

◆ DANCERS ◆ BODIES, PROMOTING WELLNESS ◆: LET ◆S TALK SOLUTIONS

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By Hannah Krafcik

Dancer wellbeing represents a glaring and puzzling concern within the dance world. The physical and psychological health of dancers becomes especially tricky to foster within an environment where worth is often based on physical appearance. Many other factors, such as limited funding and resources, also complicate the matters, making it a difficult terrain for dance professionals to navigate. However, the latent stigma circulating around this subject is occasionally brought to public attention—most recently by a New York Times review, which critically remarked on the appearance of two New York City Ballet principal dancers.

On May 16, 2011, in the wake of this controversy and the mounting concern for dancer health and wellness, Dance/NYC, the New York branch office of Dance/USA, and the Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancer Health convened a town hall meeting entitled "Dancers' Bodies, Promoting Wellness." Its panel consisted of NYCB principal dancers Jenifer Ringer and Jared Angle, culture critic Jennifer Edwards, and mental health expert Melissa Gerson. Richard Gibbs, M.D., creator and supervising physician of San Francisco Ballet's dancer health program, moderated the proceedings.

As Gibbs remarked, this panel intended to "crack open" the issue at hand and begin a productive dialogue within the dance community, if not to dispel, at least to address, the stigma surrounding topics of dancer health, wellbeing, and body image. Ringer and Angle initiated this dialogue by graciously sharing their personal health struggles. Ringer described her recovery from an eating disorder, which had haunted her professional dance career since age 16, and Angle spoke of his battle with numerous injuries that brought about bouts of depression and negative self-perception.

Gerson illuminated this discussion by elaborating on the "culture of the ballet company," in which success is often correlated with physical size, or a lack thereof. Gerson noted that dancers are typically afraid of appearing vulnerable when working in a competitive casting environment; thus many dancers—particularly young ones in transition from pre-professional schools to companies—"fall through the cracks and suffer in silence." ... "culture of the ballet company," in which success is often correlated with physical size, or a lack thereof. Gerson noted that dancers are typically afraid of appearing vulnerable when working in a competitive casting environment; thus many dancers—particularly young ones in transition from pre-professional schools to companies—"fall through the cracks and suffer in silence."

On behalf of the Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancer Health, Gibbs requested that members of the panel share any practical suggestions that dance institutions and organizations might implement for the betterment of dancer health and wellbeing. An overwhelming number of suggestions, both from panelists and other participants at the meeting, conveyed the desire for more communication and transparency both through education and instruction and public sharing of personal stories and struggles.

For instance, Edwards proposed that dancers should be better informed of "how their bodies work." Young dancers often lack an understanding of proper nutrition, particularly in terms of what food pairings will maximize their capacity to perform. Edwards noted that dancers should be taught to be in constant "communication with their own bodies" in order to understand the physical source of their health concerns, however minor. This way, dancers may work productively to achieve their individual goals, instead of blindly manipulating their bodies for an abstract result that they believe directors or audiences prefer. Edwards also pointed out that many freelance modern dancers do not have the benefit of health insurance and services often offered to full-time dancers with longer-term company contracts. Therefore, emphasis must remain on prevention, and dancers should build a daily practice of listening and tending to their bodies to avoid detrimental health problems.

Ringer responded by suggesting that dancers should be informed of any pre-show requirements for their appearances in a more timely fashion. According to Ringer, dancers are often not given enough time to address weight concerns before the opening of a show. Healthy weight loss occurs over a relatively long span of time, and, in order to facilitate healthful practice, dancers should be notified about expectations for weight loss well before the opening of performances.

Panelists and respondents alike also acknowledged the need for communication and transparency between dancers. Admittedly, Gerson stated, dancers are often afraid to appear vulnerable, especially in front of their immediate peers. However, many conceded that mentorships could occur between dancers who perform in different communities and between working and retired dancers. Communication, commiseration, and support of this kind might occur through interactive blogs or even long-distance pen pal programs.

Individuals from the dance community who participated in the meeting brought plenty of productive questions and insight to the discussion as well. One attendee questioned how it might be possible to generate more financial support for dancer healthcare within dance companies. In response, Gibbs mentioned that other healthcare options exist, such as the Harkness Center for Dance Injuries affiliated with NYU Hospital, which offers a free injury-assessment program. Harkness is also involved in injury prevention specifically for the male dancer. Additionally, Edwards pointed out that technology provides new methods for sustainable prevention and wellness training for dancers through custom e-books, iPhone apps, and blogs.

In a related vein, another participant suggested that the Taskforce on Dancer Health might pursue a video project, in which role models from the dance community speak publically about their personal health concerns and struggles on YouTube. This project could serve to cultivate transparency for the next generation of dancers and humanize the dance profession.

The crowd's earnest participation and eagerness to bounce around ideas served as a testament to a collective desire for tangible, productive solutions to the problematic area surrounding dancer health and body image. Yet, the most important question now remains: What is the next step? How can this gathering of concerned individuals collectively mobilize, both in conjunction with Dance/USA and Dance/NYC and within their own communities, in order to create a culture conscious of the necessity for health and wellbeing? This meeting was an initial step toward enacting a great cultural change for dancers of all genres. In the words of Ringer, the primary goal should be to educate "a crop of dancers who aren't just dancers," but who are, first and foremost, self-assured individuals able to respect and cherish themselves physically, psychologically, and emotionally. In the words of Ringer, the primary goal should be to educate "a crop of dancers who aren't just dancers," but

who are, first and foremost, self-assured individuals able to respect and cherish themselves physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Hannah Krafcik studied English and American literature and dance at the University of South Florida. She went on to receive her MA in performance studies from New York University, where she focused her research on dance theory, spectatorship, and photography. She currently works with various artists and entrepreneurs, specializing in communications, research, and writing. Her curiosities lie with the cultural potency of dance performance and the present role of dance writing.

About the Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancers Health

The Taskforce on Dancer Health is sponsored by Dance/USA and is composed of the medical personnel from many of Dance/USA's member companies. The mission of the Taskforce is simply is to bring better health to dancers, especially in the setting of active professional companies. At the request of the Managers Council of Dance/USA, the Taskforce created a Preventive Health Screen in 2005, designed specifically for the unique needs of professional companies. The screen focuses on the "whole" dancer, looking at physical, emotional, nutritional, and general medical issues. After a successful "pilot year" by four eminent companies, the Taskforce Screen has been adopted by an increasing number of companies as the benefits of a preventive approach to dancer health become apparent. In the current season, more than 30 companies are using the Screen. To learn more about the Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancers Health, visit: <http://www.danceusa.org/dancerhealth>.

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