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Dance like Nobody's Watching

By Ella Rosewood and Alex Rodabaugh

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We are Alex Rodabaugh and Ella Rosewood from the Dance/NYC Junior Committee Self/Advocacy Think Tank. For the past year we have been researching issues surrounding dancer compensation. Some questions included:

- Are dancers paid enough? If no, who do you think is responsible and why?
- How can dancing be sustainable?
- Where are choreographers getting their money from?
- Should there be compensation standards for dance artists?
- Do you think the minimum wage (\$8.75/hour) is reasonable for a dancer to be paid for their work? Would it be better than nothing?
- What if the only way for a piece to exist is for no one to be compensated for it?
- Is making a living wage through dance possible?

Non-profit arts organizations who voluntarily pay artist fees that meet a minimum payment standard can choose to belong to the W.A.G.E. Certification Program [hyperlink: <http://www.wageforwork.com>]. This program establishes a minimum payment floor for compensation that is scaled up based on the total annual operating expenses of the organization.

We propose a similar certification program that independent choreographers can belong to if they meet a certain minimum for paying their dancers. Choreographers making a work that meet the requirement would be awarded a badge that could be put on their fundraising campaigns, websites and concert programs. We brought this idea to a Junior Committee meeting earlier this year and came up some pros and cons of this potential program.

Pros:

- Helps establish an industry standard for dancer compensation
- Helps dancers fight for their true value
- Encourages better payment practices from choreographers
- Choreographers could get the badge for some projects but not others, as needed
- Helps discover trends in dancer compensation
- Brings attention to issues of dance compensation and helps stoke the fire for future higher compensation
- Assists in leveraging funds for the choreographer's project
- Helps to legitimize the dance field for those who may not value it

Cons:

- Some choreographers might not be able to afford the certification
- Makes some projects impossible to complete
- Needs a budget/fundraising training program
- Discourages bartering
- Easier for people who have solid financial backing
- Needs transparency and consensus on standards (hourly rate or budget based)
- Needs a staff person to manage the certification system
- Badges could create an unwelcome power dynamic
- Needs community commitment

What do you think? We welcome any feedback, thoughts, and discussion on this topic. Please help us expand our ideas and help us take it further!

Below are some of the websites and articles we found in our research:

Who Pays Artists? (art job compensation submission form for greater transparency)
whopaysartists.com

Living Wage Calculator (see how much money you need to live!)
<http://artshacker.com/handy-living-wage-calculator/>

Glass Door (for comparing salaries)
<http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm>

2012 Dance/NYC Junior Committee Dance Workforce Census: Earnings Among Individuals, Ages 21-35
<http://www.dancenyc.nyc/advocacy-and-research/research/2012/02/Dance-Workforce-Census-Earnings-Among-Individuals-Ages-21-35/>

RELATED ARTICLES:

Is American Modern Dance a Pyramid Scheme?
<http://www.danceusa.org/ejournal/2015/03/02/is-american-modern-dance-a-pyramid-scheme>

If Underpaid Dancers Work Together, We Can Make a Difference
<http://www.releveyourlife.com/dance-blog/if-underpaid-dancers-work-together-we-can-make-a-difference/>

The Crisis in Modern Dance
<http://observer.com/2010/08/the-crisis-in-modern-dance/>

An Open Letter From a Dancer Who Refused to Participate in Marina Abramovic's MOCA Performance
<http://taboofart.com/2013/08/28/an-open-letter-from-a-dancer-who-refused-to-participate-in-marina-abramovics-moca-performance/>

[< back](#)

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