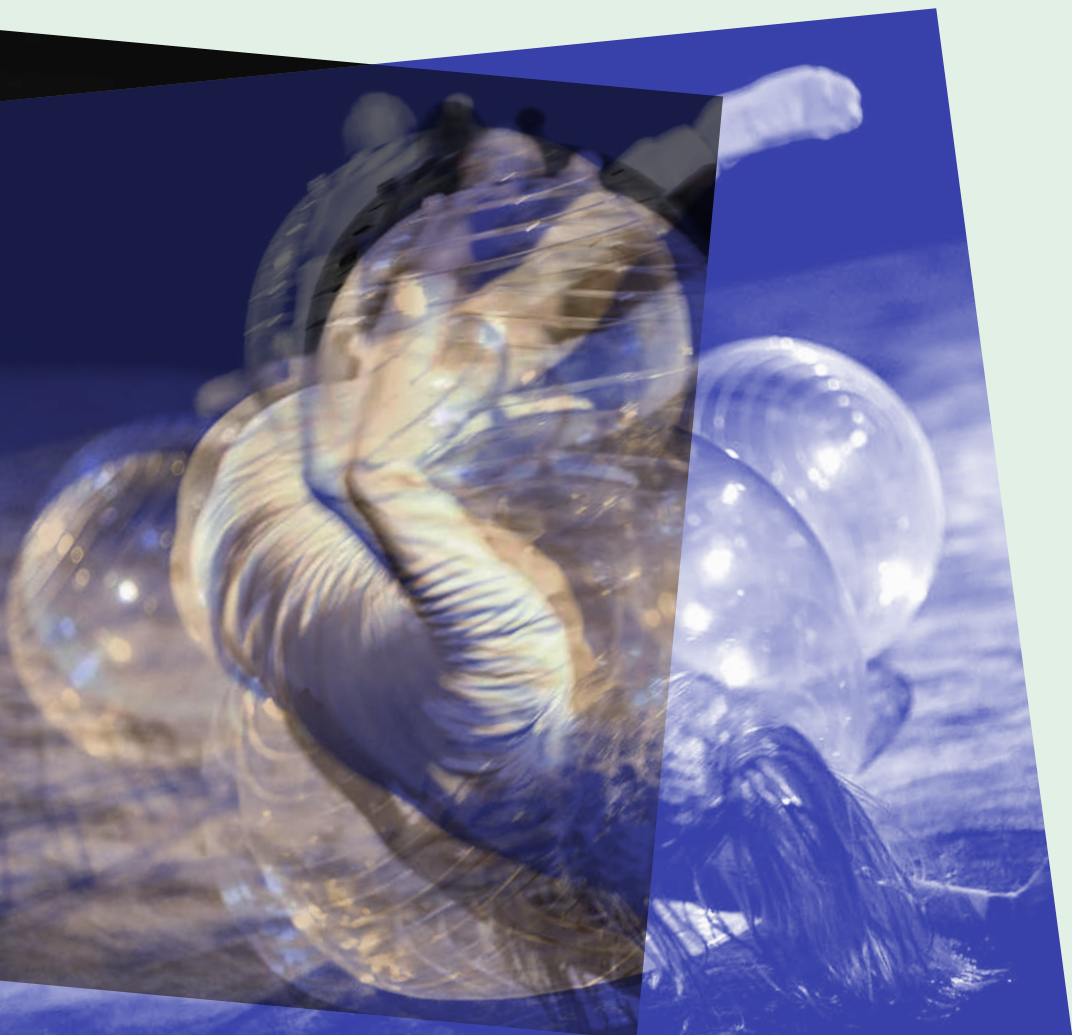


# Feedback in Performing Arts Processes

Mette Tranholm and Marie Mors



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# What is Feedback?

Feedback is an essential part of the performing arts creative process. We use feedback, when we develop our ideas and concepts, we use feedback to strengthen material-in-creation and we use feedback to learn from the impact of our work.

In every creative process, feedback can be used as a driver of the continuous development of the artistic material. Hence, feedback can be integrated in theatre processes of all types, whether it be the classical drama, postdramatic theatre, ballet, contemporary dance, immersive theatre, or performance.

As we consider feedback to be crucial to the quality of our work, we need to ask ourselves how we can create optimal conditions for feedback in our processes.

We have often experienced feedback taking place in a relatively intuitive and informal manner without a clear framework. This can make the feedback rather unfocused and time consuming. We believe that a more methodological approach can strengthen our feedback practices in the performing arts field.

