



John Ashford

Aerowaves

<http://aerowaves.org/>

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## Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

The network organization Aerowaves  
Working to discover and support young choreographer

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In 1996, Aerowaves, an organization aiming to become the hub for dance discovery in Europe, was launched. It identifies the most promising new works by emerging dance artists and promotes them to producers and presenters, specifically, across Europe. John Ashford, the former Director of the theatre at The Place, London, is the man grasping the helm of this exciting network organisation. After working in a London dance venue fully equipped with a theatre, a dance school and a resident company for over two decades, and through which he served the promotion and development of the British contemporary dance, we asked why he decided to expand his horizon beyond the UK.

Interviewer: Kyoko Iwaki, journalist

Aerowaves was founded with the aim of connecting the young dance artists with presenters across Europe. When the network was launched in 1996, you were still working as the incumbent director of the theatre at The Place. Why did you set up a new network organisation, when you were already occupied with another task?

I worked as the Director of the theatre at The Place from 1986 to 2009. During my tenure, I tried to open up the British contemporary dance scene to the world, as it was too domestic. Based on this thought, in 1990, I started a season called The Turning World, which focused on providing some international profile to the program. Around that time, most international dance productions that came to the UK were those from the United States. This was mainly because the Dance Umbrella festival, led by Val Bourne, became distinguished largely through the presentation of works by American choreographers such as Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Mark Morris. Inviting these choreographers was kind of the right move in the 1980s, because America was where important dance works existed. Anyway, since The Place was, and, still is, one of the main venues for showcasing Dance Umbrella, there was a certain necessity to create a counter balance with their program. Also, I felt that when I started working at The Place, the centre of intelligent creativity was moving to Europe. So, without much conflict with Dance Umbrella, we invited European choreographers such as Wim Vandekeybus and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker for the first time to the UK.

When The Place began to be recognised as the dance venue in London which welcomes European works, a lot of young European choreographers started sending me these letters with precious videotapes enclosed. At the outset, it was only a few, but, in due course of time, the stack got bigger and bigger in my office, until it became

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around seventy. Of course, I wanted to go through all the works closely. But, the less than ideal quality of the video made it impossible to grasp the work, even if I watched the whole performance. So, I thought, I needed some advice; and started making international calls to trustworthy colleagues, such as Guy Cools in Ghent or Maria de Assis in Lisbon. I asked them which tapes I should watch, and what they thought of the dance makers. To my surprise, I soon realised that my colleagues didn't know much about choreographers outside their own countries. And, equally to my surprise, they didn't know each other either.

Noticing the lack of shared knowledge among international dance professionals, I came up with the idea of inviting a dozen friends of mine with similar enthusiasm to London, and to watch the seventy videos together. Then, at least, those people would end up having the same knowledge of dance works produced in Portugal, Belgium and elsewhere. So just like that, Aerowaves started over a dinner table in London. And, to finally answer your question, I started doing this in 1996 because I regarded it as part of my job. By instigating this project, I thought it would result in a more diverse and interesting dance program at The Place.

Aerowaves' network has been developing since to become 'the hub for dance discovery in Europe'. In order to provide a pan-European identity to the organization, you have managed to organise the annual meetings in different European cities every year.

Yes, for the year after the initial meeting in London, Marianna Kajantie, our partner in Helsinki, invited all twelve of us and more to her theatre. We all paid ourselves to go there. The Place paid for the shipping cost for the three aluminium trunks with video-tapes, the host providing the venue. One of the highlights of the second meeting was the venue itself. It was a renovated Russian vivisection laboratory from the 1930s, which was situated on a little island called Harrakka – only reachable by a boat ride from Helsinki. So, in the end, we were discussing contemporary dance in this historical building, still furnished with benches and Bunsen burners, and cages for the laboratory monkeys! I worked there alone throughout Saturday night, watching a beautiful sunrise over the sea... And, yes, our network has expanded substantially since then. Now, Aerowaves consists of forty-one partners across Europe, and we have never met in the same city twice.

Why did you decide to call the organisation Aerowaves?

