

## Systems of Co-Creation Artistic reflection

Tanja Råman

### ABSTRACT

This article is an artistic reflection of a research project called Please Switch On Your Mobile Phones (PSOYMP) that took place in three venues in Wales in 2014. The aim of PSOYMP was to develop new tools for audience interaction with on-stage dance, with the intention of developing new audiences. The project utilised an action research model to create a flexible choreographic and digital hybrid system that enabled the audience to collaborate in real time with the creative team—a choreographer, five dancers, a digital artist and a technologist—using mobile phones and tablets.

The project resulted in the creation of an hour-long performance event. This was developed through three stages that included a week-long residency in each stage and a public performance event with a feedback session at the end of each residency. The final event was streamed live via YouTube and a web-based application, which allowed the online audience to participate in the event and to collaborate with the creative team in a similar way to the in-house audience. This article focusses on the creative process and discusses the nature and the development of the collaboration between the creative team and the audience.

### TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä artikkeli keskittyy kuvailemaan Please Switch On Your Mobile Phones (PSOYMP) – nimisen tutkimusprojektin taiteellisesta prosessia. PSOYMP järjestettiin Walesissa vuonna 2014 ja sen tarkoituksena oli kehittää uusia digitaalisia työkaluja, jotka mahdollistaisivat ja edistäisivät yleisön ja esiintyjien vuorovaikutusta ja sitä kautta toisivat uusia katsojia tanssin pariin. Projekti hyödynti toimintatutkimuksen periaatteita ja pyrki luomaan joustavan koreografi-digitaalisen hybridi järjestelmän. Järjestelmän tarkoituksena oli mahdollistaa yhteistyö yleisön ja taiteellisen tiimin välillä reaaliajassa mobiililaitteiston avulla. Taiteelliseen tiimiin kuuluivat koreografi, viisi tanssijaa, digitaalitaiteilija ja teknologi.

Projektiä kehitettiin vaiheittain kolmessa teatterissa eri puolilla Walesia vuoden 2014 aikana. Lopputuloksena syntyi tunnin mittainen interaktiivinen esittävä tapahtuma. Jokainen vaihe sisälsi viikon mittaisen residenssin, julkisen esityksen sekä yleisökeskustelutilaisuuden residenssin lopussa. Viimeinen tapahtuma lähetettiin myös suorana lähetyksenä YouTube Liven välityksellä. Varta vasten kehitetty verkkosovellus mahdollisti tapahtumaan osallistumisen ympäri maailmaa ja yhteistyön taiteellisen tiimin kanssa samalla tavoin kuin itse tapahtumassa. Tämä artikkeli painottuu esittelemään PSOYMPin luovaa prosessia sekä yhteistyön kehittymistä taiteellisen tiimin ja yleisön välille.

# Systems of Co-Creation

## Artistic reflection

Tanja Råman

**T**his article is an artistic reflection on a research project called Please Switch On Your Mobile Phones (PSOYMP) that took place in 2014. PSOYMP was created by TaikaBox (a Wales- and Finland based dance and digital art company) and Moon (a Wales-based digital studio) with the aim of creating a digital and choreographic system that allows in-house and online audiences to interact with the creation and performance of a dance show in real time. The project was one of seven selected for the pilot Digital R&D Fund for Arts in Wales funded by Nesta, Arts & Humanities Research Council and public funding by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Wales.

### Background

Over the past ten years, TaikaBox has integrated dance and technology to various degrees to create works for stage, screen and site. In recent years, the company has been developing more interactive and immersive experiences that allow interaction between the performer and his/her audio-visual environment and audience participation in the performance or the creation of new dance work. The audience has become a strong focus in the company's research and production processes, encouraging a shift from the role of a passive consumer to an active participant and—in some projects—to become a creative collaborator. During PSOYMP, TaikaBox explored the use of mobile technology for the first time. In contrast, Moon is an established digital company. Over 15 years, Moon has crafted interactive products and experiences for the changing landscape of web,

mobile, tablet, TV and other connected devices. However, this represents the first time Moon has created digital tools for live performance.

