In the Dec 08/Jan 09 issue of ‘Dance Australia’, Dr Nicholas Rowe took the choreographer Lloyd Newson to task over his forum at the World Dance Alliance Summit held in Brisbane last year. Rowe argued that Newson presented a ‘one-dimensional view of religion as an oppressor of gay people’. Dr Jondi Kanes was also at the forum. Here is his response to the article.

Nicholas Rowe “took issue with Lloyd Newson” in the article “Points of Difference” that appeared in the Dec 08/Jan 09 issue of Dance Australia. This article stated that Newson had “overlooked the complexity of Islam” with regards to homosexuality in an open forum discussion at the 2008 World Dance Alliance (WDA) conference. I was present at the forum and feel compelled to respond to Rowe’s article because, in part, I had such a different reaction to what was said and to what Rowe inferred. Despite Rowe’s attempts to frame the article in terms of scholarly engagement, many of his comments are unfounded, unsubstantiated and potentially damaging to the spirit of public debate. As a scholar and practitioner, he should have stuck to identifying the issues. I have been in correspondence with Newson and would like to offer an alternative reading that takes into account what was actually said at the forum and identifies a different set of issues for public discussion. Before the discussion can take a constructive turn, Rowe’s more problematic assertions – those regarding Newson’s “superficial understandings” and research process, his “interrogation” of Boi Sakti and the audience’s “revelation” to the forum – should be addressed. For me, the issues that come to the fore as a consequence of the WDA forum are related to the increasing pressure in society to account for the “personal is the political”, literally through our thoughts and feelings, words and actions at the dinner table, in the studio or on the global stage.

Rowe seems to conflate Newson’s research on the experience of being gay under conditions of intolerance with an “agenda to blame religion for the difficulties faced by homosexuals”. At the forum and in our subsequent correspondence, Newson was clear that his research concentrated on the countries from which the majority of British Muslims originate and, among other research, cited the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, a non-partisan academic fact tank observing global trends which conducted a country-by-country survey of attitudes towards homosexuality. One of the conclusions of the report was that “Asia, Africa, and in most predominantly Muslim nations such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, lopsided majorities believe homosexuality should not be accepted by society.” Newson stated in an email to me that Rowe, in defense of Islam’s “tolerate” attitude towards homosexuality, cites Indonesia:

...in Indonesia... homosexuality is not in fact illegal but is both celebrated and contested within popular culture”. His statement is misleading, unsubstantiated and confused. Firstly I had never said homosexuality was illegal in Indonesia. Secondly only five per cent of Indonesians think homosexuality should be allowed in society compared to other South East Asian non-Muslim countries like Japan (54%) and the Philippines (64%). Because of the sensitivities and complexities in discussing the inter-related themes of religion, culture and intolerance towards homosexuality, I opted for a methodology, “verbatim theatre” [in “To Be Straight With You”] to disguise the issues. Hence every word spoken by the
performers belongs to the interviewees, first-hand stories and voices (many of them Muslim), not mine. Unlike Rowe suggests I have never said at any time that my findings or the stories represent those of everyone Muslim or every Christian.

Nonetheless an overwhelming consensus/pattern did emerge amongst our UK Muslim interviewees consistent with other, respected, independent research; some of which I cited at the conference. I am not prepared to skew the results of our findings nor silence the voice of my UK Muslims, to appraise Rowe's sensibilities. Whatever the exceptions worldwide, as I said at the conference; it is not a coincidence that the only 6 countries in the world that hold the death penalty for homosexuality justify it using Sharia law. (Newson to Keane email correspondence 16/03/09)

The critical moment in the WDA forum - the one that reverberates back through Rowe's objections and brings the domains of the academic and the practitioner, the personal and the political, the public and the private into tension - was when Newson publicly confronted Sakti regarding his views on homosexuality. Rowe comments that: "By subjecting Sakti to an unexpected interrogation on stage, Newson overstretched his role as perpetual victim of social "oppression and stirred the audience into revolution" (44). But his article omitted the account Newson gave at the forum of discussions that occurred at the preceding Ch defects. Newson had told of his efforts to accommodate Sakti's religious observance, and of how Sakti’s answer to Newson's question regarding homosexuality prompted Newson to raise the issue in public.

His recounting of the initial exchange is consistent with my memory of what he told the audience at the forum:

Sakti confirmed on two separate occasions, in the work place, with at least one other course participant present, that he thought "homosexuality was a sickness", and I replied, "In that case do you realise you are working with someone who is sick?". On another occasion Sakti said: "Homosexuals need to change." When I asked him what he would do if one of his dancers were gay, he said that he would talk to them with the intention of asking them to change - presumably toheterosexuality or a life of abstinence. (Newson email to Keane 09/02/09)

When Newson publicly confronted Sakti at the forum, it was to politically illustrate intolerance by substituting the words "Islam" and "Muslim" for "homosexuality" and "homosexual" in Sakti's response. He asked him: "What if I had said that Islam was a disease/sickness and that he (Sakti), as a Muslim, needed to change, how would he have felt?". My impression was that he did not anticipate Sakti's silence or expect that some in the audience would perceive Sakti as in need of assistance. It is the nature of the audience's complex and varied response that I would propose requires further investigation. There is no doubt that Lloyd Newson is a provocateur willing to stir up controversy. This is evident in his work and in his public persona. His careful and considered discussion at the forum, often punctuated with pauses in which one could see him collecting and phrasing his thoughts, confirmed to me that there is nothing casual about the way he engaged in the debate. I would suggest that some of the reactions to Newson in the public forum stem from his willingness to push the issues, regardless of the etiquette that often holds historical judgments in place. In our correspondence, Newson reflected:

Should I have made Boi's comments public? I could have challenged Boi more privately, but it was clear from his comments to me [that] he held deep beliefs about homosexuality and was not about to change - even at the public forum he never retracted or denied his comments when confronted. I could have let the matter pass and not drawn it to the attention of the delegates/public. However I felt the issues were important for the whole conference - how can people work together in the arts (particularly dance) across different cultures if homophobia is allowed to go unaddressed? One audience member said to me, "Thank goodness someone addressed the elephant in the room". (Newson email correspondence 08/02/09)

If, as Newson rightly observes, the WDA was specifically aimed at "transcultural conversations and work practices, why would it not be relevant to raise the fundamental question of religious and cultural in/tolerance towards homosexuality" (Newson email 09/02/09). A global summit is the place for a community (a dance alliance) to talk about the complex experience of being torn and conflicted as a consequence of multiple belongings and loyalties. Perhaps the next question must be addressed to Sakti regarding his views and the meaning of his silence. Jondi Keane, PhD, is a practising artist, critical thinker and senior lecturer at Griffith University, Qld.