



DANSPLAN SVERIGE

The story of how the Swedish contemporary dance sector came together to address politics with a common voice

Some months ago, a Scandinavian dance colleague shared a document with me called 'Dansplan Sverige'. The paper is in Swedish, but with the help of online translators I could grasp the content: It is a policy paper from the Swedish dance sector, addressing politicians on national, regional and local level, with proposals for actions to improve the current situation and to ensure the sustainability and development of contemporary dance in Sweden.

The paper was initiated by three dance organisations: Danscentrum Sverige¹, Dansnät Sverige² and Riksteatern³ and brought together nearly 200 participants from the dance field to discuss the future of contemporary dance in Sweden.

I decided to contact Amy Fee, the head of Danscentrum Sverige, who also happens to be a member of EAIPA⁴, to find out more about the process, how this paper was developed and if such a paper can actually have any impact on cultural policy. Amy has an extensive knowledge of the independent contemporary dance field in Sweden, and talking to her on Zoom about their Dansplan was equally inspiring as it was overwhelming. Overwhelming, as I only began to understand the sheer magnitude of this undertaking, but inspiring to see how the sector came together and what structures have already been set in place to support the community.

The Background: Inspired by the German model, the first working group consists of three major players

The idea for the Swedish Dansplan was first brought forward by Cullberg Ballet just before the global pandemic

hit Europe. They called some organisations for a meeting to introduce the German 'Tanzplan Deutschland'⁵ as a best practice model. Even though the starting point in Germany was a very different one (the German model was backed by a 12.5 million Euros investment from the German Federal Cultural Foundation), it was an excuse to talk about long-existing issues in the sector and to take an inventory of the structural situation.

In order to better understand how the idea of a Dansplan could be realised, we need to understand the basics of the Swedish funding system and how the three leading organisations interact with the Swedish dance landscape:

The predominant funding available for dance artists is project funding. To receive long-term funding in Sweden is not impossible but rare, which makes it difficult for artists to build a sustainable career and allow long-term planning.

The regional 'Danscentrum' organisations have funding to provide daily training for professionals. Most dancers and choreographers are members of their regional Danscentrum, as these centres provide subsidised training options as well as work space, residencies and production support. The different dance centres only manage to cover parts of the necessary infrastructure in this big country.

Amy: 'Half the country is the North, and they don't even have their own studios. In Stockholm, there are two studios and 200 plus dancers, so there is never enough space.'

The Dansnät Sverige on the other hand is a network of venues that provides touring opportunities for dance pro-

ductions throughout the country. Regular open calls give selected companies a chance to get to tour with the organisational help of Dansnät and to play on some of the stages of partner organisations. With about 400 applicants per year and only 15-20 shows, the competition to get to tour within this network is extremely high.

So, with Danscentrum and Dansnät in the first working group, the dansplan, which at this stage was just an idea, had won over two important organisations that collectively represent almost the entire independent contemporary dance field. The third partner in this alliance is Riksteatern, the national touring company of Sweden, which has the largest state funding in the entire country, and therefore carries a lot of weight in political terms. (The world-famous Cullberg Company is part of Riksteatern.) Between those three organisations, the majority of the dance sector was represented, with each of them covering a very different aspect of the dance landscape.

Bringing the sector together

Historically, the dance sector in Sweden has become extremely fragmented due to the fact that funding is inconsistent and mainly project-based. There are many choreographers who want to create work and tour – meaning: the whole scene is indirectly pitted against each other as they all apply for the same limited resources.

The division this system creates within the community is counterproductive to any advocacy work. Previous efforts to lobby for the sector's interests (e.g., to create a dance information office modelled on the 'Dance Info Finland') were unsuccessful - not necessarily due to a lack of resources or the government's unwillingness to listen, but because the sector itself, consisting of so many individuals and institutions, was unable to agree on policy recommendations.

The decision of Danscentrum, Dansnät and Riksteatern to organise the Dansplan together on a national level was made to retain a certain level of neutrality, but the working group was very aware of the critical question of ownership of the final paper. For the Dansplan Sverige to work, it needed to be legitimised by the entire sector, so the decision was made to involve everybody in the process and to keep it completely transparent. The first step was to plan a national

meeting as well as workshops to bring the entire dance sector together and gather information for the final document.

Finding common topics

Amy tried to describe some problems from a seemingly endless list of issues.

Amy: 'Our biggest challenge was to determine which issues to address first. Because there are so many issues and they are all burning, but we couldn't take on all of them at the same time.'