In the first part of this book, we present three models for feedback sessions following a run-through. In the second part, we present examples of how feedback can be implemented in the idea- and concept development phase of a creative process.

Photo: Catrine Zorn



- A model for feedback with the artistic team
- A model for feedback from a test audience
- A model for feedback from an external consultant
- Two examples of how feedback can be implemented in the idea- and concept development phase.

### **Our starting point**

The choice of feedback method should always depend on the specific context and the people involved, as different organisations have different workplace cultures and ways of communicating. Our starting point for developing the feedback models in this book has been our own experiences from working with feedback in Corpus (Royal Danish Theatre) and BETTY DEVELOPS (Betty Nansen Theatre) in Copenhagen, Denmark. Both Corpus and BETTY DEVELOPS operate with a collaborative and exploratory approach to creation, aimed towards work that carry the creative complexity of collective ownership within an open dramaturgy. You can read more about Corpus and BETTY DEVELOPS in the second part of the book.

We encourage you to adapt the models to your specific context and to pick and choose the elements that are relevant to you and your co-creators.

### **Our goal**

The book is directed at both students and more experienced performing arts professionals. Newcomers to the field can use the book as a template or guide to implement feedback in their creative processes, or as inspiration to develop their own feedback models. More experienced performing arts professionals can use the book to revisit their feedback practices and discover potential for development.

The three feedback models address the traditional feedback situation following a run-through, while the second part of the book explores the use of feedback in the idea- and concept development phase. In the context of the performance tradition and in immersive work, the second part of the book will be the most relevant as run-throughs rarely occur. Feedback from a test audience can sometimes be relevant to immersive work, just as the feedback-after-a-run-through models can be of relevance after a performance-piece has taken place, for example if there is a wish to use feedback in the further development of an artistic practice transferable to the next project or piece.

Enjoy.

### **Mette Tranholm**

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Betty Nansen Theatre

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The Royal Danish Theatre

# The Basics



Photo: Catrine Zorn

## **A vulnerable space**

The feedback space is a vulnerable space. It is vulnerable to both receive and give feedback.

*Will they say it was miserable?*

*Is my feedback intelligent enough?*

Honest and impactful feedback requires a safe space to be brave in together.

The methodological approach to feedback makes the feedback situation less personal and sensitive. We are inspired by Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition, which puts the focus on how each individual contributes to the process with a distinctive knowledge and experience. We encourage a feedback culture where the knowledge and experience of both mind and body is valued.

## **Hierarchies of power**

Power hierarchies can be challenging when implementing feedback practices in an organisation. We recommend that management and the production department follow the creative processes as involved feedback partners for the artistic team. However, we do acknowledge that this type of involvement creates an overlap between the role of leader and the role of feedback partner.

The challenge can be met by acknowledging and articulating the power relationship. We are inspired by Rivca Rubin, who suggests

a *power with-* rather than a *power over-*approach. In this, we move away from an approach where power is being exercised over someone through a judgmental, commanding *you must and should-*communication, and towards what Rubin calls “upwording”, a *would you consider-* or *would you be willing to-*communication, that gives the receiver space to take part. Basically, the approach is about acknowledging and taking responsibility for your position and point of view when participating in feedback. It can be considered whether some feedback situations would benefit from having the formal holders of power absent from the space, but at the same time it is important to be aware that you can never create a space free from power. Taking responsibility and creating clarity around the positions of power creates much more psychological safety for the participants than pretending that the hierarchy is non-existent.

### **Situational leadership**

The nature of the feedback depends on where you are in the process, and we recommend situational leadership and feedback. Situational leadership is a management tool, developed by the psychologists Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard, consisting of four leadership styles: the directing, the coaching, the supporting, and the delegating style. In situational leadership, the situation and the task determine the leadership style, requiring an analytical and adaptable approach. In our context the situational approach means shifting between different kinds of feedback according to the situation, the point in time in the process and the people involved. Are you workshopping or are you a week away from the premiere? When is the process in need of more sober feedback, and when does it make sense to invite more opinionated perspectives? In a workshop space the material is open, and the feedback will serve the purpose of making it grow. A week before the premiere decisions need to be made while showing sensitivity to the fact that the feedback recipients are under pressure.

### **The on-going feedback loop**

Every feedback situation creates a loop: something is presented – an idea, a run-through, a set design, or a conceptual tweak. The element presented is met by artistic team members, a consultant, a test audience, or another relevant party through feedback. Their feedback is implemented or rejected, and the creative process has moved forward. From this new point the feedback-process loops again and again until the creation meets the audience. In the beginning of the process the material is an open system, and during the process something closes, new openings emerge, but with each loop the creation is developed and sharpened.