A friend of mine called Assis Carreiro, who now works as the Director of Culture for the Delegation du Quebec in London, was the person who came up with the idea. Her advice was that it should not be a name that restricts our funding sources, most especially helping encourage sponsorship, at that time. Half-jokingly, she said 'what about Aerowaves? We could get funding from Rowntree.' In the UK, Rowntree makes this famous chocolate called Aero [laughs]. Truth be told, there was no significant presence of the network at that time because it was an invisible agency. And, so I never considered any consequences of branding it..

In the earlier years, young dance makers selected by the Aerowaves meeting were given the opportunity to present their works at Resolution!: a five-week platform, that

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runs from January to February every year at The Place.

Resolution! is a fast-paced showcase, in which around a hundred emergent dance makers are introduced over consecutive nights. There are no repeated performances: every evening, three new pieces. The idea came from responding to the potent young choreographers burgeoning specifically in the London dance scene. I wanted to provide a platform in which young choreographers could express their talents. And, every weekend night, I slipped in a couple of international dance productions in the triple bill.

For five weekends, that is, for ten days, I managed to present international artists, who were selected by the Aerowaves meeting. It was a deliberate decision not to present all ten international works in two or three nights. The contemporary dance audience in the UK mostly consisted of friends and acquaintances of the artists around that time, and so, I knew that I would never get a full house if I only programmed international works. Also, I made sure to put on the European works first thing in the evening so that the satisfied audience would not leave after seeing their friends on the stage [laughs]. Luckily, the European works were mostly well received. And, for the first decade or so, Resolution! formed the basis of Aerowaves.

Did you have any specific criteria when selecting the ten pieces?

Yes, we had them from the beginning. When I invited the twelve friends to the dinner table in London, I handed them a piece of paper with nine criteria which I had remembered to scribble down just beforehand. You can still read them on the Aerowaves website. Some of them look a bit creaky now, but, they haven't changed. And those nine criteria are: 1, The work is propelled by a good idea; 2, Choreographed with an originality motivated by this idea; 3, Which has the confidence to omit the superfluous; 4, With a clear and sturdy structure; 5, Danced with clarity, verve, commitment and assurance; 6, That will look good presented under limited technical conditions; 7, From a company that has not toured much abroad; 8, But whose experience might be enriched through Aerowaves; and, 9, That will have a future. Among these selection criteria, the most important is the second one. Around that time, I had seen a lot of dance works where people simply danced the way in which they had been taught, and trying to somehow find a subject. It seemed to me that was the wrong way around. The subject comes first; then, you find the form in which the subject can be best expressed. A successful example of this is *Elvedon* by Christos Papadopoulos, which was presented at this year's Spring Forward. Aerowaves is not so much interested in those works which attempt to express themselves through a given technique.

In February 1992, four years before Aerowaves was launched, the Maastricht Treaty (formally, the Treaty on European Union) was signed, and, in the subsequent year, the European Union was created. I assume Aerowaves is a dance network that expanded in tandem with the development of the EU.

I would argue that the development of Aerowaves was not so much related to the expansion of the EU. Maybe it led it! I won't say it was completely irrelevant, but, basically, the network grew because, around that time, in various different European countries, the independent dance scene was emerging one by one. That is why we

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often adopted partners from Eastern European countries, even before they joined the EU. Around the millennium, there was a point at which we could have possibly received EU funding. But we decided not to do so because it would have divided the network completely between West and East. I wanted to work with partners from all countries on an equal footing, and, so, to apply for funding which would underline the division seemed to be a mistake..

On 23 June 2016, a historic referendum on whether the UK should remain in or leave the member of the European Union will take place (The interview was conducted on 15 June 2016). Depending on the outcome of the referendum, do you think that the future of Aerowaves will change?

I don't think there will be any immediate impact as we have already secured three-year funding from the EU until 2017, which provides us approximately €420,000 annually. Even if the UK decides to leave, I think it will take a certain time to withdraw, so the current three-year grant should be safe. However, we have only secured the first three years of the seven-year scheme called Creative Europe, which runs from 2014-2020, with the total budget of €1.46 billion. And, if the UK decides to leave, we might not be able to apply for funding from there for the remaining four years. The top annual amount of money for this scheme is half a million euros, and I would like to secure that amount. Considering all this, what we could do when Brexit actually happens is that we could move the centre of Aerowaves to another European country; ideally, to one of those countries in the Eurozone..

