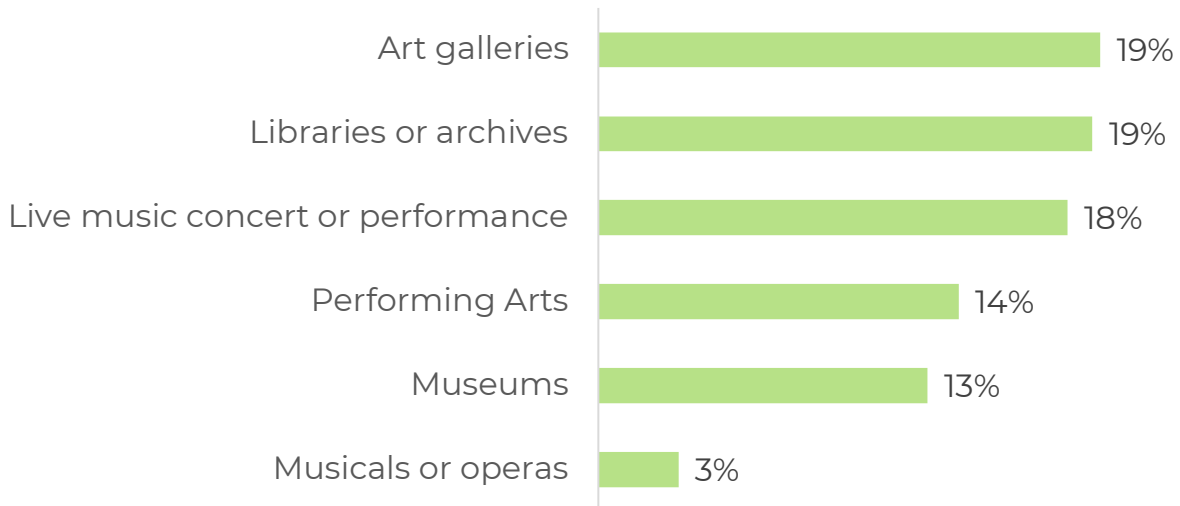
There is a perception that major dance organisations are not touring as much through regional areas as they have in the past. The cost-of-living crisis has also worsened regional access to opportunities.

Dance and performance in regional areas is fragile. Following a series of natural disasters and a pandemic there is a need to look at how to support this ecology so it can thrive into the future.

According to Philip, 'geographically the Northern Rivers is a massive area and reaching everyone is difficult. People want to create opportunities here, but they're not networked and organised here.'



Figure 1 - % of adults in Northern Rivers who attended selected cultural activities, July 2020 – June 2022



### There are examples of exciting dance projects in the region, but investment has been sporadic

The Creative Industries Recovery Forum Report discussed some of the funding opportunities for the creative industries of the Northern Rivers following the flood and storm events of early 2022. For instance, ANR supported over 220 individual creatives with one-off \$1,000 rapid response funds. One-fifth (22%) of these creatives identified as performers of some kind.

Additionally, in the past 2 CASPs (Country Arts Support Programs) in 2022/23, two out of 10 projects funded have been dance projects.

### Supporting the uplift of the dance sector has the potential to create benefits for individuals and communities

The specific characteristics of dance bring their own unique benefits. As stated by Philip Channells, 'dance is different to other artforms which have audiences in awe, on the edge of their seat. Because we all have a body and a connection to a body, we can relate to it, more so than a painting. There's that tangible physical experience that invites you into the performer's world.

Because it's a non-verbal form of communication, it allows people who are from very different backgrounds and lived experience to participate. It enables that person to be the author of their own creative expression – completely let go of the everyday world and the different stressors that we live with.

We have lots of different cultural groups and history – dance is a way to connect to country, to culture, to stories and each other. It transforms people’s lives and enables them to connect in ways that words can’t.’

## Dance can play a role in community healing and recovery

When communities are hit with disasters, there are immediate concerns that need to be addressed, namely ensuring that people are physically safe and have access to essentials such as shelter, food, and clean water.

Once these basic needs are met, the question of how to recover a community can be addressed from different angles and with various priorities.

The recovery of creative industries is central to a community’s recovery from a disaster. Not only are these industries the source of people’s livelihoods, but they can also positively benefit the wider community during the recovery process.

This can take the form of creative recovery, which utilises “community arts processes to support community cohesion, wellbeing, resilience, and capacity building in disaster recovery” (Source: [Impacts of Creative Recovery Report](#) by Creative Recovery Network and Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal).

Speaking about the recovery process after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, Lara Strongman (Director of Curatorial and Digital at the MCA, and formerly Head Curator at Christchurch Art Gallery) said that ‘what became clear was the great value of art in processing experience – people started to write, compose, dance responses to the earthquakes.’

- ❑ A report into the impact of creative recovery found that “creative recovery projects have a marked impact on lasting social capital and connection, leaving a legacy of enriched community social connection, closeness and affection whilst permanently strengthening complex and comprehensive partnerships for both creative practices and disaster management processes” (Source: Creative Recovery Report).
- ❑ The report also highlights that creative recovery “has the capacity to mitigate disaster impacts and the disempowerment which results from the stresses and strains of disasters, through its unique ability to build long-lasting community resilience, wellbeing and local capacity for disaster preparedness, response and recovery” (Source: Creative Recovery Report).
- ❑ Incorporating arts-based approaches (including dance and music) into recovery processes following a disaster can have “profound positive impacts on health outcomes, such as stress levels, emotions, social cohesion, and health behaviors” (Source: [Exploring Community Art and Its Role in Promoting Health,](#)

### [Social Cohesion, and Community Resilience in the Aftermath of the 2015 Nepal Earthquake](#)).

- ❑ Dance in particular was noted in one study as a form of physical activity that can help to build resilience, which can in turn help when coping with trauma after living through a natural disaster (Source: Bubbling to the surface - mental health and disaster recovery).

## Methodology

### Over 120 people contributed their perspectives, including local dance artists, First Nations leaders and representatives from funding bodies

A project methodology was designed to reflect the Northern Rivers region and its traditional owners. As Project Lead Philip Channells said, 'it's impossible to look at dance without looking at both cultural practice and contemporary practice.'

The DSU project was undertaken in two stages:

- ▶ Stage 1: Yarning Circle for First Nations artists (local and global), which engaged 20 participants.
- ▶ Stage 2. Digital Survey, which heard from 107 respondents from across the region and dance sector.

In addition, more than 50 consultations were held with local dance artists, as well as people outside the region who support Dance, including: Creative Australia, Create NSW, Critical Path, Ausdance, BlakDance, Dance Makers Collective, FORM Projects, Placemakers\* Gold Coast, Arts On Tour, Performing Lines, Bangarra, ADT, Karul Projects, The Farm, Shaun Parker & Company.

### A Yarning Circle

The first individual consultation included Sarah Bolt, a dance artist and knowledge keeper. In speaking with Sarah, the need for a Yarning Circle was identified.

The Yarning Circle was held on Easter Sunday 2023, attracting around 20 people, with another 10-15 invited but not able to attend. The Yarning Circle conversation was led by Ella Noah Bancroft and Mark Cora.

Most participants identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while others identified as Blak, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), who also felt underrepresented in the local dance sector.

Many participants were meeting for the first time. The Yarning Circle identified an opportunity to continue sharing knowledge and cross-pollinating ideas between cultural and contemporary dance.

Feedback was gathered from participants.

## Digital Survey

A dance sector survey was administered to enable the project to reach a broader audience. The survey garnered responses from casual dance hobbyists to artists touring internationally and making works of significant scale. Some responses were from dance artists who live in the Northern Rivers but are unable to make work locally due to a lack of opportunity.

The main objective of the survey was to 'think big about dance.' Some respondents were more reluctant to discuss big ideas, while others were very open to do so.

Responses from a total of 107 dance artists were collated. Byron Shire Council had 19 survey responses to a call out about its Arts and Cultural Strategy, so a result of over 100 is very positive in this context.

## This report analyses the data collected to identify the areas of need and recommend an approach for uplifting the dance sector

There was extensive feedback from participants about the need for events to share, present and gather.

The final stage of the process is the development of a report that documents the priorities for dance identified from the consultation process, and to share this with stakeholders in a webinar.

As Philip Channells remarked, 'we have an incredible amount of talent, experience and knowledge but a lack of opportunity to share that. People are ready now to come together, collaborate and support each other in the development of the regeneration and re-activation of dance in this region.'

