

# VERSLAG POSITIONING BALLET 2023





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## INTRODUCTION

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From 24 until 26 February, artistic directors from leading ballet companies from all over the world came together in Amsterdam for the third edition of the conference, Positioning Ballet, organised by Dutch National Ballet. For many of them, it was the first opportunity in a long time to see their fellow artistic directors again in person and to expand their network through new encounters.

The main focus during the work conference was thinking out loud, sharing experiences and learning from each other, rather than reaching a joint statement. The artistic directors talked about current social developments that influence the work of ballet companies, and discussed the future of the art of ballet. Despite the differences between the companies and the environments in which they present their work, they share many similar and overarching challenges. Various ways of tackling these challenges were discussed.





## CENTRAL QUESTIONS

The following questions, categorised within four main topics, were central to this edition of Positioning Ballet:

### Leadership and collaboration

- How do you take a choreographer or visiting rehearsal director into the company's work culture and company goals without denying their autonomy? How do you develop a culture in which this conversation becomes an organic part of the creative process? What do you do when their behaviours do not align with company guidelines and values, no matter how famous they are?
- Is a one-leader artistic leadership, with the many and growing different responsibilities an artistic director traditionally fulfills still realistic? Are there alternative and new models possible?

### Dancers

- How to respond to the growing discrepancy between the individual agency the newest generations of dancers are hungry for and the collectivity, hierarchy and micromanagement that are part of the artistic decision making as well as the rehearsal and training practice?
- How is the physical, mental and artistic training and support of the dancers evolving? Do you, as a company, have all they require? If not, what do you need and how can you get it?

### Diversity and inclusion

- A lot of companies have a diversity and inclusion statement. Is this state influencing or changing your company? For instance, your programme? Your dancers, your artistic staff and the wider organisation, including your board? Is it influencing your audiences and who comes to the theatre?

### Works

- What does a reenactment or reinterpretation of an existing historical work require? What do we consider the core that requires preserving and why?
- How involved should you be in the development of a work? Can we learn from other art forms about producing new work? What is your definition of success and risk?
- How do you scout for choreographers? How do you ensure the same names don't keep popping up? How do you ensure diversity in terms of gender, age and experience? How do we deal with the Instagram world of choreography being sold? Is this the way forward? How can we best ensure the development of new talent next to the preservation of existing works from the 20th and 21st centuries?

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

The conference opened on Friday 24 February with a dinner and an intervention (via video link) from the think tank – comprising international ballet students – of Assemblée Internationale, a collaboration between ballet academies, initiated by Canada's National Ballet School.

One of the questions from the think tank was: how can you ensure that dancers of colour feel welcome and comfortable in a ballet company? They also encouraged the artistic directors to continue to learn together and remain open to the many changes in the world.

Hendrikje Crebolder, one of the directors of the Rijksmuseum, then outlined in a live interview, how a more diverse composition of the museum's own team and a broader dialogue with the public and other interested parties have contributed to stronger links between the Rijksmuseum and society.

On Saturday, three rounds of break-out sessions took place, in which several topics related to the future of ballet, within the theme 'Transitioning Times', were discussed extensively. The following questions were used to provide structure to the break-out sessions:

- State your personal experience to the challenge in a few sentences.

- What are you doing already, or would like to do (differently) to resolve this challenge?
- Are there obstructions preventing you from taking action?
- What kind of support do you need in order to act?
- Which parties involved (internal or external) play a role in this issue or problem?
- As an organisation, with which of these stakeholders do you enter into a dialogue (what do you prioritize?)
- Which conversations do you delegate? To whom? With whom are you in contact with yourself?
- How do you evaluate this exchange, how do you use possible outcomes of these conversations?

Each break-out session was followed by a plenary session. The participants were asked to bring a question or observation from the break-out session to the plenary session to continue the conversation. The programme was moderated by Peggy Olislaegers, Associate on research & development with Dutch National Ballet and advisor to various choreographers and art institutions in Europe.

The third and final day of the conference started with a working session from consultant Christina Barandun, who presented the directors with various communication and organisation models for shaping developments in their professional field along with their organisation.

In this document you will find the reports of the plenary sessions that took place on Saturday 25 February, as well as a report of the working session from Christina Barandun on Sunday 26 February. The break-out sessions and Sunday's one-on-one conversations have not been reported. The document also includes a list of names of all participants.