PSOYMP was created out of frustration and curiosity. TaikaBox shares the frustration of poor audience attendance for dance with many other artists and companies in the Welsh arts sector. The company felt that traditional marketing strategies were not reaching or engaging with new audiences for dance in appropriate ways, and touring in Wales was commonly plagued with near-empty auditoriums. It was also considered that the theatre experience is perhaps viewed as an irrelevant and even scary and alienating experience by non-theatre goers. The unspoken code of behaviour in theatres is usually out-moded in relation to the contemporary society in which we are living. Audience members are generally expected to sit quietly in a dark auditorium, switch off their mobile devices and not interact with others (unless especially invited to do so by the performers) to avoid interfering with the 'art'.

The last two decades have shown an explosion in the use of technology in dance performances worldwide, with an array of audiovisual and interactive environments to accompany the dancers. Artists have also questioned the relationship between the performer and the audience and increasingly explored technology as a tool to engage audiences in the creative process. One of the most renowned companies blurring the boundary between technology and the moving body in choreography is Troika Ranch (2015). In this company, the use of technology is driven by an attempt to stay relevant for the audiences in contemporary

society, in which live theatre is competing fiercely with broadcast media.

In PSOYMP, TaikaBox was curious to investigate how interactive technology could seep deeper into the audience engagement and ‘glue’ the audience more firmly and more intimately into the artistic content. Could we build a system that extended interactivity to include the audience as part of the creative process? Could we take a step further and do this in real time?

## **The aim of the project and research questions**

PSOYMP explored the creation of new digital tools that could be integrated into a new production model that would break out of the time- and place-limited audience of a standard theatrical performance. Using mobile platforms, the project sought to connect with the audience through the two following aims: 1) to engage more deeply with the audience in the venue and 2) to simultaneously involve a global audience, expanding the geographic limits of theatrical performance, and creating a way for new audiences to feel more connected with a dance performance.

The research focussed on questions like the following ‘How can the creative disruptions of new technology redraw the relationship between audience and performance in contemporary dance practice?’ ‘Does the system created manage to introduce non-theatre and a non-dance audience to contemporary dance?’

## **Research framework**

As one of the aims of the research was to develop new digital tools, the research team considered it important to design a research framework that allowed time to design these tools, test them out and—more importantly—develop them over time. A cyclical action research model was adopted; action research is commonly used to solve problems and develop ideas in education, social sciences and business development. It can also be used as a reflective

practice to improve one’s own practice—learning by doing (O’Brien 1998).

The digital and choreographic elements of PSOYMP were built hand-in-hand through research cycles that enabled the team to test, learn from mistakes, re-develop and refine the system three times over the course of eight months. PSOYMP took place in three locations in Wales, each including a week-long residency and a public performance followed by programming and studio-based practice.