In 2011, Aerowaves started a festival called Spring Forward. What was the motive behind developing a festival, through which all twenty performances were presented in a single weekend?

To take it on from your previous question, I started realising that I couldn't go on much longer being the director of Aerowaves and hold down the job at The Place. The former task was becoming such a large part of my life. So, I thought, now is the time to take Aerowaves independent by making its own board and grant applications. Fortunately, six months after I left The Place in 2009, we got our first grant of €70,000 from the EU, which could cover the basic running costs. The amount was enough to employ me and Anna Arthur: my general manager, who worked throughout the development of Aerowaves - we previously worked together at The Place.

When making Aerowaves independent, I felt the necessity to provide more openness and presence to the organisation. And, I thought that the best way to do so was through creating a dance festival. The crux of the idea materialised when I visited the Mousonturm in Frankfurt. Olivia Ebert, the former dance programmer of the Mousonturm, and our German partner at that time, was organising a mini dance festival by inviting young choreographers all selected through the Aerowaves meeting. When attending the festival, in which nine choreographers and a few producers gathered in one place, I noticed the significant synergy, the potential for future collaborations, emerging right in front of my eyes. And, I thought that if you could successfully organise a mini-festival in Frankfurt with nine artists, then I could do it with twenty, by launching an internationally promoted weekend platform. Inspired by this experience, I organised the first Spring Forward festival in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with Iztok Kovac,

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Director of En Knap whose work I had presented back in the days of The Turning World at The Place. There were twenty-three productions spread over five venues with Iztok's Spanski Borski at the core. We did it on a tiny budget and the generosity of friends at the depth of the recession. I invited presenters and producers from all over Europe.

The only people we did not welcome were the managers. I know that there are many wonderful managers working in dance, but there are also those people who just thrust DVDs to others who may have no interest in the work. I wanted the producers or the presenters to talk directly to the artists. So, most importantly, in Ljubljana, all guests, from artists to producers, stayed in the same Hotel Park – a crucial partner since it cost only nineteen euros per night for an artist. When I saw all these people meeting over breakfast, it made me realise that we had really got on to something.

### What were the expected and the unforeseen outcomes you have seen through Spring Forward?

The expected outcome was that Aerowaves presenters could now invite artists to their respective venues with much more confidence. Even if you were still sceptical after watching a video or hearing other people's opinions, when you saw the live performance, bang, those doubts were gone. Until now, I could count more than hundred performances a year by Aerowaves artists presented in venues across Europe.

The unforeseen result was that even those producers outside the Aerowaves network started inviting the artists. Aerowaves artists ended up being in famous institutions like Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, France, and commissioned by state companies like Tanz Mainz in Germany. Also, they were invited to tiny places, like a festival located on the border of Hungary and Slovenia, Murska Sobota, which I can hardly pronounce. I did not expect the network to expand so diversely and drastically, from prestigious institutions to small independent theatres.

### How do you think Spring Forward has developed from the initial festival in 2011?

In 2012, the second festival was held in Bassano Del Grappa, Italy. One of our partners, Roberto Cassaroto, generously devoted the entire budget of his festival called B Motion, a part of Festival Veneto Estate which has been going since 1981. Our third edition was held in Zurich, Switzerland, as part of the Zürich Tanzt Festival. We failed to raise the sponsorship in that year, and could only invite sixteen works, among which three were local Swiss productions. Aerowaves developed exponentially from the fourth edition, held in Umeå, the far north of Sweden. Since Umeå was selected as the European Cultural Capital for 2014, we suddenly had a budget of €160,000. The opera house later put in €20,000 more. With this ample budget, we were able to materialise our vision fully for the first time. And, owing to the demonstration of this edition, we were able to secure three-year funding from Creative Europe. In 2015, it was Barcelona, Spain, in 2016, Pilsen, Czech Republic, and next year, we are off to Aarhus, Denmark - again a Capital of Culture.