## SATURDAY 25 FEBRUARY

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### PLenary SESSION 1: THE CODE OF CONDUCT (COC) AND ITS CHALLENGES

During Saturday's first plenary session, the artistic directors underline the importance of having a code of conduct (COC) in the dance industry, particularly for choreographers and dancers, to ensure safety and a clear understanding of expectations. The session also explores the challenges of implementing a COC without restricting creativity and individual journeys.

The conversation also touched on the need for open communication and dialogue between the choreographer, the dancers, and the artistic and medical team to ensure everyone is on the same page and to avoid misunderstandings or potential conflicts. It was suggested that having regular check-ins or opportunities for discussion can help to build trust and maintain a positive working environment. The directors acknowledged the potential for mistakes to be made, as well as the importance of accepting and addressing these mistakes in a constructive way. It was suggested that setting expectations beforehand and creating a safe space for dialogue can help to address any issues and prevent them from escalating.

Several topics and questions related to the COC and the need for open communication and dialogue were discussed:

#### **Who should have the COC conversation?**

The COC is there for the safety of the entire company, including the artistic director. The general idea is that the director should set the tone from the beginning. Dancers, choreographers, and everyone else should understand the COC and discuss it before rehearsals begin.

#### **How do the contract and the COC relate?**

The ballet industry is product-driven, and the contract is traditionally focused upon that, but it is essential to have a dialogue about the COC and the process of rehearsing or creating too. Dancers should also be informed before rehearsals begin so that they can be prepared for the specific methods and expectations of the choreographers.

#### **The COC versus traditions**

Some masterworks have been around for a long time and have been rehearsed in a specific way. Should we stop performing them or create a new atmosphere of rehearsing? Is that always possible when specific guest répétiteurs come into a company? One option is to inform people that the person is from a different era and to prepare them for that. Things can be awkward sometimes without becoming unsafe. How to hold the space, and continue to stay connected as human beings when this happens? Two examples were discussed:

Example 1: A répétiteur (aged 70+) specialised in an established historical work was

used to direct via physical coaching. The dancers were uncomfortable, and certain behaviour was also experienced as inappropriate, so the repetiteur was asked to adapt their method. It might have made a difference if the repetiteur had been in dialogue about their specific method of working beforehand.

Example 2: An assistant of a choreographer asked very young dancers (still children) for consent: "Can I touch you?" This question felt wrong because it puts the burden on the child to answer. This example underlines that a COC (code of conduct) is not enough; a dialogue amongst the artistic directors, artistic staff, and guest choreographers, repetiteurs and teachers is needed as well.

### **How detailed should a COC be?**

The more rules we define for how to behave, the more restricted we become. This can cause us to overthink and hold back from saying certain things, which creates distance between staff and dancers. The directors suggested that an environment where mistakes are allowed and acknowledged can help bridge the gap and create more open communication. Dancers also need to know that all choreographers have had a conversation about the COC before entering the rehearsal space. The COC is a starting point for conversations and every journey is individual and managed by the Artistic Director. The job of the Artistic Director is also to constantly articulate the company's values.

### **Dancers' well-being**

Establishing trust among the dancers is crucial. They need to feel confident that the director is keeping a watchful eye on their well-being. It's important to care for both the choreographer and the dancers, and find ways to preserve the artistic integrity of the work while also safeguarding the dancers' health and safety. One way to achieve this is to have open and honest communication with the dancers and choreographer, investing time in dialogue to ensure that everyone's needs and concerns are being heard and addressed and acknowledging that not all dancers feel safe enough yet to share and articulate their experiences with the artistic director who is also the person who evaluates the dancers' development and careers.

### **How should the COC be discussed?**

When discussing the COC at the beginning of a project, it's important to do so in a way that doesn't disrupt the creative process. One way to approach this is to schedule a separate conversation about the COC ahead of time, such as during a Zoom call months before the actual creative work begins. During this conversation, it's crucial to ask the choreographer how they prefer to work, rather than making assumptions. Taking the time to get to know the choreographer and their approach can help establish a sense of ownership and trust. It's also important to remember that every dancer in a process is on their own unique journey, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Ultimately, the

power dynamics in the room should be balanced between the choreographer and the performing artists, the dancers.