# Overview

## Analysis of the Northern Rivers Dance Sector

By uplifting and connecting the sector, dance artists can make a bigger contribution to local recovery and Australian culture

Based on results from the survey, the Yarning Circle and consultations, the project has analysed the Northern Rivers Dance sector and its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Strengths:	Weaknesses:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Strong continuum</b> of active cultural dance as Indigenous storytelling in community, particularly children/youth</li> <li>▶ <b>History</b> of significant dance projects, companies, and the legacy of the Northern Rivers Conservatorium as a nationally recognised dance educational institution at the time</li> <li>▶ <b>Relationships</b> with dance artists, companies, festivals and events, regionally, nationally and internationally</li> <li>▶ <b>Audience demand:</b> strong participation rates and box office results – through to strong grassroots engagement in dance schools</li> <li>▶ <b>Local dance artists:</b> a large number of contemporary and cultural dancers living/working in the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Disruption from natural disasters:</b> spaces were lost, people were affected, sense of isolation and lost connection</li> <li>▶ <b>Disasters compounded pre-existing issues</b> for dancers to access space to practice and present dance, particularly in the cultural dance space</li> <li>▶ <b>Dance lags behind</b> other sectors recovering in the Northern Rivers, and there are inadequate opportunities within annual presentation seasons, and a lack of sector visibility</li> <li>▶ <b>Lack of connection</b> among dance practitioners, and between dance and other artforms</li> </ul>
Opportunities:	Threats:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Connection:</b> there is a strong desire and intention to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous dance</li> <li>▶ <b>Creative recovery:</b> Dance can play a role in community recovery from disasters and be an example for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Losing momentum</b> of current dance activity through resource shortage i.e. lack of dedicated space, opportunities, professional development, audience engagement, industry networks</li> </ul>



<p>recovery/resilience, particularly through socially-engaged practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Pathways:</b> sector development to ensure pathways exist for more mid-career/established dancers to sustain their professional careers in the region</li> <li>▶ <b>Hub for dance:</b> the region can become a focal point for regional dance in Australia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Continuing climate risks</b> – future floods/bushfires could further disrupt the community and dance sector, creating more missed opportunities</li> <li>▶ <b>Rising costs of touring</b> – national organisations are touring less, and lack of spaces could see fewer works reach the Northern Rivers</li> <li>▶ <b>Talent drain</b> – lack of local opportunities risks more dancers working outside the region</li> </ul>
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## Recommendations

### Long-term goals

Dance artists living and working in the Northern Rivers are ambitious about the future. The following long-term goals appear to have support from a large number of practitioners working in the region, and are worthy of further exploration:

- ▶ Establishment of a **dance centre** by 2030 to address long-standing concerns about connection and availability of indoor and outdoor venues for dance making, workshops and performances
- ▶ Founding of a flagship **dance festival** that cements the region as a dance hub – starting in 2025/6 and occurring bi-annually, with a full-length dance work by a local artist or company
- ▶ Expanding capacity for **dance residencies** that financially support local artists while drawing in and connecting national/international interest – starting in 2024 and linked with the dance festival
- ▶ Development and retention of **producing skills** in the region – for instance independent producer(s) dedicated to dance, or a producing company, working in both cultural and contemporary dance worlds.

### Short-term actions

Key actions that may be achievable for stakeholders to take in the short-term, to further develop a vision for Northern Rivers Dance, and make progress on the above goals include:

- ▶ Hosting a **gathering or 'convergence'** in 2024 to bring the sector together for talks, workshops, performances of short works



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- ▶ Addressing venue concerns by exploring and securing new **temporary and semi-permanent locations** for dance, such as repurposed spaces, outdoor areas and use agreements for key community halls
  - ▶ Promoting existing resources, and adapting national/regional programs for mid-career dance artists to support **grant-writing, producing skills, and audience development**
  - ▶ Investing in socially-engaged dance practice to explore the potential of dance in **community recovery from natural disasters**

Read on for the detailed sector analysis and recommendations.

## 2 Strengths of Northern Rivers Dance

### Profile of the sector

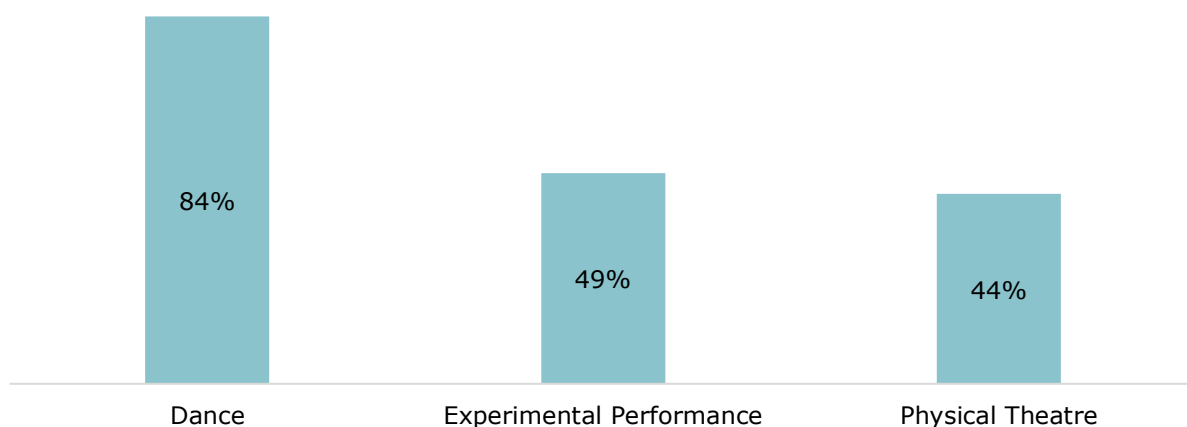
There are over 100 dance and physical theatre artists working or living in the Northern Rivers, many independently

The Hon. Ben Franklin, MLC, former Minister for the Arts, said: 'The Northern Rivers is home to the largest number of creative industry practitioners outside of Greater Sydney. The region is renowned for its imagination and creativity. I am acutely aware of the profound impact it has on community.'

263 people participated in the Creative Industries Recovery Forum, including artists, creative businesses, cultural organisations and other stakeholders. Half (50%) of participants identified as independent artists, with 27% of this group identifying as practicing in the performing arts.

Responding to the Dance Sector Uplift survey, almost all (93%) of respondents said they are based in the Northern Rivers. The majority of respondents said they work in Dance (84%), 49% in Experimental Performance, and 44% in Physical Theatre. High response figures to all three categories demonstrate that many artists are working across all three areas.

Figure 2: I work in...(n=103)

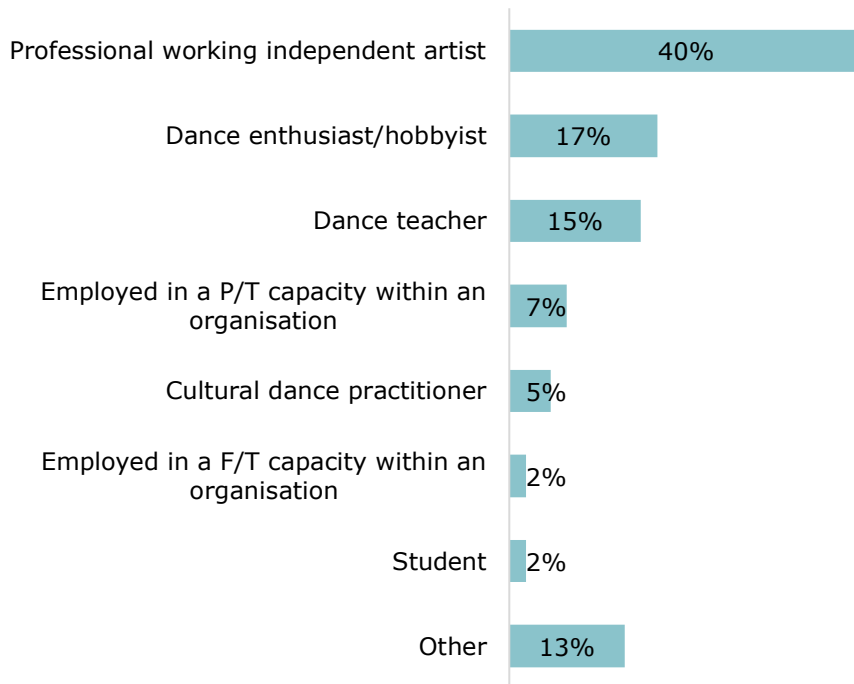


Four in ten (40%) of respondents stated that they are professional working independent artists, 17% are dance enthusiasts/hobbyists, 15% are dance teachers, 2% are students, 5% are cultural dance practitioners, and 13% 'other'.