From 2014, Spring Forward started two ancillary activities. First, you started livestreaming all productions in the festival through the Aerowaves website. Second,

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you launched a platform called Springback Academy that aims at nurturing emerging dance writers.

When we got enough funding for the festival in Umeå, I came up with the idea of livestreaming the productions. Since thirty percent of our funding is judged by the audience development plans, I wanted to do something that broadened the audience. Recommended by a couple of friends, I met Andre Portasio, a man who runs a company called artStreamingTV in London. After meeting him, I found him a trustworthy person, having a keen understanding of dance as a former dancer with English National Ballet. And so I signed a four-year contract with his company. In 2014, people watched online for 750 hours around the world. Now, it has increased to 1200 hours. The number of people logging on to see the performances is stuck between three-and-a-half to four thousand. The advantage of live streaming, though, is that it allows additional contents, such as interviews with artists and guests. Anyway, it's an experiment to a certain extent, and I am discussing with our partners how we could strengthen it.

As for Springback Academy, it's more of a long-term project. My interest in writing about performances could be traced back to the first job I got: Theatre Editor at Time Out in London. Through the job, I came to understand how difficult it is to write about performances. At the same time, I came up with this fundamental belief that you learn about things by naming them. At least that is what child psychologists say. And, I think that because dance is such a difficult art form to explain through words, doing so enhances your understanding of the artwork. To say more, I think that if you watch a dance piece and could write what it is about and how it affects you, the text not only enhances your individual understanding of the artwork, but also promotes its collective understanding. I think that dance writing is a crucial interrogative process necessary for choreographic developments.

Recently, however, with the decline of the print media, the authority of the dance critic has more or less evaporated. In order to challenge and question the situation, I launched Springback Academy. During each festival, we trawl through Europe to select a group of ten emerging dance writers to come and write about the dance pieces they see. For the sake of getting them to write with greater authority, both in terms of content and style, we employ three to four professional critics with considerable backgrounds in dance writing as editors and mentors. Initially, the idea was that these ten people should come to a festival, write reviews for our website, and then we wave good-bye. But, the first year participants in Barcelona said they wanted to come back this year. So, I said, okay, and it is now developing into a three-year academy with first, second, and third year participants. After the third year in Aarhus, 2017, we are planning to publish something whether in print or online. These writers form a new generation of advocates for dance.

How did you end up being a dance producer, though starting your career as a Theatre Editor at Time Out? Can you briefly explain your trajectory?

After receiving a degree in English from the University of Leicester, I went to Manchester to do a one-year postgraduate diploma in Directing. Initially, my ambition was to become a television director. But, after working twice for a six-part youth TV

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programme during the summer, I realised I didn't fit into the industry. There were too many compromises. Subsequently, I came up with the idea of becoming a theatre director, and launched a fringe theatre company called Sidewalk. After presenting two or three productions, I found an advertisement that sought a writer for Time Out. I thought I could help this culture magazine, which initially came out once every three weeks. And, so I started writing theatre reviews for them. Soon, I became the founding Theatre Editor of the fortnightly, then weekly Time Out.

Since becoming a theatre director, and not an editor, was my ambition, I left the post a few years afterwards and started working as the Manager of Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court. As the Manager, I produced twelve productions annually, mostly by young writers from my generation like Sam Shepard. One of the highlights of my career at the Royal Court was that I produced the very first production of Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* at the 120-seat theatre. Also as a young artist, I was given an opportunity to direct plays written by Caryl Churchill.

As a result, I was then appointed the Director of Theatre at the ICA, and worked for them for seven years. What I found during that time was how being a theatre director and leading a venue are irreconcilable. It is just impossible to direct a play during the daytime, and also go around other venues to see and judge other people's productions in the evening. So, after a few years, as I knew I was not such a good theatre director anyway, I decided to concentrate on running a venue. It was around that time that I invited Anne Teresa De Keesmaeker's *Fase* to the UK. Our partnership continued when I moved to The Place, and, ultimately, I managed to present her piece in the 900-seat Queen Elizabeth Hall. I also invited Édouard Lock with *La La La Human Steps* to the UK for the first time, when I was working at the ICA. I presented his work in a 2000-seat rock concert venue called The Forum (currently, O2 Forum) in North London. I think this is still a revolutionary thing to do in the contemporary dance world.