### **Collected questions**

At the end of this plenary session, the following questions were collected:

- Regarding managing nuance and unbiased decision-making in a COC situation, what steps can be taken to ensure a fair and just outcome for all parties involved?
- When dancers ask for more details on the COC in writing, how can artistic directors balance the need for clarity with the further development of a safe working environment, in which moments of insecurity or awkwardness are acknowledged as being part of the artistic process?
- How are COCs typically signed by companies, and who is involved in the signing process? It was agreed that not only choreographers, but also rehearsal directors and staggers should sign the COC.
- How can artistic directors balance the desires and expectations of their dancers with their own artistic vision for the company?
- In your experience, what compromises have you had to make in order to have important conversations about the COC or other sensitive topics? How do you

structure communication to ensure that these conversations are productive and respectful?

- How much time should be allocated to these conversations versus studio rehearsing time, and what is the role of the artistic staff in making these decisions? How can they be empowered to read the room and respond to the needs of the dancers and choreographers? Many acknowledged that, whilst there 'never is time', meetings have to be scheduled. Some scheduled meetings before class, others organised 45-minute sessions once a month.



## PLENARY SESSION 2: THE ROLE OF AN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

During Saturday's second plenary session, the directors pointed out that as an artistic director, it can be challenging to balance various responsibilities, including HR management, marketing, PR, fund raising and artistic direction. Collaborating with an artistic staff can help alleviate some of the burden, but it's important to clarify expectations and delegate responsibilities effectively.

When considering new leadership models for ballet in the future, it's essential to prioritise the art form's development while also addressing HR and managerial concerns. To achieve this, it may be necessary to shift traditional expectations of the artistic director's role and explore new approaches to collaboration in leadership.

During this second session, several topics and questions related to artistic leadership were discussed. Together, the directors also listed the various tasks of an artistic director and came up with alternative leadership models.

### **What to do when you have too many responsibilities?**

If you find yourself constantly being approached for everything, it may be time to reevaluate how responsibilities are distributed. Encourage a culture of shared responsibility

and consider whether anyone on the team has a different perspective on what the artistic director's role should entail.

Ultimately, by fostering effective collaboration and exploring new approaches to leadership, you can better manage the diverse responsibilities of an artistic director and ensure the success of your organisation.

### **Exercise: The tasks of an artistic director**

Together, the directors listed the many different tasks they have and experience, acknowledging the differences between different (national) practises:

#### Artistic direction:

- Producing, programming, supporting, and curating the art form of ballet
- Creating a clear artistic vision
- Establishing the identity of the company within a bigger landscape (local, national, and international)
- Inspiring the broader organisation
- Overseeing productions / being in the studio
- Knowing how to speak about music/ musicians and other artistic departments

- Re-designing the context and story-telling around ballet and its repertoire; adding additional stories by inviting a more diverse approach to the public face of ballet

#### Marketing and fundraising:

- Inspiring/directing the marketing department and PR team
- Having an informal understanding of marketing and related areas
- Fundraising and networking

#### Management:

- Managing the dancers
- Managing the artistic team
- Coaching the dancers
- Scouting new dancers

#### Connections:

- Developing connections within the ballet industry
- Establishing relationships with other (cultural) organisations
- Developing relationships with donors

#### Spokesperson and crisis management:

- Being a spokesperson for the organisation
- Crisis management

#### Ambassador for dance:

- Promoting and advocating for dance in the country and internationally

It's important to note that there may be tension between management responsibilities and thinking big and broad, so it's essential to learn to delegate effectively and take pride in the accomplishments of the team. The responsibilities of an artistic director may vary depending on the organisation's structure and needs, so it's important not to define a one-size-fits-all package of responsibilities.

#### **Alternative leadership models**

The directors also discussed alternative leadership models:

- Multiple artistic directors, each with their own area of focus and taking pride in it
- An artistic director in partnership with an executive director and a supporting team

It's important to consider what is needed to make any of these models happen and create the necessary structure around the artistic vision.

**What is needed to achieve these models?**

- Provide more training and information to your organisation, including the board
- Engage in dialogue to restructure the organisation as needed
- Invest in your own training
- Consider mentoring as a way to bring former dancers who aspire to be Artistic Directors into the organisation (e.g. on the artistic staff), but ensure that they receive appropriate training and education before transitioning from the studio
- Provide mentoring from a pool of former respected Artistic Directors to aspiring and new Artistic Directors
- Succession planning
- Due to changes in the working culture because of Covid, it may be necessary to find alternative solutions for sharing space and time in the office
- Offer internships (from people from one department in another department)
- Be prepared to engage in difficult conversations and conflicts to ensure the future of your art form
- Map out colleagues within the organisation to build a coalition of individuals who are able to lobby and take on other roles instead of the Artistic Director. They can be trained to reach out to e.g. the government and other external stakeholders.