Fewer than one in ten (7%) were employed in a P/T capacity within an organisation while only 2% were employed in a F/T capacity within an organisation.

Figure 3: I would identify my practice as...(n=107)

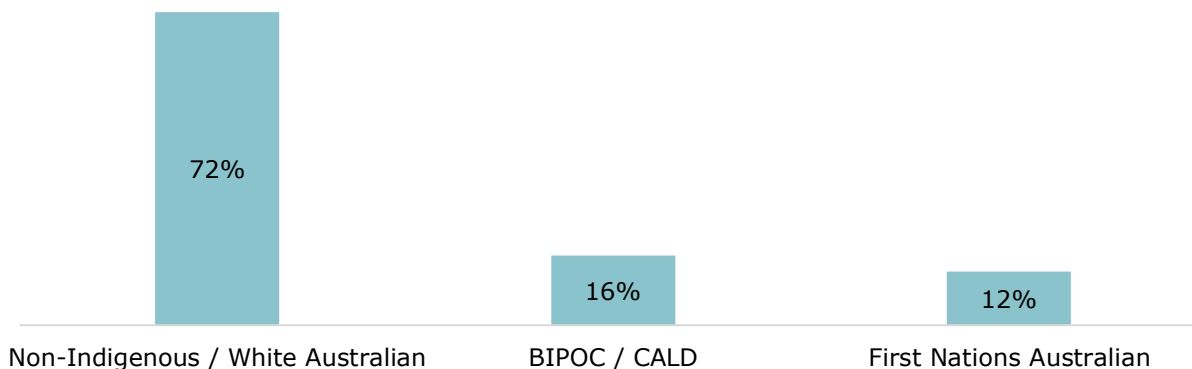


### One third of Northern Rivers dance artists identified as culturally or linguistically diverse, First Nations or BIPOC

Dance artists responded to survey questions which contributed to developing a profile of the demographic breakdown of dance artists in the Northern Rivers.

Around two thirds of dance artists in the Northern Rivers identify as non-Indigenous/ White Australian (72%). Meanwhile, just under one third (28%) identified as either BIPOC / CALD (16%) or First Nations Australian (12%).

Figure 34: I identify as...(n=106)



Although First Nations Australian is the smallest representative group in this survey (12%), this percentage of First Nations respondents is proportionately significant when compared to the percentage of First Nations people in the Northern Rivers as a whole, where just 5% of people identified as Aboriginal Australian or Torres Strait Islander (see [here](#)). This figure could point to the importance of dance in the lives of First Nations people in the Northern Rivers.

**KEY VOICES**

# Mitch King



Image credit: Kate Holmes

## Mitch King

### Bio

A Yaegl Bundjalung man from the Far North Coast region of NSW, Mitch is a creative producer specialising in hip hop music and dance.

He is one third of award-winning hip hop group Teddy Lewis King and teaches dance with young people around the region. Mitch has a background in youth work and collaborates with young people on community events and programs.

### Latest work

His production *FLOW*, a free outdoor community event celebrating kinship, culture and connection, is being presented across two locations in the Northern Rivers this November.

Joined by long term collaborator and musician Blake Rhodes, *FLOW* "is a yarn about Yaegl country and neighbouring nations, within NSW. It's a tale of searching and finding identity in music, urban culture and nature, an ancient story acknowledging how and why water flows through this region and its cultural significance."

Told through contemporary dance, poetry, visual imagery and rap, *FLOW* is a new dreaming, strengthening respect for Eldership and engaging young people in the living traditions held in local ancestral stories." ([source](#))

### Voice

When asked about where investment is most needed in dance in the region, Mitch said, 'I would invest more in First Nations work, young artists development and a facility that all dance practitioners can use to develop and present their ideas. Also more events!'

KEY VOICES

# Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal



Image credit: Jade Dewi Tyas  
Tunngal's *Opal Vapours* project



## Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal

### Bio

Jade is a Javanese-Australian dancer, choreographer, director and educator. Born in Darkinjung country NSW her imaginative and highly theatrical work has been made and shared nationally and internationally. She has ancestry of Australian Scottish Viking convict-settlers, kinship ties with Borobudur Temple 800AD and is a direct descendant of Yogyakarta's first Sultan 1755, Kangjeng Hamengku Buwana.

Awarded High Distinction for her Master of Choreography Research at VCA Melbourne University, Jade's work and exegesis *6/7 Empty* toured nationally supported by Kultour.

Jade is curious about the macro and micro implications of embodiment, cognition and communication in human anatomy and nature ecology. She is also involved in mentoring emerging artists, youth dance company and tertiary dance choreographic commissions, and intercultural exchanges in remote regional communities.

### Latest work

*SMOKE* is Jade's current work in development, a First Nations collaboration with Kirk Page, reweaving the sacred and mundane intensities of spirit. Exploring resilience and adaptation in her Somatic studies with the School of Body-Mind Centering she recently participated in the Northern Rivers Creative Recovery Training, facilitating community-centred creativity in a disaster impact context.

Her previous works *Opal Vapour* and *Enfold* are award-winning dance works created and performed in collaboration with Ria Soemardjo that have toured throughout Australia.

### Voice

Jade says, 'I would like to be more connected to the dance sector... When you do work, you have to climb another mountain to get the people there to see it and support it. I lack that business aspect of my practice, and that someone of interest might bill me and book me for work.'

When asked about where investment is most needed in dance in the region, Jade mentioned dance studio spaces and establishment of a professional dance company. She also called for 'Regional layers of engagement, Regional Youth Dance Events and Dance Festivals joining existing festivals i.e. Splendour'.

KEY VOICES

# Geraldine Balcazar



## Geraldine Balcazar

### Bio

Geraldine is a Chilean-born Australian-based contemporary movement artist, choreographer and mother artist.

Her work is collaborative and challenges the role of the audience in participatory sensory experiences towards building intimate connections. She is curious about minute micro-movements, stillness, silence; and what emerges from here, while using dramaturgical thinking to extend her art practice.

Balcazar continues to research the body-mind supporting her, her parenting and arts making. She has studied embodiment and somatics with Alice Cummins, put her studies into practice dancing in conversations with Meredith Elton, and sharing practice/motherhood with Ade Suharto. All while making time and space to have slow conversations on changing ways to care and connect through body-based practices.

### Latest work

She is the recipient of the 2023 Regional NSW Choreographic Research Fellowship from Critical Path where she is collaborating with Ira Ferris and Stella Chen to explore what a new relationship to time offers her practice and a different way to make work.

Asking, 'can time be decolonised while working with the body in performance? What shifts/transformations in the individual and social body could occur through a shift; if we decolonise time and slow down - as an innovative approach to choreographic practice?'

### Voice

When asked about where investment is most needed in dance in the region, Geraldine said, 'it has been challenging finding a space to work in that is close to my child's care and home (Tweed City). I have been very grateful to hot-desk at the [former] Arts Northern Rivers Office on Tuesdays in Murwillumbah and look forward to finding a new regular space to work in once they move back to Lismore.

The region is missing a dance space where artists can meet, exchange practice and rehearse towards a work or project but also to maintain arts practice.

Opportunities to meet and get to know one another and who is working in the region would also be of great support and potentially further collaborations and experiential projects in the region that don't need to leave to be developed and presented.'



**KEY VOICES**

Kirk Page

## Kirk Page

### Bio

Kirk is a proud Munanjali person born on unceded territory on Tulumur country in South East QLD with ancestral connections to Badu Island in the Torres Straits and Germany.

He began his career as a dancer and over the last 24 years he has performed in the theatre across disciplines including physical theatre, musical theatre, circus, dance and acting for stage and screen.

### Latest work

As a choreographer, dancer and physical theatre practitioner he has worked with Legs on The Wall, the Melbourne Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony, Bangarra Dance Theatre and Force Majeure. Kirk is currently working on Bundjalung country for the Koori Mail newspaper in regional NSW.

He was the Movement Director for the critically acclaimed production of *Dogged* for Griffin Theatre Company. Other directing credits include: Co-Director for Bathurst Circus and Physical Theatre Festival Catapult 2012; Director *To Whom It May Concern* at the Australian Centre for Theatre and Television; Associate Director Circus Oz Blakflip training program; Assistant Director *Bloodland* with Sydney Theatre Company and *Posts in the Paddock* with My Darling Patricia.