I've heard you took a sabbatical, when working at the ICA, and stayed in Japan for a year.

Yes. Thanks to the Japan Foundation, in 1980, I received a generous grant to live and conduct research in Japan for a year. My initial aim was to observe works of novelist Abe Kobo, who also had a theatre company. However, just before my visit to Japan, when I talked with Mr. Abe over the phone, he said that he was disbanding his company to concentrate on writing a novel which became 'Secret Rendezvous'. Sadly, he passed away soon, and I never got a chance to meet Mr. Abe in person. To begin with, I got interested in his work because even though he was a novelist, he was writing a play that excluded words. I saw his theatre works on film, and there were no words; it was more like choreography. I never got the chance to do so, but I was fascinated to know why a novelist would abandon words when entering the theatre.

Although the initial plan had been cancelled, The Japan Foundation kindly asked me whether or not I want to visit Japan anyway. I wanted to. So for a year, I just attended countless theatre and dance performances. In due course of time, I got interested in works by Ohta Shogo and his theatre company Tenkei Gekijo. And, the playwright-director had indeed abandoned words. I got to know him, and, struck by his series of

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non-verbal theatre pieces, I later invited two of his great works, *Komachi Fuden* and *Mizu no eki*, to the ICA. I think that they were perhaps the best experimental theatre I presented during my time there.

**I could see that your interest has gradually shifted from theatre to dance. Why?**

When I started working with dancers for the first time at the ICA, I realised that these people are the ones I want to work with. For instance, let's say that I ask an actor to move to the sofa. What happens for the next ten minutes is that they will discuss *why* they have to move. By contrast, if I ask the same thing of a dancer, they will immediately work out *how* to do it. For me, the latter seemed to be a much more interesting response. Plus, I got on well with the speed of dance in the developing digital age. That is why I applied to the directorial position at The Place. When the job came up, I knew this was what I wanted to do. However, since I knew little about contemporary dance, I just went to every performance that I could see in London. And, when I was interviewed by Robert Howard, the founder of The Place, I was able to say that I did not have a proper dance training, nor did I know much more than most people in the audience, but, I have done my best by training my eye.

**At the end of the day, you had the eye for seeing through talents. There are so many choreographers who were discovered by you to later become international artists.**

It may now look like I made the discoveries, but, actually, I didn't. I just reflected. It was perfectly obvious that Matthew Bourne and Wayne McGregor were going to be interesting choreographers. How could you miss them? So, thank you for saying that, but, in truth, I just provided them the space. I still remember the day I first met Wayne. It was another one of those Resolution! triple bill in the 1990s. The lights went up to reveal in a spotlight, centre stage, this lanky, gawky young man with no hair, who started flexing his long limbs to saxophones. I never speak during performances; but this time I had to whisper to Rachel Gibson, the former colleague sitting next to me: 'Hey, this guy is *really* good.' 'I know him', she replied, 'He is the Community Dance Animateur for the London Borough of Redbridge.' Wayne had just graduated from University, but I immediately invited him to become an Associate Artist at The Place, where he later formed Random Dance.

**Lastly, if I were to ask you what is your asset for being a successful dance producer, what will it be?**

Maybe not having a professional training in dance [laughs]. When I sit through a performance with producers who have been excellent dancers, I can tell from their reactions that what many of them seek is technical virtuosity. But, for me, no matter how technically challenging the dance may be, a boring dance is just boring. Also, I think I was very lucky that I started working as a dance producer when the independent dance scene was about to flourish in the UK. From Lloyd Newson of DV8 to Hofesh Shechter, I was able to introduce various talents at The Place. My wish then was to provide them a place, in which young British choreographers could explore their talents. Now, in Aerowaves, I am doing a similar thing for young European dance makers. Providing them a platform, through which they can meet audiences from all over the world.