

The consequences of asking personal questions



Ayesha Mailey and Noam Carmeli in *Consequences*, a socio-psychological experiment taking place in this futuristic laboratory.

Photograph: Max Beer

Wolfgang Hoffmann, director of the Dublin Fringe, has choreographed a dance that delves into the performers' personal histories to create characters, he tells **Michael Seaver**

Festival directors are usually found fretting over glum spreadsheets or schmoozing with potential funders rather than performing on a traffic intersection during rush hour. But since he arrived to Ireland three years ago, Dublin Fringe Festival director Wolfgang Hoffmann has maintained a healthy work-dance balance and his latest choreography, *Consequences*, was premiered by Derry's Echo Echo Dance Company last Tuesday. For him the two worlds of office and studio aren't all that different.

"I feel like I do my Fringe Festival job as an artist," he says. "I work creatively when I am curating and when I talk to other artists about their work I talk as a fellow artist. That exchange about ideas and work is very important to everything I do." Exchanging ideas can overspill into performance, as happened on the intersection of Dame Street and South Great George's Street during the last festival (although it wasn't part of the programme). In a dance developed by choreographer Rebecca Walter, Hoffmann was one of four who performed quick dances in the yellow box during the short few seconds all of the lights were red and the junction was clear. Filmed at different times of the day, problems set in during the late-night performance when two gardai tried to intervene. "I had this rolling motif and one Garda stood in front of me so I continued to roll against his leg. He became apoplectic and let a roar. 'Get up you big f***ing muppet, before I lift you!'"

IT'S AN ENCOUNTER few producers will experience, but guerilla performances like this only increase Hoffmann's curatorial understanding of the Fringe and it's place in Dublin's aesthetic landscape. This was also the case when he formed the theatre company - Fabrik Potsdam - soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Housed in an abandoned brewery in his native Potsdam, the venue (of the same name) soon became as important as the company, and became a centre for the exchange of ideas both on and off stage. Among the early visitors were the joint artistic directors of Echo Echo Dance Company, Steve Batts and Ursula Laeubli, there to complete their company's debut work, *Willing Accomplice*.

"There are still a lot of people from that period in Fabrik that we are still in contact with," says Batts. "It was a very vibrant, creative period with a mixture of risk and responsibility that was always really well balanced."

Hoffmann's dual role as a curator and performer continued at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe when Fabrik Potsdam began curating the Aurora Nova venue with Brighton-based Komedia. Critically acclaimed as a venue, Fabrik also scooped awards for their performances, with Pandora 88 winning a Fringe First Award, a Herald Angel Award and a Total Theatre Award. Created in 2003 (and performed in Ireland in 2004), Pandora 88 - a duet with Sven Till based on Brian Keenan's book *An Evil Cradling* - is the last work that Hoffmann has made. So was he a bit rusty heading back into the studio in Derry?

"There was certainly a bit of anticipation and I started off trying too much too soon," he admits. "I had to re-find the rhythm and get in tune with the company." This was partly to do with the process chosen to create the piece. A diehard collaborator, he wasn't prepared to hot-wire the piece and come into the studio with the work mapped out, even in the barest outline.

"I always start with questions and ideas and I'm then influenced by whoever is in the studio and the potential of the group. It's important to engage in a process that develops something beyond the skill levels already apparent. I think this is particularly the case in dance, otherwise you are calling on an existing vocabulary that isn't always interesting."

Consequences probably relies more on this process than other works. Starting with the question "Have you ever done anything that didn't have consequences?", it delves into the performers' personal histories to develop characters. At an early stage, Hoffmann asked the cast - from Germany, the US, Switzerland, Israel, England and Derry - specific personal questions. "These questions led us to the idea of a socio-psychological experiment taking place in this futuristic laboratory. Each of the six performers is working to analyse themselves. They might describe being hurt by someone they love or a childhood memory and these stories are recorded onto a Dictaphone."

IN TRANSFORMING THESE verbal experiences to the physical, Hoffmann encourages the performers to draw on myriad movement styles outside of regular dance technique. This reflects Echo Echo's own aesthetic, which draws on martial arts, clowning, physical theatre, folk and vernacular dance forms and therapeutic movement practices. The performers also have the luxury of rehearsing with the futuristic set, thanks to the company's roomy new home in the Waterside Theatre. "We have kind of forgotten the set is there," says Batts.

"Usually we are thinking about it all the time, imagining the taped lines on the floor are a wall or the edge of the stage."

The new residency reflects Echo Echo's rising currency in Northern Ireland. Touring to Derry's Playhouse in 1997, director Pauline Ross invited it to become company-in-residence where it was based, until two years later when building redevelopments led it across the river to the Waterside Theatre. The dedicated dance studio has not only made rehearsals easier but has facilitated the company's ancillary outreach activities, including evening classes and its youth dance company Daring Feet.

Increased support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has added some financial security (although still almost 50 per cent lower than comparable theatre companies, according to Batts), and the company is part of the Arts Council's Touring Experiment in the Republic. "It's a good balance between the two funders," says Batts. "Effectively, we couldn't produce without having a tour and we couldn't tour without having a production."

For Hoffmann the tour signals his return to the desk. Right now a combination of office commitments and fatherhood limits his dancing to weekly Bikram Yoga classes, although he is interested in researching a movement project based on wrestling. He claims there are no performances imminent, but it might be best to keep an eye out next time the lights are red.

Consequences is at the Riverside, Coleraine, Co Derry at 8pm tonight, 048-70323232; Town Hall Theatre, Galway at 8pm on Thu, 091-569777

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