FOUNDATIONS FOR ARTS AND PERFORMANCE (HUFFINGTON POST)

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By Lane Harwell

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Monday night's New York Dance and Performance Awards (the Bessies) celebrated the gift of dance and performance to the people of our City. But as the presenters left the spotlight at the end of the evening, I was struck by the stage that was left behind, still glowing in half-light--the foundation under the feet of a dancer, the canvas for a choreographer.

While experiencing a performance, New Yorkers are likely unaware of the structures and resources that support dance and culture. I believe that understanding these foundations is a key to building effective cases for attendance, patronage, and policy that can move the art form forward.

For the first time, The State of NYC Dance (2013), tracks dance trends in the New York State Cultural Data Project (CDP) over time, showing us where the art form has gone and may be headed. By integrating a sample of local dance makers sponsored by Fractured Atlas, it speaks in more inclusive terms about our evolving creative ecology.

Study findings underscore the value of nonprofit groups in the CDP study sample as contributors and ambassadors for our City, with thousands of performances locally and on tour, millions in paid attendance, and $251 million in aggregate expenditures. Findings also demonstrate the industry's resourcefulness in attracting diverse revenue streams--public, private, and earned--and its efficiency in putting resources to use in making dance, with 83% of dance makers' expenditures going to programs.

The trend analysis offers a story of growth in a changing economy. From 2009 to 2011, performances increased 3% and live attendance grew 12%, and the study experienced the first instances of paid "virtual" attendance--harnessing the potential of digital media. Nonprofit dance makers generated gains in foundation contributions and special events, and created new jobs.

The promise of the art form is uniquely present in the data on small nonprofit dance makers with budgets of $25,000 to $100,000, and on fiscally sponsored groups. Small dance-makers' growth in annual expenditures (36%), use of in-kind resources, and high level of new creation--premieres and commissioned work-- demonstrate entrepreneurship is alive in nonprofit dance.

Whereas the lion's share of nonprofit groups are based in Manhattan, 47% of the sponsored dance makers are headquartered in Brooklyn, and 15% in Queens, creating value for diverse communities. On average, these groups generate 56% of their revenue from earned income, outpacing all dance makers in the CDP with budgets of less than $5M.

Despite my exuberance, the State of NYC Dance (2013) presents data that is also sobering. The data show our industry as a whole operating in the black, but we know many groups are not making ends meet. Board and individual contributions to dance makers are declining in the aggregate, and the largest dance makers ($5M+) report losses in public funds. While total performances grew, the number on tour declined by 8%. New employment opportunities are part-time only, raising the issue of how our artists and administrators--I believe they do--make dance a viable career path.

The study reveals more about the state of dance than any prior Dance/NYC research, but it is only a step in an ongoing investigation. Its value, as a tool to guide fund and policy development and to improve management practices, will be measured best by its application--the dialogue, creative problem solving, and action it generates. It is not the stories it allows us to see that will effect change for the future, but the new stories it may inspire us to imagine.

Please note: This article first appeared on Lane Harwell's Huffington Post Blog on October 11, 2013.
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