### **Interaction between the planned and the unforeseen**

A high degree of unpredictability is characteristic for the feedback loop, which is exactly the point as it supports collaborative creativity. We never work towards a predetermined goal. Nevertheless, the process relies on a facilitated space and a clear framework. A transparent, predetermined framework is essential for the collaborative creativity to unfold. Thus, we attempt to create a feedback framework that makes space for the unforeseen to occur.

The relationship between the feedback parties is not static. Ideas and material are developed in the intersubjective space, meaning the space between the involved subjects and between them and the material.

# Preparation

## Who is responsible?

Management is responsible for outlining the framework for feedback, ensuring that it can be conducted and facilitated in an ethically sound manner. Management must be supportive of the feedback culture and understand that a vibrant feedback culture will result in changes and discussions that would not otherwise have taken place. Feedback always has the potential to influence and change a work-in-progress and thus, the organisation must be ready to accommodate the creative disturbance that the feedback might cause.

Feedback should always be used in service of the work and the process and not as an outreach activity; if we ask the audience for feedback, we do so because we are interested in letting them influence the work, not to entertain them with a feedback session. We present a model for audience feedback on page 20.

Feedback complexity can be reduced by letting a process consultant or dramaturg gather the feedback from different feedback givers, to avoid overloading the feedback recipients – this can be helpful when getting close to a premiere.

Photo: Simen Diesetud Thornquist

### Aligning expectations and clarifying positions

Remember to align expectations with everyone involved. Articulate the desired feedback culture and ask questions about the expectations for the role of feedback in the process.

In our feedback models we suggest three main positions:

- Feedback recipient
- Feedback giver
- Moderator

Clarify these positions and make sure that everyone understands the framework for the feedback session and feels ready to participate actively.

### The role of the moderator

The role of moderator can be taken on by the director/choreographer, the dramaturge, or the process consultant, depending on the specific feedback situation. Sometimes it makes sense for the director/choreographer to take on the role, and sometimes it can be beneficial to have someone else moderate, allowing the director/choreographer to assume a more listening position.

The moderator is responsible for:

- Providing a clear framework for the feedback session
- Time management
- Progressing the conversation
- Facilitating the conversation with energy

The moderator facilitates the conversation, but all participants are responsible for making the feedback situation work. We recommend that you:

- Communicate the purpose of feedback clearly
- Communicate the positions in the conversation clearly
- Hold the feedback session in a focused and undisturbed space
- Make time for the session in the schedule – we recommend around 60 minutes for a session

The goal is to establish a feedback situation where:

- The recipient of feedback does not have to defend, explain or make suggestions for solutions, but instead is able to listen.
- The conversation identifies the artistic challenges instead of coming up with quick solutions.
- The experiences of both body and mind are valued
- You can differentiate between sharing and giving feedback

“Sharing” refers to performers or audience members sharing their immediate experience as experienced from within/without. The potential is the recognition of the experience of the individual.



# Feedback for the Artistic Team

## Before the run-through

The moderator informs the team that there will be a feedback session following the run-through. Usually, everyone involved in the run-through participates in the feedback, but it can still make sense to clarify who is expected to participate. In this situation the moderator will typically be the director/choreographer, but a process consultant or dramaturge can also take on the role.

## After the run-through

- The moderator outlines the framework for the conversation —————>
- Sharing —————>
- State of the work/piece —————>
- General feedback —————>
- Working through the piece scene by scene —————>
- Reflection —————>
- Summing up —————>

### The moderator outlines the framework for the conversation

The moderator specifies the timeframe, premise, positions, and purpose. Often the director/choreographer acts as both moderator and feedback giver, while the rest of the team (performers, technical staff and so on) are recipients. It can sometimes make sense that feedback is also given between performers and/or between performers and technical staff. The moderator encourages everyone to take notes during the session.

### Sharing

A short round where all participants can share their experience of the run-through. The moderator asks about the performers' experience: What felt right? What would they like to explore further? Where did they feel stuck or lost? What physical experiences did they take with them? The moderator makes sure that the round can be completed in approximately 10 minutes.

### State of the work/piece

The director/choreographer sums up the current state of the work.

### General feedback

The director/choreographer gives a short, general feedback on the run-through and unfolds the artistic points of attention and main challenges.