His roles have included NORPA's Associate Artistic Director and the director of *Djurra* and *Horse's Mouth* – a program for emerging Indigenous artists in partnership with Beyond Empathy.

### Voice

About his 2022 performance in *The Demon*, he is quoted in the National Indigenous Times as saying, 'I want our audiences to perhaps think a little deeper about this nation and what it's built on and the incredible communities that live here.'

When asked to what extent he feels connected to the dance sector, he says, 'A little connected but just as disconnected'. He describes himself as 'close to retirement edging on burnout & searching for enthusiasm and substance.'

When asked to think big about dance in the Northern Rivers, he said, 'I would buy a property with accommodation and amenities, and a venue to house creative process and artists... and set up a dog rescue service and retire and hang with the homeless dogs and grow organic veggies and supply fresh produce to the artists and run the venue.'

KEY VOICES

# Robert Alejandro Tinning



Image credit: Hamish McCormick

## Robert Alejandro Tinning

### Bio

Robert is a Clunes-based movement artist and choreographer dedicated to creating, developing and sharing original multidisciplinary art projects. A graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) in 2015, he has performed for Stephanie Lake Company, Shaun Parker & Company, Tasdance, STRUT Dance and a number of independent creators, on national and international tours.

Robert holds cultural-futuristic movements as his biggest inspiration, with the Afro-Latino cultures being especially personal to him. Understanding that performance art and live art are practices of human connection, he has already begun to act nationally and internationally. His projects have focused on inter-generational interdisciplinary art exchanges and creative developments, in collaboration with institutions and artists, in regional and urban centres in Australia and overseas. Robert is currently on a self-directed dance-based residency in Brazil.

### Key works

As a movement director, Robert is currently invested in the development of 'The Drip', a multi-artform performance installation designed for non-traditional spaces, and has closely collaborated with Perth-born actor/director Dacre Montgomery of Netflix's 'Stranger Things' in the production and release of his short films 'IN VITRO' (2019) and 'NIGHTMARES' (2019), garnering nearly 2 million views across social media.

Robert is a collaborator with Dream Bigger (Northern Rivers Indigenous youth program), and Dance Integrated Australia (DIA). He is also a facilitator of DIA's socially engaged and inclusive face-to-face dance classes: MOVE IT for all neurological capabilities, abilities and age groups.

### Voice

'There's a major discrepancy in the amount of professional artists who successfully work on the national/international stage who have to leave the Northern Rivers for their professional careers, and the amount of funding for the sector that comes through the Northern Rivers.'

'My connection to the local dance sector is born out of grassroots led efforts during the pandemic. Prior to this there was very little I knew about the community. I've come to find out we are one of the densest professional arts populations in NSW. But that wouldn't be apparent in the lack of infrastructure, funding, and resources, for the local sector. Especially in such an arts hungry region of Australia.'

**KEY VOICES**

Sarah Bolt



## Sarah Bolt

### Bio

Sarah is from the Bundjalung nation, with connections to the clans of Widjabul (Lismore), Nyanbul (Ballina, Cabbage Tree Island), Bandjalang (Evans Head) and Githabul (Muli Muli).

She is a dancer, visual artist, mentor and cultural knowledge holder. Her passion is to support and encourage change through cultural, social and emotional wellbeing. She loves to dance, teach dance (contemporary Aboriginal dance, Hip-Hop, and traditional dance), deliver art-based activities (painting, weaving) and provide leadership.

Sarah has worked across several government, non-profit and performing arts organisations, and has experience with event coordination, project management and community engagement.

### Key works

In 2017 Sarah established the Nini Nahri-Gali's ('Aboriginal Female Dancers' in Bundjalung), an all-female dance troupe in Lismore created to identify culture, connection, identity, tradition and healing through movement and dance.

Sarah also played a pivotal role as manager of Yawarr Ngujawiny Aboriginal Corporation, a dance group based in Coffs Harbour, and works closely with Saltwater Freshwater Arts Alliance delivering dance workshops, and as a performer with Solid Young Fellas and Sistas in Canberra.

Sarah established First Nations fashion business Mahmi Guyamgan Bahna, ('Mother Star Rise Consultancy' in Bundjalung), working with First Nations designers and models nation-wide and internationally. The business delivers workshops reflecting on fashion, design, personal development, creative arts, social/emotional wellbeing, mental health, domestic violence, and raises awareness around suicide.

### Voice

'When it comes to Traditional or Contemporary Aboriginal Dance it's not supported at all. But other mainstream dance is supported very little too. It lacks funding and having the right people who have the capacity to do this.'

When asked about where investment is most needed in dance in the region, Sarah mentioned 'employing skilled people, workshops, cultural creativity and off-country tours, dance productions and festivals, courses and a dance warehouse/studio to deliver this... as well as a bus, budget for catering, equipment to make this happen.'

**KEY VOICES**

Philip Channells

## Philip Channells

### Bio

Philip is a NSW regional-based artist living, working and playing in the Northern Rivers. He is the Creative Director of Dance Integrated Australia (DIA) - an artist led co-operative committed to the development of cultural communities inclusive of people from diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds and life experience.

Through his work with emerging and established artists, Philip has been a key contributor to the advancement of diversity in dance and has mentored many successful disabled artists. He has worked internationally, across cultures, generations and arts genres including dance, theatre, performance, film, installation and exhibitions, artist residencies and dance in education.

### Latest work

A DIA initiative, Philip is leading a team of creatives for the 'MOVE IT Dance Fitness Fun' workshop program. MOVE IT began as a way to get more people dancing in the NSW Northern Rivers region, with classes springing up in Byron Bay, Brunswick Heads, Lennox Head, Lismore & Repentance Creek. It connects the public with dance teachers who are also practising artists and provides an income stream for the creative team.

Creative relationships were also initiated through DIA which led to several new collaborations around the country. For example, Kayah Guenther and Gavin Webber's project, 'The Battle' was a Screenability funded project which received many awards at international film festivals around the globe.

Philip has also spoken on how to develop and sustain a regional practice and career and build community.

### Voice

'There is a lot happening, but everyone works in silos. Through the Dance Sector Uplift project, I am developing a wider view of the sector.'

'I'd like to see us share our practices ongoing so that we build towards becoming an identity of our own significance - so that people visit the region not only for music, art, food, nature, healing but they also witness and experience great dance, physical theatre and experimental performances made here with local artists.'

'Residencies that foster the growth and development of creative practice of emerging and established artists are part of the dance ecology that serves their communities.'



KEY VOICES

Katie Cooper-Wares

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## Katie Cooper-Wares

### Bio

Katie is an interdisciplinary performance artist and creative producer specialising in the forms of dance theatre, storytelling and comedy. Her collaborative, socially-engaged practice is driven by the untold stories of diverse artists and communities and the need to bring these to light through art.

After extensive dance and theatre training, Katie went on to study a Bachelor of Environmental Science; creating and facilitating Environmental Education programs (K-12) through an Arts lens. She is dedicated to staying curious, responsive and creative in a changing climate and making work that offers either reflection or respite.

### Latest work

Katie is the founder of the Creative First Aid Alliance which advocates for the arts in the recovery of the Northern Rivers post catastrophic 2022 flood event/s. She is currently receiving arts leadership mentoring by the Creative Recovery Network and as part of the Front and Centre: Arts Leadership Program (Accessible Arts).

Her recent professional development highlights include training with Force Majuere, Zen Zen Zo Theatre, Giovanni Fusetti, Action Theatre Australia, La Pocha Nostra & Mattel Destro.

### Voice

'It is hard to articulate the value of socially-engaged or community-engaged arts/artists in a world where so much focus is placed solely on an outcome. It is a way of working; collaborative and responsive in nature. It requires a deep interest in people. You can't fake it. It's not lip service or an add on.

My own practice in the Northern Rivers has taken a long time to build to a point where it is now sustainable, creatively rich and meaningful. It takes time to build relationships, you can't rush trust. It takes the time it takes. My work is constantly changing... it asks you to adapt amidst chaos, to pivot, to stay true to process but hold it lightly enough that change doesn't derail you entirely.

These ways of working are unique and undervalued. In a time of increasing unknowns, particularly in our region which has seen the effects of a changing climate up close, we need, more than ever to invest in our communities. Art brings us together. To dance, to respond, to reflect, to sing, to play. That we, as artists, can create places or experiences that reflect and strengthen our communities is an honor. One that we should not take lightly.'