## PLENARY SESSION 3: COLLECTING QUESTIONS

The last plenary session on Saturday had a different approach. Open-ended questions that emerged from the various breakout sessions were shared and discussed, and further articulated together, knowing that clearly formulated questions are key to finding possible answers and solutions.

The following questions were discussed:

- Is it more difficult to be an ambassador for dance in a time in which financial recourses are shrinking? People are on strike to make a proper living. How can we continue being an ambassador for our (expensive) art form in this time? Financial bodies question the impact of our art form. How do we respond?
- How should we discuss the normative body in ballet? Society is changing. How to support schools in responding to this change in society? Schools feel that the companies expect a standard look they, as schools, should provide and train. How can we articulate what we are looking for? Thinking of different qualities: physical abilities, body type, artistic abilities. How do we share that with the schools, and contextualize our vision within the broader vision of society? Engaging ourselves in the broader dialogue. What do we mean with body shape? Body type? Who is excluded? What should be questioned and changed?
- We have to keep discussing the wellbeing of dancers, including the importance of self-expression.
- From the example of the *Nutcracker* experience in Westfield, London, two questions arose:
  - How to respond to the growing amount of commercial ballet shows and ballet competitions. Is this a problem? Does it have positive effects?
  - Is the amount of commercial activities an invitation to deepen the value of performing arts and live ballet?
- How do we respond to Artificial Intelligence? Will it enhance or threaten the art form?
- How do we deal with dancers in transition?
- How do we respond to people who don't want to portray something/someone who does not reflect their own identity 1-1? Who don't want to represent something/someone different from their expressed identity off stage?
- Who do we hire and do people know why they are hired? What are the

expectations of the hiring, from both perspectives? Can we, in the future, perhaps articulate a little bit more why we hire people?

- How can we attract talent? And how can we maintain that talent?
- How do we make sure that we, as companies, continue to be up to date in relation to the pedagogical climate that is developed within the different ballet schools. How do we make sure that the climate in the school continues to be connected to the climate in the companies and vice versa?
- Dance students are very often used to a constant stream of feedback. As a result, they sometimes still feel the need for this continuous feedback after joining a company. How can we make dancers less dependent on feedback? How can we help them develop their own critical voice?
- How to become more aware of our ecological footprint. Can we make touring more sustainable? How can companies operate on a daily basis in a more sustainable way?

## SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY

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### WORKING SESSION WITH CHRISTINA BARANDUN

Christina Barandun started the morning with the introduction of two leadership styles, the directive and the collaborative style, noting that most leadership styles are positioned in between these two main styles. She then explained the seven levels of delegation and went on to moderate a conversation on leadership and change.

#### **Directive and collaborative leadership**

In directive leadership, the artistic director provides guidance on what needs to be done, and everyone follows. This style is top-down and hierarchical, which means that everyone knows their place in the organisation. The triangle (in the picture) symbolizes the function, whereas the circle represents the individual. In hierarchical contexts function and person are glued together. Therefore we cannot easily detach the function from the person.