### Working through the piece scene by scene

The moderator facilitates a detailed feedback dialogue that goes over the entire run-through. This step is the most time consuming.

### Reflection

Five minutes to reflect on the conversation before summing up.

### Summing up

The moderator invites the participants to share additional points or perspectives. The director/choreographer concludes the session by summing up the main points and outlining the plan for the coming rehearsals.



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# Feedback from a Test Audience

## Before the run-through

The artistic team prepares for the feedback session by discussing the purpose of the audience feedback – are there specific elements of the piece that the feedback should focus on and does the team have an idea of how the feedback will be used in the process? It is decided whether the performers will be present during the feedback or if the director/choreographer will be the sole recipient. The director/choreographer formulates three specific questions for the audience.

On arrival the test audience is welcomed by the moderator and introduced to the framework for the session. We recommend that the process consultant or dramaturge takes on the moderator role, to make it easier for the director/choreographer to engage in the dialogue with the audience.

The director/choreographer introduces the current state of the (unfinished) work. The moderator can ask the audience to pay special attention to certain elements if the artistic team has decided so. Be aware that this will affect how the audience experiences the piece, thus making their experience less immediate.

## Efter gennemspilning

- The moderator outlines the framework for the conversation →
- Free conversation →
- Sharing →
- Prepared questions →

### The moderator outlines the framework for the conversation

The moderator specifies the timeframe, premise, positions, and purpose.

### Free conversation

The audience forms groups of two–three people and these groups engage in a conversation about their experience. Each group chooses a person to take notes during the conversation.

### Sharing

The moderator invites the audience to share their experience based on the group conversations. The moderator seeks to unfold the experiences of the audience members by asking open-ended questions.

### Prepared questions

The director/choreographer asks the three prepared questions. E.g., *What was your experience entering the space? How did you experience the first address to the audience? How would you describe your immediate physical/sensory experience of the piece?*

## REMEMBER

- The purpose of the conversation is to further the development of the work.
- The artistic team does not have to explain or defend, but can simply use the session to listen to the audience.
- The moderator can help the audience members to unfold their experience by asking questions, e.g., *“You say, you did not like the ending - can you say more about how you experienced it?”* *“You describe the performance as funny - can you give examples of what you found funny?”* *“Can you say more about your sensory experience of the piece?”*. Open-ended questions are preferable *“We are trying to create a physical discomfort in the audience through the use of sound in the final scene - how would you put into words your physical experience of that scene?”*

## NOTES

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# Feedback from an External Consultant

## Before the run-through

The director/choreographer and the consultant align expectations. The director/choreographer presents the artistic vision of the piece and the desired audience experience. The director/choreographer specifies what they would like to receive feedback on, e.g., the final scene, the dramaturgical arc, the sensory experience of the material.

## Clarifying positions

The director/choreographer and the consultant agree on who should participate in the feedback. Will the whole team listen to the consultant's feedback or will it be passed on by the director/choreographer to the rest of the team?

## After the run-through

- Gather notes —————>
- The consultant outlines the framework for the conversation —————>
- Notes —————>
- Possible solutions —————>
- Perspective —————>
- Summing up —————>

<b>Gather notes</b>	After the run-through, the consultant has a few minutes to gather their notes and prepare for the feedback.
<b>The consultant outlines the framework for the conversation</b>	The consultant clarifies how they will approach the feedback and what the overall focal points are.
<b>Notes</b>	The consultant presents the main points of their feedback and subsequently gives detailed feedback on each scene/sequence of the piece.
<b>Possible solutions</b>	The consultant and the director/choreographer engage in a dialogue about the possibilities and potentials of the piece – the degree of openness in this conversation depends on how close the premiere date is. The consultant can make suggestions, but the main purpose is to create a basis for qualified decision making for the director/choreographer.
<b>Perspective</b>	The consultant can introduce fresh perspectives by asking questions, e.g., <i>"What if the final scene took place in the dark?"</i> , <i>"What would happen if we took out the solo?"</i> , <i>"Is the piece in fact dystopian?"</i>
<b>Summing up</b>	The director/choreographer chooses how to implement the feedback and input from the consultant and communicates this to the rest of the team. This communication will typically take place in the next rehearsal.





