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Wednesday, November 2, 2016

Measuring the Value of Our Work

By Kate Ladenheim

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image by Liana Fink

I randomly stepped into an audition in July of 2016, expecting nothing, with a company that I had no prior relationship with, and two months later found myself getting emailed a contract for second cast of a brand new, ongoing, immersive theater show. I'd be performing multiple times a week. I'd be getting paid for rehearsals and performances. To say I was thrilled would be an understatement.

For awhile, I was very happy. The show was powerful and transformative and the creative team respectful and kind to its performers and employees. However, after several months of performing, I ultimately ended up leaving company a few weeks ago because I was dissatisfied with my job. This piece is not meant to be a critique of the company I was working for. They made decisions about allocating resources - some that I imagine were very difficult to make - in order to make sure that their employees were taken care of. The point that I am trying to make instead is that if you just look at the numbers and do not consider the magic of artistic fulfillment, most people would consider the performance gig a bad job.

Performers work long hours, late nights and weekends, for a very low salary (I would have earned approximately \$24,000/year). This salary is barely sustainable given NYC rents - and completely unsupportable if you consider student loan burdens. While Worker's Compensation coverage is available for workplace injuries, there are no offered benefits. I supplemented this work with a collection of freelance projects in event production and digital marketing. This work is very important to me - I adore my clients and collaborators, and am constantly creatively engaged. Additionally, I earn about 2-3 times as much on an hourly basis than I did as a performer, and good work that I do is rewarded with raises and bonuses.

In a very well-intentioned spirit of equality, every cast member for this particular show makes the same amount of money for rehearsals and performances, no matter how long you've been working for the company. There is no growth in pay rate - however, over time, certain cast members are offered more work.

While one may experience artistic growth and fulfillment, there is no potential for professional advancement without adding work - something that is exhausting if you are already working one or two other additional jobs. And this is one of the most consistent and highest-paid jobs offered to contemporary dance performers in the city. Essentially, I had a choice - to perform more and make less, or to perform less and earn more. I chose the latter.

This got me thinking, because a paying, consistent NYC performance gig is a goal that I have been working towards since I was thirteen years old - not to mention, something that many of my peers and colleagues aspire to. Regardless, I choose non-performance projects, because they are more stable and, over time, rewarding.

I am incredibly lucky that I have this choice; it is not a privilege that is available to all of my peers and colleagues. However, it does not dismiss the fact that being a performer is at best precarious and at worst unsustainable. And this is hardly an issue that is specific to performance careers— choreographers, administrators, and advocates all face incredibly taxing jobs for very low salaries and low potential for growth.

If the positions available to us are exhausting, stagnant, and underpaid, how can we hope for growth and longevity as individuals or as a community? Essentially, how can we create good jobs in the arts?

In an under-resourced field, it's not an easy question to answer. However, it's an issue that we have been thinking about rather intensely at JComm HQ. We've formed a think-tank (sub-committee) dedicated to exploring career sustainability and measuring the value of our work. We are identifying standards by examining our skills and experiences, and balancing them against the dollar amount that we need to thrive.

Thus, we encourage practices of advocacy for ourselves and the work we are creating, and demonstrate standards of sustainable employment for both and the community at large.

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