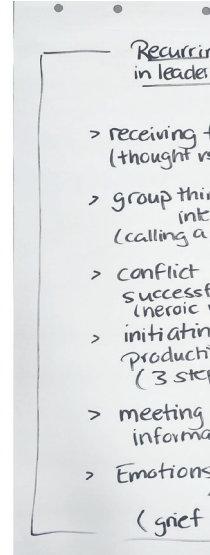
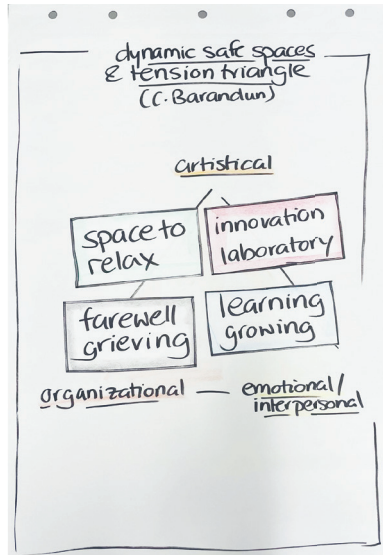
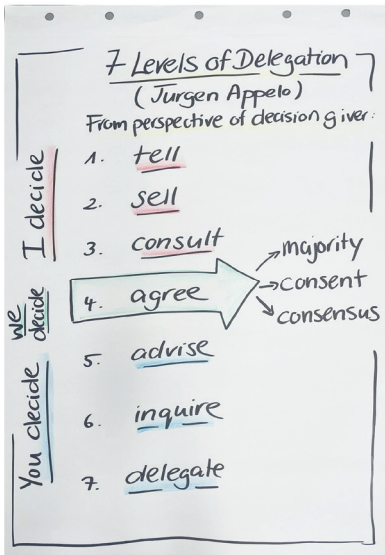
In the past ten years, there has been a rise in self-formed organisations that use a collaborative approach to leadership. Their philosophy is to have people organise themselves flexibly according to their capabilities, preferences, potential and life situation. People don't have specific functions or fixed processes anymore, but get together and choose which tasks they want to work on and in which function (like on a buffet), and the group collaborates to do the work. This flexible approach requires more rules for

processes, communicative skills and conflict management than the hierarchical model. It requires more defined processes than the more hierarchical directive approach. During the working session, the difference between directive and collaborative leadership was discussed, as well as how they are represented by the triangle and circle symbols. The rise of self-formed organisations that use a collaborative approach was also mentioned, along with the increased need for communication and discussion within these groups:

#### **Levels of delegations**

Barandun then went on to explain the seven levels of delegation:

- **TELL:** This level involves simply telling someone what needs to be done without any discussion or input from the other person.
- **SELL:** This level involves selling an idea to someone and convincing them to do something. It is still a one-way communication.
- **CONSULT:** This level involves asking for the other person's point of view and taking it into consideration when making a decision. Clear communication is important to avoid conflicts.
- **AGREE:** This level involves allowing the other person to help think about a decision but with a clear agreement of the boundaries and limits of their decision-making power. This can help



Presentation flipcharts by Cristina Barandun

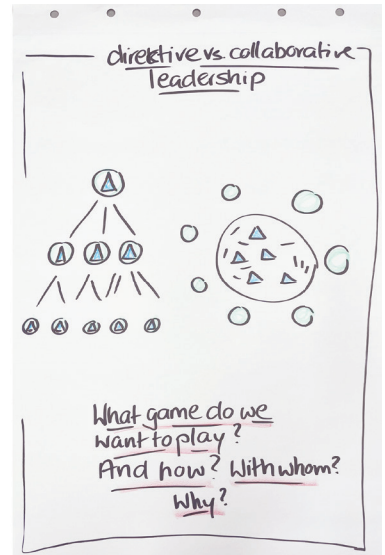
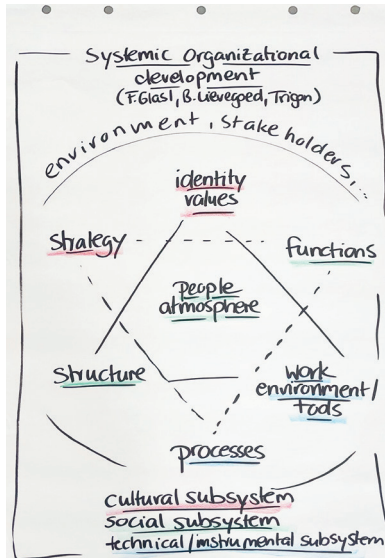
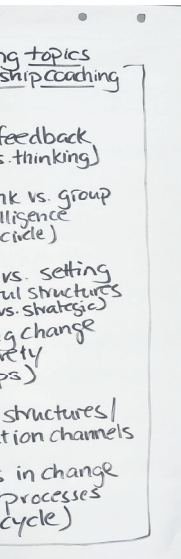
prevent conflicts that arise when people think they have more control than they actually do.

- **ADVISE:** This level involves empowering the other person by providing guidance and coaching, while still maintaining some control. However, if communication breaks down, it can feel like micro-managing to the other person.
- **INQUIRE:** This level involves delegating tasks and responsibilities while still maintaining an active interest in the progress of the work. It is important to have good communication to avoid misunderstandings.
- **DELEGATE:** This level involves full delegation of tasks and responsibilities, with the other person having complete control over the outcome. The delegator provides support and resources as needed, but the other person is ultimately responsible for the work.