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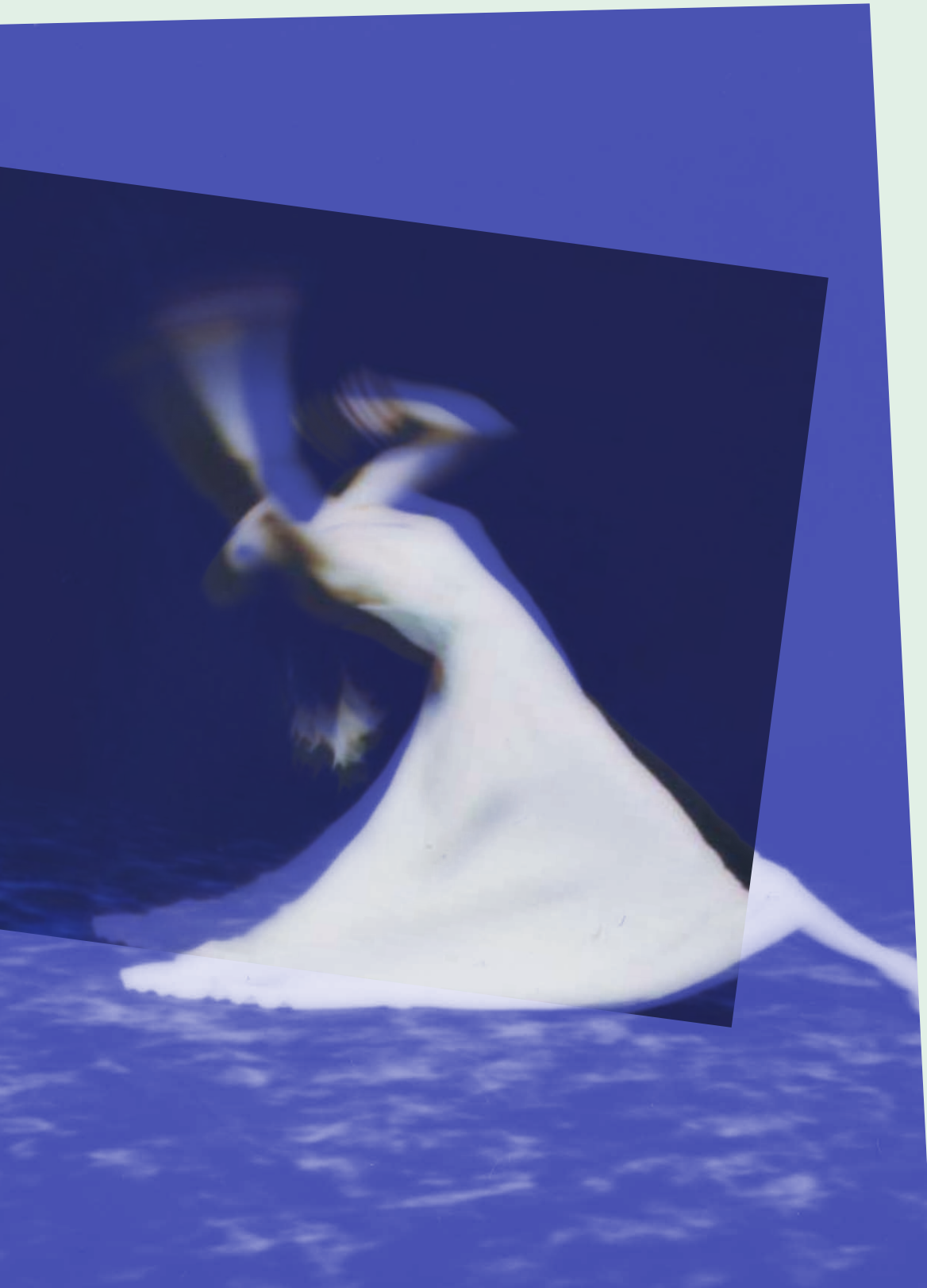
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# Two Examples of Feedback in the Idea- and Concept Development Phase

Feedback in the idea- and concept development phase takes on a different form than feedback in the rehearsal process, and it is harder to turn it into a model. This type of feedback takes place in highly collaborative contexts where the focus is on development, qualification, conceptualization, and exchange of ideas. In this phase many of the collaborative layers overlap – you generate ideas, give and receive feedback, align expectations, reflect, research and explore together. To exemplify we will outline the use of feedback in the idea- and concept development phase at BETTY DEVELOPS and at Corpus.

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**BETTY DEVELOPS** was established in 2019 in collaboration with The Bikuben Foundation as an artistic development initiative to foster cross-disciplinary work through extended rehearsal processes including collaborative methods and experimental workshops.