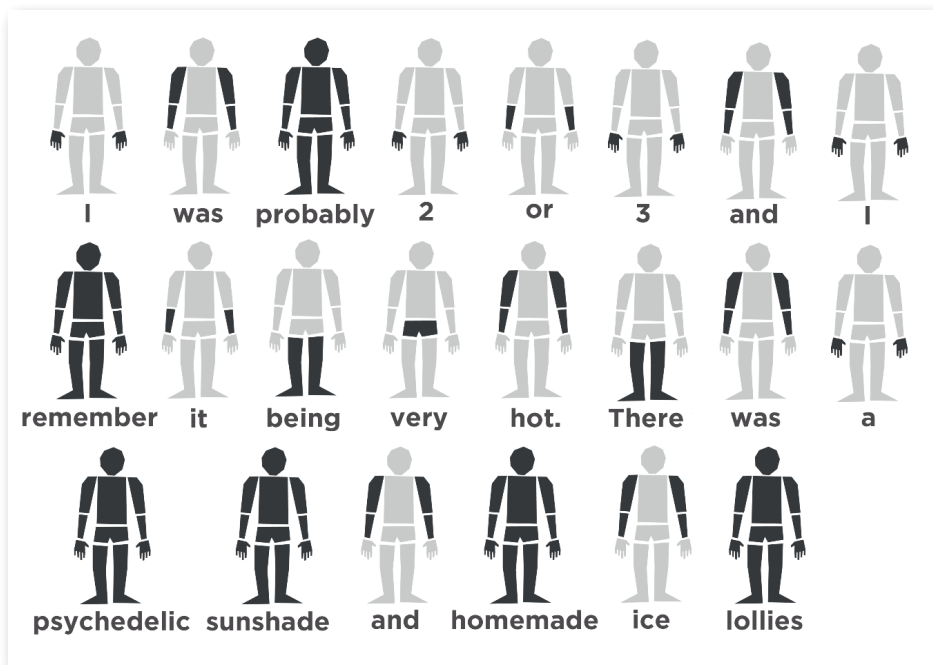
## **Discussion**

Each of the three research cycles is presented separately to shed light into the progression of the project and the learning that came from this research process. The presentation of the research cycles is followed by more general discussion of co-creation and post-digital tendencies in dance. The steepest learning curve came at the start of the project, during the first public test.

### **Stage 1 – Cardiff**

The first residency included a group of dance students from the dance degree course at Cardiff Metropolitan University. These students worked alongside five TaikaBox dancers to build a choreographic system based on the principles of a simple choreographic workshop following the idea of generating initial movement material based on stimuli, developing it further with tasks and then performing it at the end.

The students were split into five groups, each led by one TaikaBox dancer. Each group was allocated a colour to make it easier to differentiate the groups onstage. The idea was that the audience submits short (Twitter-size) stories with their mobile phones and tablets. From the list of stories that were projected onto the back wall, each group chose a story to process into their initial movement material. To avoid the dancers miming the stories, a mathematical formula was introduced where each word was allocated to



*Figure 1. Processing a short story into movement.  
Image by Moon.*

a different body part depending on the length of the word from one to seven letters. For example, one-letter words referred to a hand gesture, three letter-words to arm movements and so on.

This resulted in a rich movement vocabulary. The emotional content of the stories, however, was instantly lost. After the groups had created their initial movement material, the audience voted with mobile devices on how the movement was to be developed further by connecting each group with an icon, such as a compass or road. Each icon had a meaning, such as changing directions, travelling or doing movements with a certain speed or quality.

Although the system worked very well as a residency, the first public test was a 'brilliant, spectacular failure', as noted by one of the audience members. There is no better way to describe it. The system had been tested in a pilot with positive outcome, but the pilot differed too much from the first public test to prepare the team for their first encounter with the

general public as reflected in this blog post about the first beta test:

Server crashing and people getting frustrated. Audience members feeling left out and betrayed as only 5 stories were selected and the stories were chosen for their length rather than their meaning... the audience felt helpless as a collaborator... (Râman 2014)

The system that we had initially created did not work. It did not allow me, the choreographer, respond to or steer the situation when needed. The digital user interface did not provide enough guidance and clarity for the audience to replace verbal communication. The event was set up in a traditional theatre environment, creating certain expectations for audience behaviour that hindered the research. Smaller factors, such as the venue announcing: 'Please switch OFF your mobile phones', did not help the situation. Although the humiliation of public failure was initially difficult

*Figure 2. PSOYMP rehearsal during the first residency in Cardiff.  
Image by TaikaBox.*

to deal with, it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened.

The public was generous in the post-show discussion, explaining what they had hoped for and what they missed. We realised that the digital tools were needed to solve problems rather than provide elaborate and irrelevant gimmickry. At this stage, although the audience members actively used their mobile devices to interact, they could not understand what to do unless they were already dance-literate. What was unfolding in front of them was alienating rather than engaging. Controls, such as changes in lighting and sound, were passed to audience members, but the responses were too subtle for them to feel that they had any influence on what was going on on-stage.

## **Stage 2 – Aberystwyth**

The failure of the first PSOYMP stage represented a crucial turning point. Only the very essence of the project was kept—the creative process would be based on stories that the audience members submitted and then the audience would vote on how the choreography should be. We agreed to find a better balance between human and digital communication, and verbal communication was re-introduced to guide the audience through the event. This was part of the pilot but was excluded in the first public test. The key for the re-development of the digital tools was to enable the audience to communicate with us through a user interface that was easy to understand without diverting their attention away from the stage. The aim was to create flexible tools that would allow us to respond spontaneously and instantly to respond



to any given situation. This would mean creating tools that could improvise as fluently as the dancers. The digital mechanics were simplified to create a solid foundation that could be tested in the second research stage. We re-thought the choreographic system and adopted a more improvisational approach. The aim was to change the dynamics, and through a guided creative process, audience members changed from passive to active participants. However, the audience was still not collaborating.

