

CCDC x EDC *4Seasons* - Reflecting on the Transformations in the Dance Companies and Dancers

By Felix Chan (Observer)

In recent years, CCDC mainly focused on bringing its productions abroad or bringing in works by overseas artists, including through the expanding Jumping Frames dance video programmes. Compared to a decade or so ago, CCDC has not been staging as many collaborations with dance companies and choreographers outside of Chinese-speaking regions, there were also less co-performances between overseas and CCDC dancers.

Against this backdrop, this collaborative work-in-progress showcase of *4Seasons* – a programme in *Season(s)* choreographed by Natalie Weir, Artistic Director of Expressions Dance Company (EDC), and performed by 14 CCDC dancers and 6 EDC dancers – was particularly exciting. At the same time, Dominic Wong, Assistant Artistic Director of CCDC, is creating a work for six EDC dancers in Brisbane as part of the mixed bill programme, which is completed by a work by Hong Kong-born Australian choreographer Kristina Chan.

CCDC's long-term dancer Qiao Yang told me, some ten years ago, CCDC worked with Weir and EDC dancers, but for the current CCDC – this was their first contact. So when I had the privilege to observe the first workshops between the two companies last November and the subsequent excerpt showcase, I was excited to see how the contact and process have impacted on the two companies' creative framework, on their dancers' view on the work, as well as on the value of dance itself.

In terms of creative process, though Weir has worked with dance companies worldwide including several times with the Hong Kong Ballet, she frankly admitted that in Australia, there were few contemporary dance companies with more than 10 dancers. So for her, it was unusual to work with a large company like CCDC, and the same for the EDC dancers, the experience of dancing in a large group piece, say for 20 dancers, was rare. To Weir, it was also an enriching opportunity to work individually with a variety of dancers to create small pieces.

For Wong, what struck him the most as an observer was the vital role the assistant choreographer played in the creative process, allowing the choreographer to focus on creating the big picture and how it worked with music and space. The individual dancer's rehearsals and tweaks were left to the assistant choreographer, which made the creation more efficient and precise.

CCDC dancers also praised this division of labour. Weir's deputy didn't simply handle rehearsal work, but also acted as a bridge between choreographer and dancers, clarifying understanding and movements, facilitating communication, thus allowing all to focus on their role in the process of creation.

The CCDC productions I had the pleasure to observe so far were led by one choreographer. And in my experience, though we have outstanding choreographers, dancers, researchers and critics in this city, our discussions tend to focus on concepts and movements, and not so much on possibilities in different creative structures or

modes of production. Of course, every work has different resources available, they can't be discussed in just one manner. Nonetheless, we should think about other practices of composition and creation employed by companies around the world. Working with an assistant choreographer is one way, working with a dance dramaturgy – danceaturgy – a practice brought to Taiwan from Germany could be another way, and there are for certain many other avenues to explore.

As for the changes in the dancers, I cannot comment on the EDC dancers as it was the first time I saw them in action. However, from speaking to them I gleaned interesting insights. They too have not collaborated often with dancers in Asia, for some, this was their first time working with Hong Kong dancers. Some dancers pointed out the new experiences working with ethnic Chinese dancers, who have different body shapes and spatial concepts.

A fascinating example was how a dancer's spatial imagination is affected by the geography of where they live. In Australia, there are many open spaces with few people, so the dancer's imagination of space is expansive. And this goes beyond the physics on stretching or dance movement, even the perception of space differs from that of Hong Kong dancers, who are used to living in cramped surroundings. They found that the spaces in which they live and rehearse change a dancer's physique and sense of space. Of course, there is no good or bad in each case and both have their limitations. The value of such collaboration is to bring new understanding on the differences in perspectives on body and space, to challenge the habitual self-knowledge of the tactile in dance, and to create a direct impact on the dancer's body.

The EDC dancers also mentioned that the Hong Kong dancers were full of ideas, they were quick in thinking on their feet and were fast in finding ways to complete a move. But from my point of view, the quick choice may overlook the possibilities within oneself. One example was that, despite the common impression of the more supple Eastern body, the Australian dancers with broader bone structure seemed better at controlling strength. Say, a half rotation followed by an abrupt landing, a Hong Kong dancer would complete the movement very rapidly, but the Australian dancers could spin at the same quick pace, but land suddenly but silently.

This may be a very small movement, but it reflects the emphasis Hong Kong dancers put in the process of completing a move – from lifting the arm to the landing of the feet – and the pleasure from the rapidity and the spin, whereas the Australian dancers seem not to be approaching the move itself, but negotiating the relationship between the space and the self, as well as the flow of air on the body. In other words, as the body flows, its friction with “things” – air, floor, conceptual space – creates a force, and through that they control the falling body to silently touch the ground.

My concern is not the sound of landing, but the impression that the Hong Kong dancers give as they complete a movement – there seem to be a limiting of choices. It's not because of technique, speed or suppleness, but because we come to conclusions too quickly, we're too eager to complete something, and in the process forgo the “leisure” in observing the surroundings. As I have shared with the EDC dancers, I sensed that they were relishing in every step of the moment, investigating, experiencing and feeling the texture formed between air and space with each move.

Another point I noticed about CCDC dancers were how most of them have grown more sensitive to music and other bodies, during rehearsals and the work-in-progress showcase. Perhaps inspired by the more efficient rehearsal process and the impact on their perception of space and the tactile in dance, they were able to put more into the work, which in turn affected in their explosive power and their suppleness.

In the group dance in *4Seasons*, CCDC dancers found a consistency, be it a simple step, bow or line, the flow was full of tension, drawing the eyes. The energy of the whole company also improved, so even a simple move becomes connected with the space it was performed in. I look forward to finding out the result of this collaboration in June.