## Key organisations

### The Northern Rivers has several resident companies and major events with an interest in dance

A number of organisations in the region play a role in the dance sector. While there is a limited number of dance-specific organisations/events, some with a broader remit (i.e. 'performing arts') also provide dance services and/or opportunities.

However, opportunities for obtaining ongoing work in an organisation in this space are limited, with only 7% of survey respondents identifying their dance practice as being employed in a P/T capacity within an organisation, and just 2% in a F/T capacity.

At the same time, there is still scope to make better use of the dance resources and opportunities that are provided by these organisations/events.

Three key examples of organisations in the Northern Rivers that play a role in the dance sector include:

- ▶ **Sprung!! Integrated Dance Theatre** – A not for profit community organisation based in the Northern Rivers that delivers a range of contemporary dance and community arts programs specifically for emerging d/Deaf and disabled artists. Sprung!! Ensemble develops original dance and contemporary performance works through collaborative and disability-led processes. It is both a training program - focused on developing the skills and experience of emerging artists who with disabilities and/or who are d/Deaf - and a professional performance ensemble who develop and present works.
- ▶ **NORPA** – Based in Lismore, NORPA is a not-for-profit arts organisation, led by a small team of theatre professionals. Making original Australian work is at the heart of what it does, and the company also programs and co-produces works by leading national companies. In 2020, it received multi-year funding from Creative Australia to create new theatre annually, continue to support local artists through an associate artist program and artist residencies, and to launch more activities and opportunities for young people interested in performing and theatre production. Since having its venue affected by the 2022 floods, it has presented two works: *Love for One Night* at the Eltham Hotel, and upcoming *FLOW* at the Lismore Quad and Maclean Showground.
- ▶ **Kinship Festival** – The Kinship Festival is an Aboriginal-designed and directed celebration of Aboriginal art, dance, community and culture, held annually as a free grassroots event. It is locally focused and regionally significant, showcasing cultural practitioners and bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from throughout the region. Kinship Festival is one of the region's largest cultural events, based in Murwillumbah and engaging Indigenous and Non-Indigenous families, while linking them to local support services and programs through shared learning and participation.

## Relationships with dance artists nationally

### Nationally, a range of high-profile dance companies and artists have a relationship with the Northern Rivers

Relationships exist within and between local companies and venues like NORPA, Sprung!! and Byron Community Centre, either through creative developments and making work in the region, or touring performances and workshops.

Jane Fuller of Arts Northern Rivers shares, 'there's evidence that when you bring dance companies and works to the region - they are highly valued. For example Bangarra, ADT, The Farm, Karul Projects all have strong past sales at NORPA. There's that strong audience attachment to these companies. Circa also have had a decade-long relationship with the region through NORPA and Spaghetti Circus.'

Works made in the region have achieved acclaim nationally. For example, Kate Harman from The Farm said, 'Cockfight, which was [made] in the region through creative developments, with showings to the public and then with its world premiere, went on to tour nationally, winning a Drovers Award for Best Touring Production and internationally, including England and Chile.'

## Audience engagement

### Dance companies say that audiences in the Northern Rivers are particularly engaged when it comes to dance work, compared to other regions

There is a history of strong audience engagement with dance, for instance:

- ▶ ADT
- ▶ Shaun Parker & Company
- ▶ The Farm

Nick Hays from **Australian Dance Theatre** said, 'We performed 3 shows at NORPA in 2017, which was at 75% capacity. For a regional touring venue this is a very high audience number, perhaps one of our highest across the country.'

ADT are looking to trial a visit to the region as part of regional touring planned in the lead up to its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They said, 'At the recent APAX conference we had an excellent conversation with NORPA about how we might trial a potential visit there, given the large population of practicing dancers and creative in the region.'

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**Shaun Parker** said, 'SP&Co has enjoyed several tours to the Northern Rivers with *BLUE LOVE*, *The Yard* and *Happy as Larry*... All of these shows sold out when we toured to NORPA, as well as the shows at the Byron Bay Community Centre where we even did a return season... When we did both *Happy as Larry*, and *The Yard*, we did additional schools workshops which were strongly attended. There seemed to be a very strong arts community in the area.'

Kate Harman from **The Farm** said, 'We have always said the best audiences in the world are in the Northern Rivers. They are engaged, enthusiastic and you can tell they get a lot out of the experience of live performance and the community aspect of coming together for a group experience and dare I say catharsis... We love presenting in the Northern Rivers/Lismore because of how engaged the community is. After shows they stick around and want to talk about the ideas of the work and this is not always the case even in capital cities. As a maker you want your work to have impact on the audience and this is strongly felt when they want to stick around and talk about the work after.'



## 3 Sector challenges

### Impact of the floods on spaces for dance

#### Dance artists are struggling to locate suitable venues following the destruction of the flood and storm events

Dance is, by nature, an embodied practice that requires interaction with the physical environment. The destruction of and damage to dance venues during the floods has consequently had a major impact on dance practitioners and artists of the Northern Rivers.

One survey respondent commented that *"venues & possibilities [were] severely curtailed by the flood."*

Another observed that they had *"experienced some limitations particularly in regards to accessible rehearsal, training and making spaces for dance and performance,"* and that *"The loss of NORPA [Lismore City Hall] as a venue is felt widely."*

Another wrote that *"[the] lack of dedicated venues means we are competing with many other groups for bookings at the local halls"* while also pointing out the *"limited venue[s] currently due to the flood."*

#### Some venue-related issues in the Northern Rivers pre-date the floods, with many artists highlighting long-standing concerns

Survey respondents also pointed to issues with venue access which pre-dated the floods. One noted that *"the lack of access to training, cultural spaces and funding is a perennial problem for the regions."* Another commented,

*"Space is particularly an issue for rehearsing as there is a lack of professional rehearsal spaces and venues like community halls are tricky to book regular time in due to their significant use by other community groups, activities and events."*

Another described how,

*"As a resident of Byron Bay the only professional venue for dance is the Community Centre which is limited, having virtually no wing space and one tiny dressing room up a narrow winding stairwell. To see professional dance I mostly have to travel to the Gold Coast or Brisbane."*

One respondent wrote about the need for

*"Rehearsal spaces - shared information and accessibility to existing local halls and venues appropriate for dance collaboration, experimentation, research, creation and rehearsal (preferably with sprung floor)."*

## Dance spaces and venues need to emphasise cultural safety for First Nations people, Queer communities, and family groups.

A one-on-one consultation participant commented on the need for a culturally appropriate space for First Nations people, while Yarning Circle participants highlighted the importance of collaboration between architects, local artists, and elders in the creation/improvement of spaces/venues.

One respondent commented, *"it could be e.g. a busking spot, a yarning circle, a dancing circle, a place where you can get your creative juices flowing – like an incubator and elevator for ideas."*

Another wrote about the need for *"a first nations run community dance studio space with capacity for residencies (with accommodation) outside rehearsal space and an outdoor amphitheatre."*

Respondents also discussed the need for spaces that welcome other diverse groups of people, including Queer communities and all-age family groups. One wrote,

*"...the queers are always shaking and moving. Yet we don't have many places to professionally explore this avenue of art making. It seems we must really network and travel to find a stage it's welcomed to."*

Another respondent described building a multi-purpose, family-friendly 'homestead-like' space, *"so I can be right there with my children and my wife and on the land where I feel most safe and comfortable to create where I don't have to dress up to go into another big building."*

Another reaffirmed the need for family-friendly spaces, stating,

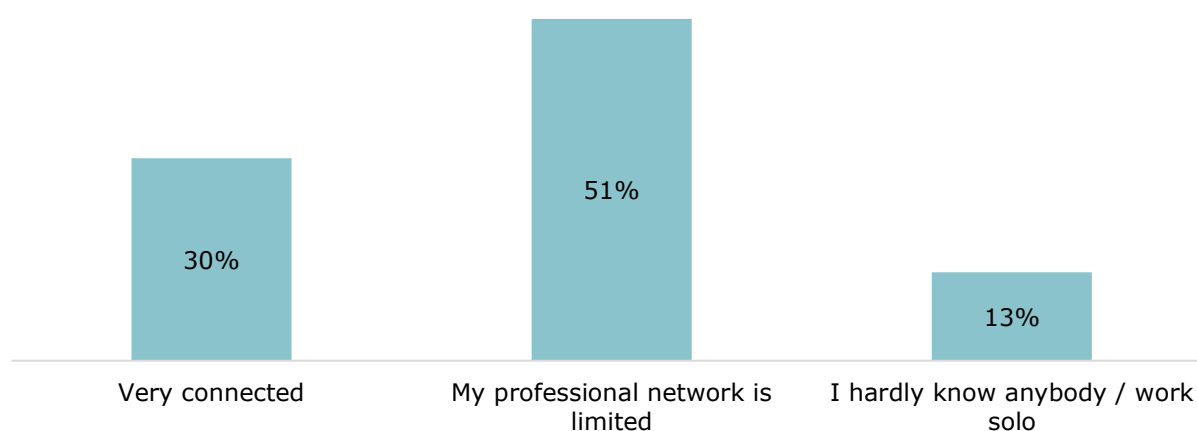
*"We need central hubs to support connection and the possibility of dance network events. Space for ageing dancers and space for family/all age dance times."*

## Lack of connection

Individual dance artists in the community are experiencing a sense of detachment from the rest of the sector – with two thirds saying that their professional network is limited or non-existent

As part of the Dance Sector Uplift survey, respondents were asked "How well connected to the dance sector in the Northern Rivers region do you think you are?". 13% responded that they 'hardly knew anybody/work solo,' 51% responded that their 'professional network is limited,' and 30% responded that they felt 'very connected.'