The public failure made us more aware of the importance of collaboration. A lot of the work that had taken place up to this point was done through web-based tools (Trello, Google Docs, Basecamp) with which the digital partner Moon was familiar. Most of the re-development from this point onwards took place in a dance studio, in which we could all combine physical doing, discussing and coding as a group.

During the second stage of PSOYMP, we simplified the user interface and the process. After submitting

stories, the audience members could favourite the stories they would like to see developed into movement. Although we did not manage to work with more than four stories in an hour, the audience seemed content. The dancers focussed on one story at a time, creating four short performances throughout the event. This meant that we developed more improvisational and task-based approaches and used specific tools, such as 'flocking', to create an impression of unison without needing to spend time on learning and rehearsing. The second test gave us confidence in the idea that we had created a foundation for the system that works –and on which we could continue building more complexity.

### Stage 3 – Llanelli

The third stage saw the addition of live streaming via YouTube, which enabled a global audience to take part in the creation of the work in (almost) real

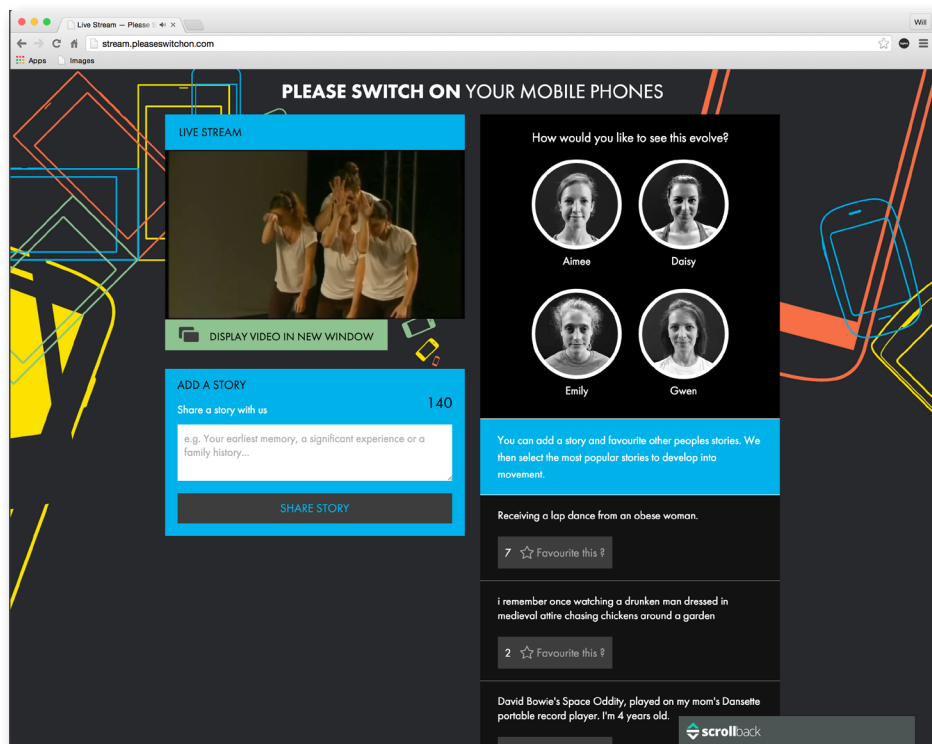
time. The online audience was provided with a user interface that had similar functions and design to the user interface on the in-house audience members' mobile devices.

The online audience had a chat room function to connect with individuals and to encourage discussion.

One of the challenges was how to combine live streaming with interactivity and encourage participation rather than passive observation. There was an approximately 40-second delay before the online audiences perceived the action that had taken place in the studio. Live sync became refined improvisation and communication between me and my technical team.

