

CITY COUNCIL TESTIMONY FOR THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS

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City Council Testimony for the Committee on Cultural Affairs

By Ivan Sygoda

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For almost thirty years, I have co-directed Pentacle, a not-for-profit service organization that focuses on the administrative and infrastructure needs of emerging, experimental, culturally specific, non-mainstream and pre-mainstream dance companies. We are an incubator. Some of the artists we served have gone on to world renown; for instance, we were the first managers and fiscal aegis for Mark Morris and Ohad Naharin. Others, such as Eiko & Koma, are MacArthur and/or Guggenheim Fellows. And still others have gone on to different careers. Not everyone makes it.

In short, we work with dance-makers in their research and development phase (which among the best is perpetual), well before they become known to a larger public, well before they grow into candidates for cultural tourism endeavors. But their ability to conduct that research here in New York City has been significantly eroded. Nascent arts enterprises are almost always underfinanced, understaffed, under resourced. It comes with the turf; and artists know that. Yet it used to come with the implied promise that talent and hard work would lead, not necessarily to riches and fame, but to the longed-for possibility of even harder work and further development of the talent. That possibility has been compromised because the field has been starved of resources. Dance is evanescent. It's made out of space and time, and then it disappears. Space and time cost money. Money for process, without any guarantee of a viable product. The arts share science's need for hypothesis, experimentation and failure. Without failure, there is no progress. Failure instructs. Success merely breeds imitation and eventual ossification. We have been building a culture where technology offers us established masterpieces at the touch of a button and where instant gratification has become the norm. The public understands less than ever the inner workings of arts and science. They demand the mega-hit and the new vaccine, but seem unmindful of what makes these miracles possible.

This is why your leadership is crucial. Despite all our letter-writing campaigns and "advocacy," support of the arts infrastructure will not by itself get you re-elected. Too much of what needs to happen is invisible to the larger public. But unless the arts are given the resources they need in order to function, they will go elsewhere—Philadelphia, Seattle, Minneapolis, large universities in the mid-west. When that happens, our vaunted venues will eventually only have imports to show, and the money will leave town with the cultural tourists. It won't happen overnight; it might take a decade or two, but it can happen, and will if we don't pay attention.

Manufacturing and service industries are given tax incentives to locate or remain here. By definition, that resource is not available to non-profits. Ironically, it's a moot point; we almost never have profits not to tax. We need other kinds of help. Space, to start with. When Pentacle had to relocate five years ago, we were distressed to discover how few danceable spaces were available in Manhattan. There were spaces, but some nexus of regulations, expenses and expectations made landlords prefer to keep them unoccupied. Perhaps the city could devise some financial incentives to make letting spaces lie fallow make less sense. Next, of course: money—non-matching general operating grants to artists, either directly to their non-profits or indirectly via any of the many fiscal agencies available for that purpose. Even a small grant of this type, say \$2,500, can be inspiringly catalytic to an emerging dance troupe. It's enough to make the project happen. (By the way, while you're doing this, it would be very helpful if the money were available at the time it was needed, not months later at the end of the fiscal year. \$2,500 can work magic if it's unencumbered by bureaucracy and paperwork. If it takes \$2,500 worth of time and effort to apply for it, match it, account for it and evaluate it, it stops being effective. If you trust artists' talent and dedication enough to give them a grant, you can trust them to spend it responsibly.)

I think we all read last Sunday's Times article by Jennifer Steinhauer about the Mayor's support of the arts. And indeed, Mr. Bloomberg has done wise and important things that have helped the arts community here. But much of what the article describes and extols is the enlightened but discretionary patronage of an empowered individual with the financial means and political clout to make things happen. Attitudes and policies such as those exemplified by our Mayor need to be institutionalized as public arts policy if the arts in New York City are to remain a prime reason people want to live and work here.

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