**Corpus** was founded in 2012 as the Royal Danish Theatre's contemporary dance company. Corpus worked with co-creation, experimental collaborators, interdisciplinary approaches, and new performance formats until December 2021 when the company closed down.

Photo: Camilla Winther

## EXAMPLE

# Betty Nansen Theatre

With BETTY DEVELOPS at The Betty Nansen Theatre we investigate how to become more methodical in our feedback practice. We consider feedback to be an artistic development tool contributing to the creative process.

Feedback serves several purposes in the idea- and concept-development phase. Firstly, feedback can instill courage in the creators – courage to test wild ideas and courage to make mistakes. Secondly, feedback develops the artistic ideas and visions by making them grow. The overall purpose is to create innovative works of high artistic quality and for us this is a collaborative matter. We believe that several minds think better than one, and we believe that multiple perspectives will expand the artistic potential.

### From repertoire vision to process framework

When a decision is made to include a specific performance in the repertoire, the next step is a framework meeting for the artistic team, the management, and the production department. Prior to the framework meeting a curation process has taken place to hone in on the nature of performances chosen for the repertoire: is it contemporary playwriting, are we working on a remediation of a novel, are we working on developing a specific physical language or are we building a piece from a specific theme? Who should we cast in the work?

This phase consists of three interconnected elements:



### Feedback: Ideas for new creations

Rather than commissioning a specific piece from a specific director/choreographer, the management invites a conceptualising team that e.g. might consist of a director, a choreographer and a set designer, to come up with ideas and suggestions based on their artistic interests. These ideas are then met with feedback from the management and sometimes a dramaturge. The feedback plays out as an open dialogue – a collaborative reflection session where the ideas are discussed in relation to artistic potential, relevance, casting, and the rest of the repertoire. Over the course of 1-5 of these meetings the artistic playing field narrows and defining choices are made: a theme or a text can be chosen, or a specific movie can be defined as the main source of inspiration. In this manner, the repertoire is formed from a collaborative process.

### Examples of feedback questions

We are inspired by the feedback tools from Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and DAS Theatre Feedback Methods (previously DAS ARTS). Both Lerman and DAS Theatre give feedback based on specific focal points or perspectives, e.g.:

- How does the thematic material presented make sense in the context of contemporary society?
- What is stimulating, surprising, moving, attractive? What makes an impression, makes sense, appears unique?

### Feedback in the studio on the initial ideas

When a conceptual starting point has been decided upon, the next phase is to conduct tests and try-outs in the studio with performers. In this phase the potential of the material is investigated.

Hereafter, the artistic team sorts through the material and an initial direction for the set-design, physicality, universe and central messages of the piece takes shape. Based on this, the management aligns expectations with the artistic team regarding the size and scope of the production – is it best suited for a larger or smaller stage?

### Process meeting

Participants in the process meeting are: the management, the producer, the production manager, the process consultant, the director, the set designer and possibly a choreographer or a composer. Here the overall process design and framework for the artistic collaboration is presented. The director presents the artistic focus and ambition of the process.

### Feedback: Workshop/research design

Before every workshop the artistic team prepares a **research design**. The overall message is articulated, and a research question

is decided upon. The team articulates what they specifically want to test and the process consultant, the producer and the production manager give feedback. At this point in the process, feedback focuses on developing ideas.

### Examples of feedback

Inspired by DAS Theatre and Liz Lerman the feedback begins with neutral, factual, and clarifying questions about the artistic research. The process consultant, the producer and the production manager ask factual and clarifying questions about the idea, with the purpose of supporting the artistic team in finding their own direction. Subsequently, the feedback givers ask a series of more opinion-based questions, where they express their own opinions and provide critical feedback. Lerman calls this *opinion-time*.

#### Neutral questions could be:

- What would you like to learn more about through this workshop?
- You have an idea about using mud on stage – does mud appear as an element throughout the performance, or is it only introduced towards the end?
- To me, the set-design represents X – is that what you are going for?

#### Opinion-time questions could be:

- We find the relevance of the material to be unclear in a contemporary context.
- We find that the scope of the artistic research is maybe too broad. Can you get more precise in your research? Can you define specific research questions to focus the work?
- We find that the ideas for the set-design are not aligned with the overall concept of the performance.
- We would suggest that you make a clear decision on how to approach the serious themes that the piece is dealing with.

### Feedback during a workshop

Feedback is a central part of the collaborative method in the workshop space. Feedback occurs continuously throughout the workshop, especially after improvisation.