Figure 5: How well connected to the dance sector in the Northern Rivers region do you think you are? (n=100)



With 40% of survey respondents identifying as professional working independent artists, this can further foster a sense of isolation from larger groups and organisations.

Qualitative responses also suggest that practitioners are experiencing a detachment from the broader Northern Rivers dance sector.

One wrote,

*"I had a very extensive network of practitioners and creative friends in Brisbane and now living back home in the northern rivers I find myself predominantly working solo by default and not knowing anyone nearby to communicate/collaborate with. It can be disheartening at times..."*

Another pointed out that *"Solo artist[s] often work in isolation. Regional artists even more so. We need connection..."* while yet another explained their experience, writing,

*"I think it has to do with the fact there is no network, it's all in isolation. There is no industry specific body presence for dance in this region. I feel lost and find it very hard to work on my own with no one to report into. I love a deadline and need support."*

Others feel that they are somewhat connected to other artists, but only within a 'bubble' and that they are missing out on broader connections across the Northern Rivers dance network. One artist wrote,

*"I feel very connected within specific spheres, and also aware that there are many dancers I don't know. This is largely because my work is somewhat 'niche.'"*

Another respondent commented that *"as a cross disciplinary artist it is hard to fit in a box (probably because we don't really want to). But it can also put us outside of networks defined by genre."*

Another simply stated, *"there is a lot happening, but everyone works in silos."*

### Isolation and detachment may be exacerbated in regional communities - some dance artists suggest broadening collaboration efforts further afield, while remaining grounded locally

Respondents also highlighted their frustration with the insularity of the dance sector in the Northern Rivers. Many expressed a desire to make connections and collaborate with other dance artists in other regions, states, and countries, while remaining based and connected to the local area.

One respondent wrote *"I wanna make work made here that tours Australia and abroad,"* also asserting that *"there is a potential to really put the Northern Rivers area on the global map and the Local Council's need to understand the potential of the arts."*

Another described the difficulties of engaging with opportunities further afield, writing that,

*"As far as exposure from our regional base into the metropolitan centres goes, I feel we are lacking in visibility and recognition. Multiple times a year we can see specific space residencies through significant arts bodies and centres inviting artists to use the space and present work. Being a regionally based independent, holding down multiple jobs and parenting, makes the prospect of utilising those offers a little unappealing. I would like to see something in the likeness of an exchange program, where my practice could be brought into the fabric of the larger dance community."*

Another commented that *"Burn out is deep in the community. A vision to connect people here and the region to dance beyond our bubble is required."*

However, while many respondents are seeking to engage with the regional/global to a greater extent, some respondents expressed the sentiment that there is too much emphasis on opportunities for artists from outside the area, and that supporting local talent and connection needs to be prioritised. One wrote,

*"Professional dancers and choreographers from outside the region seem to be given priority for work and performance opportunities, over local professional artists. There is limited, if any, support from regional and local business sponsors for the development of depth in dance and related arts practices."*

**Dance artists lack a centralised source of information and communication, making it difficult to collaborate, hear about events, and locate resources and support.**

Many respondents highlighted the logistical difficulties of organising projects with other dance artists, leading to difficulties with the project.

One respondent commented,

*"I am often in discussions with peers about the need to come together and collaborate, and at times we manage in small ways to do this, but the slog to get funding and studio and performance spaces, and to administer the projects, has often left me burnt out and projects have flailed. We suffer not having an organisation as home of and mouthpiece for our regions movement artists to help them to expand practice and be recognised for state and federal funding and presenting opportunities. This leads to what I have seen as loss of confidence and motivation amongst exceptional local makers and performers."*

Another simply expressed that having *"A local hub where people can informally meet, create and be surrounded by other artists would be AWESOME!"*

Some respondents also wrote about their experiences of locating resources.

One commented,

*"I haven't been aware of any support until the recent NORPA Makers Hub. The artists that I know are all self-funded. There needs to be more accessible, funded platforms to share skills, mentoring opportunities and live art. To connect and support the community to grow."*

Another stated,

*"I sometimes struggle to find workshops and/or activities related to dance... there should be a centralisation or entity who is really concerned about this."*

One commented on the particular challenges of accessing information and resources as an independent artist, writing,

*"I have a better network now that I work part time for an organisation, and I know more about the support available for independents than I did prior to starting with the org, when I was just an independent!"*

Yarning Circle participants also highlighted the importance of communication, sharing information, developing relationships and collaborations, whilst specifying the importance of First Nations people developing partnerships on their own terms.

Other respondents discussed the need to connect dance artists with specific types of professional development support and opportunities. One wrote:

*"More opportunities to be mentored to develop a full-length piece - more skills sharing and retreats with peers to share a practice & frameworks that help us to articulate methodology, value and impact,"* while another commented,

*"I would like some up-skilling on what it takes to be a good producer for dance, and learn how to produce a show to market."*

Other respondents pointed at the issue of connecting artists with audiences, indicating the need for support with marketing and promotion of individual and small group shows/events. One respondent stated,

*"When you do work, you have to climb another mountain to get the people there to see it and support it. I lack that business aspect of my practice, and that someone of interest might bill me and book me for work."*

Another commented on the need for,

*"Some marketing and promotion for independent arts so that they have more people coming through the doors. Support for people to work in a model, where they don't have to carry all their business on their own."*

A one-on-one consultation participant also highlighted the need for advance notice and continuous advertising before events in First Nations communities.

## Lack of funding

Dance artists lack adequate and sustained financial support, with just 1 in 10 reporting that dance in the Northern Rivers is 'good' or 'very supported'.

As part of the Dance Sector Uplift survey, respondents were asked "Do you think dance, physical theatre and experimental performance is supported in this region?" 36% responded with 'no' or 'very little support', 55% responded with 'could do better,' or 'mediocre,' and 9% responded with 'good' or 'very supported.'

Dance artists in the Northern Rivers struggle with funding their projects. One respondent stated, *"Funding is never adequate & usually inconsistent" while another asserted "we have the movement, we just don't have the resources to bring them to fruition."*

Another commented,

*"I find it difficult to find appropriate cast. Because most gigs are not paid or poorly paid, the few pro dancers around here that I know will not perform for such a small fee."*

Another respondent wrote,

*"I feel like local artists are trying their hardest to get more dance out for the community but it feels there needs to be more funding and support from larger umbrella organisations."*

Someone else pointed out that,

*"Gig payments do not even cover the amount for rehearsal venue hire let alone paying dancers for rehearsals. If the cast are a larger number, more than 2, then the fees are quite poor once distributed to everyone. I find I cannot pay myself."*

## First Nations and young and emerging dance artists, do not receive adequate financial support

Respondents discussed the particular difficulty of obtaining funding for First Nations dance projects.

One respondent shared that,

*"When it comes to Traditional or Contemporary Aboriginal Dance it's not supported at all. But other mainstream dance is very little supported too. It lacks of funding and having the right people who have the capacity to do this."*

Another respondent called for *"more investment in First Nations' practice on our own terms."*

Other respondents highlighted the difficulties in supporting young and emerging dance artists, due to the lack of adequate funding. One stated,

*"Young dancers within the region are going elsewhere to seek opportunities for career development because there are essentially no opportunities for career development within the region, unless they happen to have the resources and personal connections to stage performances themselves."*

Another wrote of the unequal distribution of funding,

*"New and unknown artists are unsupported. Funding and grants appear to be awarded, often on a repeat basis, to a small group of known artists. There appears to be more support for movement in the forms of circus arts and physical theatre, than for dance (ballet, contemporary, cultural dance, etc.), experimental movement based performance, and Screendance."*

## There are accessibility barriers within the dance funding application process that make it fundamentally unequal

Survey respondents discussed the barriers built into the application processes for dance grants and funding.