The final residency focussed on finding a balance

*Figure 3. Live streaming of PSOYMP in Llanelli. Image by TaikaBox and Moon.*



in physical, verbal and digital communication amongst all parties involved. With the digital aspects of the system responding more dynamically and flexibly, it was necessary to re-evaluate our perception of the choreographic process and the overall flow of the event. I had to explore creating work from a new perspective. We invited groups to play with the system in the studio and online, and the event evolved stylistically and became snappier in pace than TaikaBox's usual work for stage. During the last event, eight stories were transformed into mini-performances in an hour, and one of the stories was revisited to finish the event. Based on feedback from the first stage, we added the in-house audience's ability to digitally connect with the outside world and use social media. This was a way to create a more contemporary environment where the public could enjoy the performance as a non-restricting experience.

## Co-creation

During the final stage, the audience become a collaborator. We provided the tools and knowledge, and through communication with the audience, we made the performances together. The event became a social—as well as an artistic—experience, and the last performance, marked by humour and playfulness, was unlike anything TaikaBox has ever made before. This raises questions about ownership.

Was this a co-creation? I would argue that it was, as the last PSOYMP performance felt shared, blurring the boundary between performers and audience. For a co-creation to take place, there needs to be a shift of power to allow audiences to make meaningful decisions about what is being created. Although co-creation can be seen as all parties working together from the beginning of a project, Govier (2009), argues that focussing on power as a central aspect in co-creation can be counterproductive. According to Govier (2009) co-creation does not necessarily mean that the project is about a specific community group's agenda or that the power is equally shared within the

community. Govier supports a more open and dynamic approach to co-creation, where performers work with audiences to create something new depending on the people involved and the project itself.

I occasionally asked dancers to explain to the audience what they were doing. This provided insights into dancers' thinking and creativity, offering sometimes unexpected and amusing discoveries. This created a relaxed atmosphere and gave the audience ways to be more comfortable while watching contemporary dance. Maintaining a continuous dialogue fostered a friendly atmosphere that helped the audience to become part of the team and play with the dancers without needing to know anything about dance or choreography. The smooth operation of the digital system allowed people to voice their choices regularly, and the human interaction made the system work.

## Post-digital tendencies in dance

Many performances in the last event were rough, with little time to polish movements or ideas. The event relied on the dancers' ability to perform and on everyone's spontaneous judgements. Human error was an important, integral part of the performance. My argument is that the artistry did not arise from the actual dancing or choreography but rather from the act of co-creation. I would urge a shift in our focus from viewing to experiencing and from product to process to value PSOYMP. My view is that there is value in each individual audience member experiencing creativity and play, connecting with others and being part of something bigger or—for a fleeting moment—feeling a satisfying sense of 'this is it' or 'this works' whilst also scrabbling through try-outs and dead-ends.

PSOYMP does not easily fit into the aesthetics of typical digital work created in dance. The digital in dance is often associated with a sense of being clinical, cold and non-human; thus, it is often used to contrast with the softness of the human body. Post-digital art,

however, takes a different stance, drawing from the notion of imperfection and failure due to overloaded or manipulated digital systems, creating something new and more organic out of the failings (Cascone 2000). It also seems to comfortably combine analogue with digital and break the linear time-based view of old and new. Furthermore, it emphasises open process that the audience can easily witness and follow (Andrews 2002). I would suggest that the last PSOYMP event represents an example of what post-digital work could look like in a dance context. Moreover, in my view, it takes a step further to contribute to the general understanding of the post-digital condition. In PSOYMP, dancers and audience merge with the system itself, and this blurs the boundaries between the digital and the human.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Tanja Răman** is the artistic director of TaikaBox, a dance and digital art company based in Wales and Finland. She is a multi-award-winning choreographer whose signature movement tends towards process-led, multilayered abstraction. Tanja's choreographic practice integrates her knowledge of dance science, specifically the dancer's physical and mental preparation.

TaikaBox is dedicated to creating new ways for people to experience dance, making innovative and emotionally resonant work that is a hybrid between technology and the moving body. The company is engaged in ongoing research into defining the post-digital condition in dance.

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