### Feedback after improvisation

Improvisation is a central part of the collaborative method. The performers will receive improvisational tasks and present the results to each other. After each improvisation the rest of the team gives feedback in a collective reflection session. The performers generate material in a dynamic loop where they take turns being performers, spectators, feedback givers and feedback recipients.

### Feedback after reading

After the first reading of the draft for the script, there will be a feedback session with the purpose of giving the playwright or dramaturge input for the further process. This session works as a feedback round, where everyone is heard.

### Workshop showing

At times we invite employees at the theatre and a few external consultants to a workshop showing on the last day of a workshop. The external consultants will be invited based on their specific expertise to give feedback on certain parts of the material presented – e.g., if the light design is vital to the artistic material, then a light designer will be invited to give feedback.

In the context of a workshop showing, the artistic team can consider: what can the invited experts give feedback on? How does the situation further the creative process? What do the different professionals find exciting when attending the showing and how can that contribute to the further process?

### Examples of feedback

- Prepared questions: The director has prepared three questions.
- Affirming feedback round: Give only positive feedback under the headline: *This worked for me...*
- Tips and tricks: The production department offers advice on solutions to technical challenges and thereby support the artistic investigation (DAS Theatre).

### Feedback after the workshop

After every workshop, the artistic team regroups, sorts through the material, and discusses the artistic development. The process consultant, the producer and the production manager give feedback on the concept. Subsequently, the next workshop is planned.

### Example of feedback after the workshop

Focal points are inspired by DAS Theatre:

- How can the concept be strengthened to bring out the core of the project more clearly?
- What is feasible within the financial framework?
- What is feasible within a safety framework?
- What special challenges should be clarified or tested in the next workshop?

### Feedback after a run-through

At times it can be demanding for the director and performers to receive feedback from several people after a run-through. It can be constructive to gather the feedback from the different parties and pass it on to a dramaturge, who will then bring it to the director, who can choose which parts of the feedback to share with the performers. We have a feedback round with our artistic advisory board, in which the producer and other internal or external collaborators can speak freely, after which the dramaturge sorts through the feedback.




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# CORPUS

## Formats and feedback

All Corpus creations unfold within an overarching framework outlined by the Corpus management team (the producer, the process consultant, and the artistic director). The framework – we call it an *artistic format* – is based on the artistic premise of the Corpus project:

- All Corpus performances are physical and choreographic and must strive to develop the art form of dance.
- Corpus collaborates with artists who are genuinely interested in developing the art form of dance based on original artistic visions.
- Corpus performances are always new creations.
- Corpus performances must communicate with and impact the audience physically.
- Corpus performances are created with the Corpus dancers.
- All Corpus processes include a physical research phase in which the Corpus dancers develop and investigate physical material based on their embodied expertise.

A Corpus format will define:

1. A specific focus for the process – a direction for the physical research. This could for example be *the relationship between sound and movement* or a theme.

2. A production framework defining whether it is a big or small production, a long or short rehearsal period. The production framework includes an overall budget.

When the Corpus management has defined the format, we invite one or several artistic collaborators into the project. The main artistic collaborator will typically be a choreographer. We will introduce the format to the collaborator and engage in a dialogue where the collaborator gives feedback on the format: *the suggested format makes me want to focus on..., I feel the urge to challenge the format in these ways..., my first idea was to...,* etc. Through dialogue and feedback Corpus and the collaborator(s) align expectations and agree on a direction for the collaboration.

## A concept is created

The choreographer works on developing a concept, at times in collaboration with a set designer, a composer, or a light designer. Approximately six months before the premiere, the choreographer presents the concept in words, images, and sound to everyone involved in the production. Feedback is given on both artistic and production related aspects. Typically the feedback will come in the form of a myriad of questions, giving the choreographer an idea of what fascinates, what intrigues, and what remains unclear about the concept: *How did you come up with that wild idea? How do you see the physical research unfolding? Can you elaborate on the connection between the choreography and the space? I'm not sure how that aspect fits in – could you expand on that?*

The production related feedback gives the choreographer an idea of how the concept interacts with the actual conditions for the production – is it realistic to carry out the ideas or should they find an alternative way of expressing the artistic vision.



After the concept meeting the choreographer continues the development of the concept in continuous dialogue with the artistic director and the producer.