One respondent discussing financial grants wrote,

*"I think of the small number of FN [First Nations] artists who would have the skill set to apply to this [grant] and then there are others that are equally amazing who would struggle at writing these applications themselves."*

Another respondent pointed out that,

*"as a dancer and choreographer, the very last thing I want to do is to have to expend a great deal of time and energy to write and submit grant applications that I am highly unlikely to be awarded, when what I really want to do, and where my skills are, is to dance, create choreography, and collaborate with musicians, filmmakers, and other production specialists. The system that requires someone whose life focus is in the study of kinaesthetic arts to somehow also miraculously have the skills to write successful grant applications that are submitted to grant adjudicators who do not have personal or professional experience as dancers or movement artists, is fundamentally flawed."*

The Yarning Circle participants also called for access to small scale grant training officers/opportunities.



## 4 Recommendations

### Long-term goals

#### Invest in the construction of a community Dance Centre by 2030, with capacity for a variety of different spaces

Support for a dance centre/hub/centralised organisation was significant in the survey, directly referred to by 20 respondents. One wrote that given the resources they would “build a multi space performing arts centre flexible enough to suit the needs of the region, that could be used for performance, workshops and creative cultural events.”

Others spoke to the need for more community dance spaces and for a regional dance company.

Constructing a Dance Centre would address concerns around venue availability and accessibility, connecting dance artists to each other, and accessing dance support. At the same time, the Centre would also provide a base from which to further promote the Northern Rivers as a regional dance hub, building up its institutional capacity, providing employment and funding opportunities and potentially becoming the basis to found a Northern Rivers dance company.

The Dance Centre would act as a hub for dance artists across the Northern Rivers and would encourage collaboration and the development of new projects.

- ❑ The centre would be **accessible to all**, and spaces/rooms would be available and affordable for individuals/small groups to book on a recurring basis.
- ❑ Spaces could be both **indoor and outdoor**, ranging from professional dance studios with sprung floors, mirrors, barres, retractable tiered seating, an elegant theatre space that can double as a practice space, to more casual and recreational spaces for play/experimentation, as well as meeting spaces where people can come together to train, research, perform, discuss and connect.
- ❑ The Centre could reach out to **satellite venues** and pop-ups to extend reach.
- ❑ The design process would be shared, with elements that are **First Nations-led** and centred in cultural safety, also incorporating **resilient, flood-centric design**, and bringing in local cultural knowledge about water systems and environmental resilience.
- ❑ The centre would acknowledge the strong foundation of cultural and contemporary dance legacy in the region – ensuring continuity of practice.
- ❑ The centre would be informed by a local **Northern Rivers identity**, for instance incorporating local artists in the design and building process.

## Found a flagship annual or biannual dance festival starting in 2025

There is compelling support to implement a regular dance festival in the Northern Rivers, with 27 dance artists mentioning this in their survey responses (25%). One respondent wrote that,

*"[a] dream would be to have an annual dance festival for the region. A couple of weeks to showcase artists/performers living/working in Bundjalung Country. It would include performance opportunities/ informal sharing of works in development, skills sharing/ courses/ masterclasses/ workshops, and industry networking events"*

Festivals, "which typically have multiple activities in a range of sites, are flexible in the face of lost infrastructure and important in the imagination of a positive future and promotion of community cohesion" (see [Loveridge, 2018](#)). These characteristics position a festival as a particularly viable pursuit in the context of disaster recovery.

A festival would drive audiences to the Northern Rivers, cement it as a significant dance base, and bolster the visibility of the sector in the region. It would also provide dance artists with opportunities for collaboration and create regular opportunities for local dance work.

Establishing a festival also aligns with the NSW Government's recent focus on festivals in the north of the state.

The festival could:

- Feature **cultural and contemporary dance** both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.
- Provide **residencies, workshops, choreographic competitions and professional development opportunities** to engage potential audiences/ future dancers in local dance work.
- Connect** presenters, producers and makers with local businesses, philanthropy and sponsorship options.
- Present a major opportunity for local dance artists to **showcase** their art.
- Be a place for **convergence and collaboration**, strengthening existing bonds and forming new ones across the dance sector.
- Reclaim urban spaces** that are abandoned and flood-damaged to spotlight the continued impact of the flood/storm events and the recovery process.

## Expand capacity for dance artist residencies

There is a strong case for implementing a dance artist residency program in the Northern Rivers, with 14 survey respondents recommending this. Four of these respondents specified that residencies should be fully funded/paid, while another three specified that it should be targeted towards local dance artists.

One respondent wrote, "I would invest resources for more paid residency and performance opportunities using the facilities available... to encourage artists to create and perform work specifically for and within the Northern Rivers." Another described their aspirations for "a First Nations run community dance studio space with capacity for residencies (with accommodation) outside rehearsal space and an outdoor amphitheatre."

Hosting a dance artist residency program could provide paid opportunities for local dance artists to engage in professional development, collaborate and network with other artists, and produce new work. The Northern Rivers dance sector would also benefit from hosting a combination of local, interstate, and international dance artists as this would raise the profile of the Northern Rivers as a national/international dance hub. Residencies can also encourage artists to produce work that is beneficial to the wider community.

A dance residency program could form part of a Northern Rivers dance centre but could also be associated with alternative venues.

- Residencies can provide **paid opportunities** for local dance artists to make work.
- Incentivise **artists from outside the region** to come to the Northern Rivers and experience the unique artistic atmosphere and natural landscape.
- Encourage **'hothousing'** – intensive information-sharing and collaboration, thought and reflection – by setting up session times (both structured and unstructured) for diverse groups of artists to come together in the way that feels most comfortable for them i.e. both indoor and outdoor, seated and movement-based. Discussion groups could incorporate Liz Lerman's [Critical Response Process](#).
- The region would reap the **benefits** from hosting local, interstate and international dance artists.
- Include **financial support** and full board for local dance artists, with a particular emphasis on supporting First Nations artists.
- Join [Res Artis](#) global residency network.

## Develop and retain professional producers in the region

There is a case to look at the long-term development of professional producers in the Northern Rivers region.

A common thread across survey responses is the lack of support or need for professional development in areas such as writing funding/grant applications, marketing, and delivering complex shows.

While professional development in these areas could be useful for some individual dance artists, many of these concerns could be abated by the presence of a solid network of professional producers in the Northern Rivers region.

Producers oversee the delivery of projects including managing logistics and finances, preparing contracts and funding applications, liaising with artists and collaborators, and planning and managing rehearsal processes.

Survey respondents highlighted the impact that the lack of support in these exact areas has on their work. One respondent wrote,

*"I am often in discussions with peers about the need to come together and collaborate, and at times we manage in small ways to do this, but the slog to get funding and studio and performance spaces, and to administer the projects, has often left me burnt out and projects have flailed."*

Another describes how,

*"as a dancer and choreographer, the very last thing I want to do is to have to expend a great deal of time and energy to write and submit grant applications that I am highly unlikely to be awarded when what I really want to do, and where my skills are, is to dance, create choreography, and collaborate with musicians, filmmakers, and other production specialists."*

Encouraging and developing the capacity for more professional producers to live and work in the Northern Rivers would alleviate many of the constraints that are felt by dance artists in the region and allow them to redirect their time and effort to their craft.

- ❑ Dance-informed producers can assist with the transition of company dancers to independent regional practice, and ensure **sustainable careers**.
- ❑ This process could involve **promoting the Northern Rivers** to independent dance producers as a desirable place to live and work, or it could involve the establishment of a dance-focused production company in the Northern Rivers.
- ❑ Producers could work across both **cultural and contemporary** dance worlds.
- ❑ Include **First Nations-led** and **Emerging** producer development. This could be developed in partnership with organisations working nationally in this area including BlakDance, PAC Australia, Performing Lines, NAISDA, Bangarra, ACPA, co3, Critical Path, ADT.

## Short-term actions:

### Host a gathering or 'convergence' in 2024 to unite the sector

There is strong support from survey respondents to host a gathering/convergence (or several) in the near future. With only 30% of survey respondents feeling 'very connected' to the dance sector in the Northern Rivers region, there is significant work to be done in this area.