Dance is not a sufficiently recognised art form. There is a lack of understanding of the sector's needs and how much work it is. There is no audience outreach data for dance, because it doesn't own its own spaces but relies on touring and being hosted by somebody else (e.g. theatre stages or music halls). There is always more dance available than venues, and there is usually also more audience for it. But if a company plays two guest performances in a city and then leaves, the reviews usually only come out after the shows. So, how can one build a long-term relationship with an audience if one doesn't have the infrastructure to meet the audience in a controlled way?

Amy: 'Historically, there are really good examples, like when they doubled the project funding for dance in 2010, because they understood the sector was growing. But still: It was really attractive for producers, but the 'arrangers', the ones presenting, were not included. Meaning, there is more dance than there are venues. It is the same in other countries: research has shown that a dance production runs for 4-5 nights. From a sustainable work and artistic perspective that is completely crazy - that people spend thousands of Euros on all that work and they can't present the piece because it is not in their power to present it.'

Another aspect is the long-term planning needed for a career in dance: in Sweden, about 10-12 choreographers currently receive long-term national funding. However, they can apply for funding for up to 3 years, but they can only get

it one year at a time. On paper, they can get it approved by the peer committee, but because the arts council itself only operates on a yearly budget, they cannot guarantee that the artist will get the approved amount for all three years.

With so many issues at hand and so many different players in this field who operate in varying frameworks and with varying interests, it was crucial for the three leading organisations to find workshop topics that were of common interest.

Amy: 'We wanted to create a situation in which everyone lifts their eyes a bit from their own over-worked position [...] Because everybody is fighting in a bubble where culture is under-financed and the infrastructure is too weak.'

Research is key

Having scientific papers and research to support your claim is crucial for advocacy work. The many varying issues in the dance field aren't news to anyone working in the field, and they most certainly do not lack the paperwork to back their claims: Danscentrum Sverige shared 47 reports from the last 25 years on their website that describe the different shortcomings of the sector in detail. The frustration of the professionals in the dance field is understandable, considering that 45 of these reports were written and published by Swedish governmental agencies.

Amy: 'There are all these papers and reports that people who are not in the dance sector have been paid to produce by interviewing the (unpaid) dance sector about their conditions.'

But politicians change, civil servants change, departments change, and the knowledge found in those reports is no longer considered. The number of papers available on Danscentrum's website also surprised some politicians who followed the development of the Dansplan.

The national meeting on March 19th 2021

After some Covid-related delays, the event finally took place online, and the response from the sector exceeded all expectations.

Amy: 'We thought that maybe 50-60 people would turn up. And we ended up with what must've been over 200 people.'

Funders were allowed to listen in on the introduction and the presentation by Ann Larsson, who gave an overview of

the funding history of dance in Sweden and its development, but they were not permitted to join the break-out room workshops, since the artists who have to apply for funding with them didn't feel comfortable speaking openly about their issues. But all the information and notes taken from each workshop group were uploaded to the Danscentrum website, and, for the following two weeks, anyone could send in additional comments.

The need to understand the sector's history

Ann Larsson's presentation about the history of dance was also crucial for a younger generation of dancers and choreographers to understand how the current situation came to be. Because, in Sweden, dance has only been a recognised art form for ca 30 years.

Amy: 'People don't know this, that it wasn't a recognised art form. Of course, people who were born 25 years ago, they only see that independent theatres have their own buildings and funding to run those spaces, including a janitor and some permanent staff, and they ask why dance doesn't have such spaces. Well, this is because we created the former in the 60s and 70s, and half of them have lost their funding over the last 20 years... but of course, it has a lot to do with the structure, where it came from. And the buildings for theatre are from the 70s, when politicians thought of art as a human right.'

Dance has not only the newest funding structure in Sweden, but, 12 years ago, the circus arts were added to the same funding pot. Circus as an art form has exploded over the last few years, which means the project funding now gets divided between two very established art forms. At the same time, 11 years ago, a new university for dance and circus was opened in Stockholm. Which means there have never been so many artists entering the job market (including many international students, who stay on after finishing their training) while the funding has remained almost the same.

Writing the Dansplan

Amy: 'We didn't think we would get so much material. [...] We thought it would take 3-4 months to write the paper, but it took us almost 8 months.'

