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It's a time of reorganisation for dance as funding bodies make it clear not everyone will be working full-time within a company structure. MATTHEW WESTWOOD reports

**H**ER limbs slowly moving with the compressed energy of a colled spring and her face alternately visions of ecstasy and sorrow, butoh dancer Tess De Quincey is the embodiment of the Australian solo performance artist.

With a \$16,000 project grant from the Australia Council, Sydney-based De Quincey will this year take her dance installation *Is*, produced in association with a sound engineer and sculptor, on tour to Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Although she dreams of one day establishing her own company, De Quincey thrives on being in total control of her creativity. The downside of being her own boss, she adds, is that administrative tasks consume about 80 per cent of her time. It's a conundrum to which there is no answer.

Across town at the Sydney Dance Company, Graeme Murphy directs a company of 15 dancers and enjoys the administrative backup of a full-time management staff.

A strong believer in dance as an ensemble art form, Murphy has, in his 18 years as artistic director, developed the company as Australia's leading contemporary dance outfit.

De Quincey and Sydney Dance represent the extremes of activity in Australia's national dance industry. Companies such as Sydney Dance and the Australian Ballet — both heavily subsidised "flagship" companies — have become the most recognisable corporate names in Australian dance and have won loyal audience support. At the other end of the scale is the growing band of individual artists and small outfits producing innovative projects in a field where competition for audiences and funding support is fierce.

In the middle of the dance equation are companies usually comprising an artistic director and an ensemble of no more than 10 dancers, such as Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre, Expressions and the One Extra Company.

Producing a few seasons a year of often new and sometimes exciting work, these companies attract widely varying support, from near-full houses to rows of empty seats, depending on the venue and program. The companies are, their artistic directors say, wellspring of talent and are vital to the health of the dance industry.

But recent Australia Council funding cuts worth \$318,000 to seven companies suggest that continued annual support for the middle sector of the industry is no longer assured.

In what appears to be the beginning of a polarisation of the industry — with support for a handful of flagship companies and a growing number of individual projects — many middle-size ensembles have been forced to rethink their 1995 programs and company structures.

In addition, a new competitive ethos within the dance committee of the Australia Council means greater pressure is being put on companies to prove their worth. The reality is that some companies simply may not survive.

The artistic director of Danceworks, Helen Herbertson, whose company received only project support this year with a 48 per cent cut in anticipated funds, says she has had to become a part-time company and cancel touring seasons. As far as companies such as hers are concerned, there is no more fat to cut.

"I think it's pretty clear from the last funding round that there has been a decision to rationalise the small companies," she says.

Many of these issues will become the focus of debate at the third annual Green Mill festival of choreography and dance, which begins in Melbourne today. The festival will provide formal and informal venues for practitioners and observers to discuss the future of the art form.

Contemporary dance pioneer and Green Mill board member Shirley McKechnie has noted the changing profile of Australian dance. The founder of one of the nation's first modern dance

ensembles, Australian Contemporary Dance Theatre, McKechnie says there was no funding at all for dance when she established her company in 1963.

With nurturing throughout the 1970s and 80s, dance blossomed, with the growth of world class companies such as the Australian Ballet and Sydney Dance Company and the emergence of tertiary dance schools.

Now, McKechnie says, the level of dance activity has outstripped what funding bodies are prepared to support.

Dance courses such as those at the Victorian College of the Arts and Queensland University of Technology are producing graduates who are finding it difficult to obtain work with established companies and experienced dancers are finding their services are only required part-time.

McKechnie also notes that while the Australia Council cuts affect just seven companies, the cuts represent \$318,000 no longer available to the dance committee.

But dance observers have noted a shift in creative focus which will also have enormous implications for the industry. As theatre and film have become increasingly director rather than actor driven, the same has happened in dance. It is choreographers, rather than individual dancers, who are stealing the limelight.

Experienced dancers no longer content to be used merely as the instruments of another's creativity are themselves becoming creators. Stanton Welch, for example, an Australian Ballet soloist, will this year become a resident choreographer, while Gideon Obarzanek, who has been working with Netherlands Dans Theater, prefers the freedom of the freelancer.

The Chrissie Parrott Dance Company may lose two dancers who wish to pursue individual projects and new dance graduates, such as those at QUT in Brisbane, have staged their own works in mini-festivals.