## Leadership and change

Lastly, multiple topics within the theme 'leadership and change' were discussed:

- In Western thinking we tend to create plans and hold on to concrete outcomes and goals, even if the circumstances change and the goals might not be relevant anymore. A lot of force (or a hero who pushes through obstacles with a lot of force, collateral damage and wasted energy) is needed to bring about change. Eastern thinking emphasizes a process-oriented, long-term strategy in small steps.
- When receiving (critical) feedback as a leader, we have the tendency to be defensive. It helps to see any feedback as an offer of communication.
- It's also helpful to distinguish between thoughts and thinking – thoughts have the tendency to become fixed narratives



in one's head. Sometimes we feel they are part of our identity. The problem: changing becomes very stressful. Thinking is the process itself, which we want to nourish as a means to deal with change.

- If we want to initiate change at a practical level, it helps to limit the things we want to change to 2-3 things. If we do this, there is more chance that we can really see them through, and as systems react to impulses, we can see what these impulses do to the system and then take the next steps.
- Defining and clearing up meeting structures and channels of communication reduces stress and conflict.
- Calling a circle and asking everyone, one after the other, to share their thoughts and feeling on a certain subject is a wonderful way of getting a feel for a group, of going deeper into a subject and

also of opening an emotional and spiritual space.

- Mature groups actively seek out conflict and embrace discussion as a necessary aspect of growth. Seeking out friction in the pursuit of growth does not imply a personal problem, but rather an opportunity to challenge and develop oneself.
- When developing an organisation, we often need to let go of certain things, which can be painful at first. The process of change often involves a grief cycle, we react shocked, are in denial, progress to a rational understanding of the need for change, followed by a period of grief. It is important to acknowledge and address this grief in order to successfully move forward.

## CONCLUSION

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The conference concluded with the agreement that the directors will continue the dialogue over the coming period, through Zoom meetings, for example. Ted Brandsen, director of Dutch National Ballet and curator of the conference, and Assis Carreiro, co-curator of the conference, will develop a strategy for follow-up and short and longer term developments of Positioning Ballet. Peggy Olislaegers, co-curator and moderator, will continue to be involved as well.



## PARTICIPANTS

Nina Ananiashvili – State Ballet of Georgia  
 Christopher Anderson – Alberta Ballet  
 Dirk Badenhorst – Mzansi Ballet  
 Filip Barankiewicz – Balet Narodniho ívadla Praha  
 Rachel Beaujean – Dutch National Ballet  
 Tara Birtwhistle – Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet  
 Robert Bondara – Poznan Opera Ballet  
 Federico Bonelli – Northern Ballet  
 Bridget Breiner – Badischer Staatsballett Karlsruhe  
 David Hallberg – The Australian Ballet  
 Christopher Hampson – Scottisch Ballet  
 Nikolaj Hübbe – Royal Danish Ballet  
 Susan Jaffe – American Ballet Theatre  
 Aivars Leimanis – Latvian National Opera and Ballet  
 Linnar Looris – Estonian National Ballet  
 Cathy Marston – Ballett Zürich (from August 2023)  
 Ernst Meisner – Dutch National Ballet Junior Company  
 Emily Molnar – Nederlands Dans Theater  
 Hope Muir – National Ballet of Canada  
 Carlos Prado – Companhia Nacional de Bailado Portugal

Éric Quilleré – Opéra National de Bordeaux  
 Nicolas le Riche – Royal Swedish Ballet  
 Tamara Rojo – San Francisco Ballet  
 Martin Schläpfer – Wiener Staatsballett  
 Adam Sklute – Ballet West  
 Burcu Sürmeli Borovali – Izmir State Ballet  
 Javier Torres López – Finnish National Ballet  
 Debbie Turner – Cape Town City Ballet  
 Medhi Walerski – Ballet BC  
 Xinpeng Wang – Ballet Dortmund  
 Aaron S. Watkin – Semperoper Ballett and English National Ballet (from season 2023/2024)  
 Septime Webre – Hong Kong Ballet  
 Ted Brandsen – Curator Positioning Ballet and Director Dutch National Ballet  
 Assis Carreiro – Independent co-curator Positioning Ballet  
 Peggy Olslaegers – Independent co-curator and moderator Positioning Ballet

**Positioning Ballet** was organized and produced by Dutch National Ballet

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