A journalist with experience in writing governmental reports and with an understanding of the system was hired

to go through all the material and to write a paper in collaboration with a project leader and a reference group consisting of 8-10 people from all over the country, who held different positions and who were financially recompensated for their input.

Amy: 'It was extremely important that the information that was passed on came from the working group. 'What do we all have in common?' That was published in the paper. It had to be really short, because otherwise politicians won't have time to read it.'

Continuation

The three leading organisations have since been invited to the ministry of culture to present the paper, while the next step will consist of so-called 'roundtables'. These talks can be understood as a type of 'workshop day' during which politicians sit down with representatives from the sector to discuss issues and possible solutions in more detail. However, these roundtables have been postponed due to national elections and will be formally requested once it is clear who the next minister of culture will be. At the time of the editorial deadline for gift magazine, the results indicate a narrow win for the conservative / right-wing fraction. It would be the first time in Sweden's history that a right-wing party will be in government. So, the repercussions for the arts and culture cannot be predicted at this point.

But people in the sector have asked for the dialogue to continue. Consequently, a seminar was held at the performing arts biennale in June and a new national meeting has been scheduled for next year. Also, plans to include institutions programming dance have been mentioned.

Amy: 'We might have another national meeting on the subject of diversity, representation and bodies. In future, there might be a discussion each year. But I would like for someone else to take over that role. Maybe the institutions programming dance should be having a discussion about diversity. We really want to pass it on - we picked up the baton and carried it for a bit, but anyone can pick it up and carry on now. This is why transparency is so important during this process, and the reason why we don't own it.'

The Dansplan is meant to be a tool, an argument supporting anyone who needs to argue that they are not alone in observing the lack of infrastructure.

Amy's Vision

'The main objective is to create an environment that allows artists to work, and to work sustainably. [...] The country is huge and the regions are really large. So, this paper's focus is mostly on the discrepancy between working at regional or national level, but it is also about finding and creating spaces for dance in local communities.

By finding a space for a choreographer locally and giving them the resources to work, we can see - and our research is showing that - they will automatically start a tiny cultural revolution: they will work with the local community, they will revitalise the village centre, they will invite other artists as well as local artists, and they will be available for schools, kindergartens or art classes.... Something will happen if an artist moves to the country and becomes part of a small community, no matter which art form. [...]

The challenge we face today is to find additional money for arts in a world we think needs culture and arts more than ever. And even if that money goes to theatres or opera houses or something else - it doesn't really matter, as long as there is some. I really think that all art forms need to unite to stress the importance of culture. We need more money. Whether it comes from the Ministry of Finance, of Education or from the Department of Industry and Development. [...] It is about creating things and employing a lot of people, who in turn pay taxes and interact with a lot of other people who buy tickets. The lobbying work is to find 'new' money. Not to close the opera house and give it to dance.'

Esther Baio

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Danscentrum is the employer organisation and collective voice of the independent dance field. Their members are 800 professional choreographers and dancers who create the major part of the contemporary dance in Sweden. Through collaborative work they strive to boost and expand the field of contemporary dance in Sweden and internationally. Danscentrum's offices in Umeå, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö offer professional training, work space, national and international residencies and production support. Danscentrum is one of the founders of The House of Dance (Dansens Hus) and the Dance Alliance and acts as a representative in various boards and working groups to promote the interests of the members.
- ² DANSNÄT SVERIGE is an independent national network of dance scenes, institutions, regional dance and music organisations and municipal and regional cultural administrations that work together to strengthen and build national structures for contemporary dance art.
- ³ RIKSTEATERN is a popular movement consisting of 225 local national theatre associations spread across the country and 21 regional national theatre associations. The aim is to bring performing arts to all of Sweden. The National Theatre accommodates production and its own tours as well as production residencies for the country's independent dance artists and artistic development through regional dance residencies. Cullberg is a national and international repertory company that presents in front of audiences in Sweden and abroad.
- ⁴ EAIPA - the European Association of Independent Performing Arts was founded in 2018 as the umbrella organisation for associations and interest groups from all over Europe, representing the independent performing arts internationally and at the European level.
- ⁵ Tanzplan Deutschland: In 2005, the Federal Cultural Foundation decided to invest 12.5 million euros in the dance scene. It thus gave the starting signal for a major initiative for dance that was unique in all of Europe. Scheduled to run for five years, the project acted as a catalyst for the German dance scene and as a ground-breaking model for sustainable cultural practice until 2010. The goal was the comprehensive and systematic strengthening of dance as an art form.