One respondent wrote about their vision of creating,

*"a Convergence where everyone comes together to connect, discover who we are, what we do, what we want and what steps we're going to take to get ourselves there. We create a network that shares knowledge and experience, builds community and establishes a place where we share our practices ongoing."*

Another wrote of the need for more *"supported opportunities for the creatives in the region to gather, connect, learn and share."*

Hosting a gathering/convergence for dance artists in the Northern Rivers would provide the space and time for the knowledge sharing, connection, and networking that is evidently missing for many dance artists.

A gathering could:

- Provide a platform for cultural and contemporary dance practitioners to socialise and connect with each other.
- Provide transportation support for some of the more geographically isolated/disadvantaged dance artists to attend.
- Include capacity for both in-person and remote participation.

### Addressing venue concerns: explore creative and experimental locations for dance

There is a case to seek out creative solutions to the lack of sufficient dance venues in the Northern Rivers. This could involve using existing venues in different ways, but also engaging with new and innovative approaches such as temporary/semi-permanent venues, moving dance outdoors and repurposing abandoned/unused spaces.

Some survey respondents highlighted the utility of different venues in providing spaces to dance in the post-flood context, for instance "turning the empty shops into cultural spaces with [a] mobile dance floor and a production kit that could be rolled out from space to space and a mobile space (circus tent anyone?) that could be put up anywhere."

Other dance artists indicated how making use of innovative dance venues can do more than just meet the need for a physical dance space, potentially pushing the boundaries of dance and encouraging creativity. For instance, one respondent asked, *"how would an experimental performance at night held at a beach, a waterfall or a patch of rainforest... impact on a tourist that has never seen something similar? How would a street party curated by local DJs, producers... revive a public space through actual dance? How could an abandoned building affected by a natural disaster showcase that impact through dance?"*

Repurposing spaces for dance is an efficient and effective way to address the venue concerns of dance artists, particularly in the short term while the prospect of constructing a dance centre is developed. Breaking away from a reliance on conventional dance studios would provide the practice of dance in the Northern Rivers the space it needs to get back on its feet.

### **Community halls**

As a first step, community halls present a pre-existing and convenient resource that could be harnessed to meet immediate dance venue needs.

- ❑ Two or three community halls could be ringfenced for dance (or could adopt a dance focus) to avoid issues around venues being consistently booked up by other community groups. For instance, Broadwater Community Hall in Richmond Valley Shire has hosted two creative development workshops run by Kirk Page and Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal, suggesting that the community is supportive of the hall being used for dance purposes.
- ❑ Consider the equipment/ amenities available in different community halls and target those with the most useful resources i.e. barres, mirrors, sprung floors, storage space, seating etc.
- ❑ Community halls often have a break around Christmas time, providing a great opportunity to access them during the December-January period.

### **Outdoor and repurposed spaces**

Recognise the potential in repurposing unused/abandoned urban spaces for dance, as a way of coping with a lack of suitable venues.

- ❑ Assess possible sites for dance venues, and invest in a feasibility study.
- ❑ Sites/spaces will need to prioritise cultural safety and driven by First Nations knowledge and practitioners.
- ❑ Outdoor venues may be appropriate as they can provide a welcoming, informal and relatively unstructured environment, encouraging artists to be creative on their own terms. This is particularly important for young and First Nations artists to feel comfortable.

- ❑ Outdoor venues are also easier and faster to get up and running compared to indoor spaces, providing significant value to the dance community in a reduced timeframe.
- ❑ Investing in the construction of an outdoor venue like [this dance studio](#) did in 2020 can take a 'dead zone' like an unused carpark and transform it into a professional, profitable and productive dance venue.
- ❑ Outdoor venues can be located in flood zones, if designed appropriately (i.e. demountable or flood-proof flooring), future-proofing the Northern Rivers dance sector.
- ❑ Consider projects like the '[Dance-O-Mat](#)' in Christchurch, where "a coin-operated ex-laundromat washing machine powers four speakers which surround a custom-made, sprung dance floor." Anyone can use it; just insert \$2, plug in your device, and get 30 minutes of lights and music. This is an accessible and simple solution which "encourages people to 'play' in the city." They offer a how-to-guide on how to set up a Dance-O-Mat in your city.

### **Creative approaches**

- ❑ Cultural dance hubs could be formed that reach out into different communities and families, bringing dance to them.
- ❑ Residency programs linked to major organisations could be hosted in the region (e.g. ADT, Bangarra) to engage young dancers.
- ❑ Inform LGA councils regarding the recommendations of the DSU report to improve awareness of dance sector venue concerns.

### **Promote and boost existing resources for mid-career dance artists**

Particularly in the post-flood context, receiving funding and support can make all the difference for struggling individual dance artists. Disasters are unequal in their consequences, and low-income earners, small-business owners and part-time workers are more likely to lose income following a disaster than middle and high-income earners (see [here](#)).

Since a significant proportion of dance artists in the Northern Rivers are independent artists or working part time, providing them with inclusive financial support is high priority.

However, many dance artists expressed through the survey that they are not experts at writing funding applications, marketing their work/business, or at producing complex shows, and that they do not feel supported in these areas but are interested in learning more.

One respondent expressed how “there is no support for the development, production, and staging of a regular (seasonal, annual) schedule of dance and movement-based performances throughout the Northern Rivers region.”

Another expressed interest in learning opportunities, writing that they “would like some up-skilling on what it takes to be a good producer for dance, and learn how to produce a show to market.”

Connecting artists to professionals who can provide mentoring and advice in these areas would assist artists, particularly First Nations, isolated and disadvantaged artists, to flourish. It would also assist in preventing a mid-career ‘drop off’ due to lack of opportunity and support.

- ❑ There is significant interest from mid-career artists to engage in learning opportunities around grant writing, marketing, producing.
- ❑ While ‘grant-writing support’ and other services are noted on the ANR website, this could be developed further and heavily promoted to the community, as it appears that many dance artists are unaware of these resources.
- ❑ Promoting available dance resources could eventually lead to developing more complex dance-specific digital resources.
- ❑ Engage with organisations like BlakDance, who have put on this kind of workshop before. For instance [‘First Nations Dance Program: Grant Writing/Producing skills with BlakDance’](#) is a free workshop on grant writing and producing skills for First Nations dance artists, hosted by skilled professionals from BlakDance. Look into having this kind of workshop hosted in the Northern Rivers in person and/or online.
- ❑ Opportunity for scholarship or mentorships for young cultural dancers that existing arts organisations can support e.g. ACPA or NAISDA.
- ❑ Ausdance also provides [assistance](#) with funding applications for individuals/small organisations, so this is something that could be promoted further.
- ❑ Promote programs such as Performing Lines’ [training program](#) for emerging Producers if they run one again in 2024. Further down the line, develop a similar program or mentorship program specifically for dance producers.

## Explore investment in socially engaged dance practice to explore dance’s potential in community recovery

While there is no singular definition of socially engaged dance practice, it centres around the transformative possibilities of dance for people from all walks of life. For Tess Eckert,

“it means that everybody can dance, and uses dance and movement to foster community in the most inclusive way possible... [it] can also be used to address issues



of social justice, marginalization, oppression, etc. and literally help move us towards greater liberation, celebration of diversity, and connection with self, other and earth.”

However, it is also important to critically assess and evaluate socially engaged practice to ensure the genuine engagement with and benefit to the group/community that is involved i.e. via a co-design process or ongoing feedback loop.

In general, arts programs that are initiated in communities following disasters “can significantly improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities” (see [here](#)).

Socially engaged dance practitioners in the Northern Rivers have seen these benefits firsthand. For instance, Dance Integrated Australia has had success as an artist co-operative led company in engaging the local community in residencies, performances and workshops.

Establishing additional community-engaged dance projects/workshops in the Northern Rivers could provide opportunities for connection, respite and emotional processing, as well as contributing to the overall urban/regional wellbeing in the recovery of the area at large (see [here](#)).

In order to further develop socially engaged dance practice in the Northern Rivers,

- ❑ There needs to be an effort to promote a better understanding of what is involved and the value of socially engaged dance to audiences to increase interest and involvement.
- ❑ Professional development opportunities for local dance artists covering socially engaged practice i.e. workshops, discussion groups.
- ❑ Focus on culturally and trauma-informed practice or partnerships.
- ❑ Investment in a small number of select, targeted socially engaged dance projects intended as examples for potential stakeholders (especially in key local sectors like housing, youth, hospitality/ tourism) for future projects with more complex cohorts and issues.
- ❑ More broadly, funding needs to move away from economic/outcomes-based rationales.

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