Jane Westbrook, the head of the Australia Council's Performing Arts Unit, says there has been an "incredible increase" in activity from individual artists working away from established companies, either through choice or necessity. (For some, the necessity may well have been forced on them by the Australia Council's decisions. It's a circular argument.)

**T**HE 1995 dance round reflects this trend, and an additional funding round has been established to cater for the demand for project funds.

A survey of the 1995 dance round reveals the changing structure of the dance industry. The Australian Ballet will receive almost \$3 million. Sydney Dance Company's grant has not been announced, and the West Australian Ballet and Queensland Ballet both had their Australia Council funds cut by about 20 per cent to \$178,000 and \$74,800 respectively.

Eleven middle-size companies received a total of \$1,646,300; the previous year 20 companies (including SDC, WAB and QUT) received \$3,460,530. By comparison, nine performance projects received a total of \$353,138 in the 1995 round. There was no money at all given to performance projects in 1994, apart from one international touring project.

The Australia Council also gives funding to Green Mill and Ausdance.

While artistic directors recognise the need for diversity in the arts, "Not everyone thinks in ensembles," Murphy says — many warn of the dangers of supporting projects at the expense of full-time companies. Expressions' Maggi Simma says that not only musicians have the discipline of daily class, close association with the group is vital to their art.

"It can take months to learn how to read a dancer's body and the affinity between dancers and choreographer would be lost in a part-time company. If you want a work to be saying something, you have to understand each other intimately," she says.

De Quincey, who spends about six months each year working overseas, has noted a backlash against project funding in Europe for similar reasons. "There is a very big question mark because there has

been a lot of money given to project work," she says. Artistic directors also argue that companies provide a nurturing environment necessary for the creative growth of artists and the long-term health of the art. Without them, there would be far fewer artists with the experience and confidence to tackle their own projects. Project funding makes it difficult to plan seasons in advance, which in turn restricts proper marketing and audience development.

The editor of Dance Australia magazine, Karen van Ulzen, is critical of any moves which destabilise company structures. "What is the point of channelling funds away from companies that at least provide stable employment for people — choreographers, for designers, for composers, for dancers — and putting it into individual performance projects where nobody gets employed for a long time?" she says.

"Usually, the money that those individual projects get is so small that they can't market themselves properly, so they don't attract the type of audiences that might go to a company. I don't think there's any doubt whatsoever that companies with their marketing, expertise, and reputations ... attract more audiences."

Given the severity of the Australia Council's cuts to companies, it is not surprising that there has been much anger and confusion over the funding body's intentions. Are the cuts an attempt to apply hard economics to the arts and rationalise the dance industry, weeding out the less viable companies? Or is there a move to support a handful of companies at a federal level — through the new Major Organisations Board, for example — and give the States greater financial responsibility for other companies?

Sources close to the dance committee assure there are no hidden agendas. If anything, the committee is adhering strictly to the principles of peer assessment. With general purpose grants a thing of the past and greater competition for limited resources, individual companies and projects must be judged on the quality of their applications and past artistic and managerial performance.

As one observer noted, the "brutal, honest answers (to the funding cuts) are reflected in the decisions".

Nor is the dance committee attempting to shape the industry by stripping money from full-time ensembles to fund projects or forcing companies to seek greater support from the State government.

"I think it would be very wrong if the Australia Council ever set itself up to be a pseudo-artistic director," says Westbrook. "It simply wants to find the best mechanism possible to support what is happening (in the industry)." She says the Australia Council is exploring new ways to become more flexible to the needs of clients and is looking to establish co-funding agreements with the States.

While many dance companies are, individually, pursuing goals of artistic excellence, audience development and responsible management, there is a feeling throughout the industry that there is no clear vision for its future structure.

Little has been heard of any progress made with the Agenda for the Decade set at the National Dance Summit in 1991, which envisaged a "dynamic, diverse dance culture by the year 2000". And Creative Nation, while defining a role for the Australian Ballet and establishing the indigenous performing arts school, does not outline any vision for the future structure of contemporary dance.

The Australia Council dance committee will be meeting at Green Mill to discuss future planning strategies and the festival will host a special session. Dance companies at the Crossroads, on January 21.

The national president of Ausdance, Ralph Buck, says it is "crucial" for the industry to have a vision. "I think it's missing, and if it does exist, then the profile of that strategy is missing."

Green Mill Dance runs from today until January 22 at the CUB Malthouse, Melbourne.



Tess De Quincey ... thrives on being in total control of her creativity — Picture: GLENN HUNT