### **Pre-processes with feedback**

A pre-process with Corpus is a workshop or a week of rehearsals before the actual rehearsal period begins. The choreographer and the dancers investigate the concept through physical research in the studio. During the pre-process different kinds of feedback are used:

#### **Feedback from the dancers to the choreographer**

The dancers react to the choreographer's conceptual ideas: *I'm particularly interested in this aspect of the concept, I get these associations when you speak of the concept.* The feedback from the dancers to the choreographer also comes out through the physical research - by watching the dancers work, the choreographer receives instant feedback on how the conceptual ideas can materialise.

#### **Feedback from the choreographer to the dancers**

The choreographer initiates the process for the dancers by letting them research and generate material based on the concept but with a high degree of openness. The dancers have artistic agency and are free to guide their own research. The choreographer offers feedback to the dancers by engaging with the material they create: *what happens if you go further with that movement? Where can you go from there?* The dialogue gives the dancers a sense of where the choreographer wants to go with the artistic material they create.

### **Feedback is ingrained in the collaborative process**

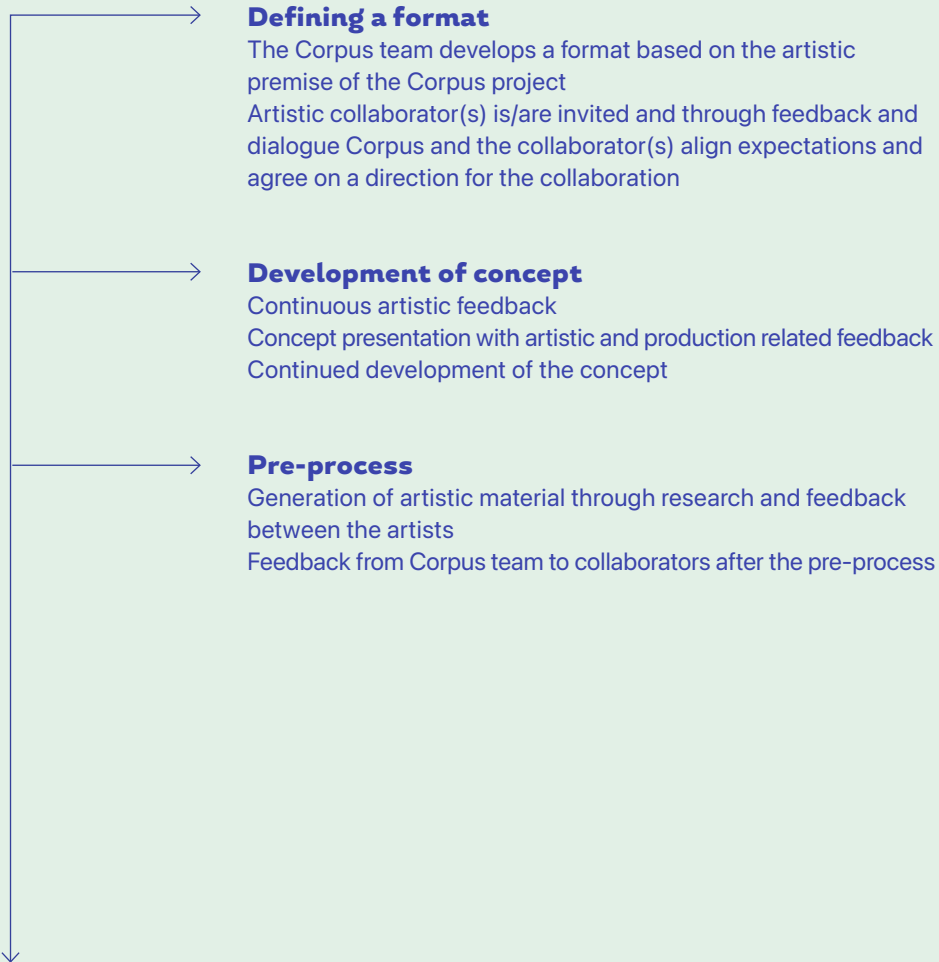
The pre-process is characterised by an unapologetic openness and curiosity towards all material generated: movement vocabulary, choreographic language, sound, set design, text, aesthetics/style etc. Feedback is ingrained in the collective creativity - the immediate responses (physical and verbal) between the creators propels an intuitive selection of material: *That is wild - I could watch that all day! Something about this captivates me, but I do not understand what it is... I'd like to see that in slow motion. Could you combine those two things?*

#### **Feedback after the pre-process**

After a pre-process, feedback is given from the Corpus team to the choreographer (and sometimes to the dancers) and subsequently the choreographer decides how they want to proceed with the creative process in the rehearsal period.

## TIMELINE

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## Feedback in Performing Arts Processes

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