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Dance/NYC: An Assessment (2005)

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OVERVIEW

In December 2004, Dance/USA engaged Romalyn Tilghman, (Consultant) to lead an assessment of its first branch office, Dance/NYC. The goal was to assess Dance/NYC's effectiveness in serving the needs, concerns, and interests of the New York City dance community. The assessment would also consider how Dance/NYC relates to the ongoing work of Dance/USA.

PROCESS

In order to carry out the assessment process, the consultant:

- .. Read and reviewed historical and current materials related to Dance/USA and Dance/NYC;
- .. Met with leadership of Dance/USA and Dance/NYC to establish parameters of the assessment, develop questions, identify interviewees, and outline strategies;
- .. Conducted 18 phone interviews with dancers, dance managers, dance service providers, and funders, representing the diversity of the New York dance community;
- .. E-mailed an invitation to almost 1800 Dance/NYC constituents, of which over 300 responded to its survey; .. Compiled data from survey responses;
- .. Conducted a focus group of stakeholders to discuss and refine preliminary findings; and
- .. Drafted final report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overriding question of the assessment was: "Is dance better off in New York City because Dance/NYC exists?" The answer was a resounding "YES!" Interviewees described a disjointed and often competitive community before Dance/NYC came into existence and cited significant change with the organization's arrival. The survey, to which over 300 constituents responded, underlined the effectiveness of Dance/NYC. As participants evaluated the importance of each of Dance/NYC's services, they rated them important and very important to their own lives in the dance field. They rated its effectiveness as even more important to the dance community as a whole, acknowledging its critical role in serving the greater good. (For example, 52% of survey respondents ranked the e-mails as "valuable" or "very valuable" to the their own work; 80.2% ranked them as "valuable" or "very valuable" to the dance community.) The focus group reaffirmed Dance/NYC's effectiveness in all areas.

It should be noted that throughout the assessment process, participants used the opportunity to articulate additional services that Dance/NYC could offer. They did so with optimism and faith that the organization will continue to increase and strengthen its services. It also should be noted that participants look to Dance/NYC to build and strengthen the dance community. Beyond providing service, building a dance community, in which members know and interact with each other, is often cited as a subtext to Dance/NYC's mission.

One of the biggest challenges Dance/NYC faces is the diversity of its constituents. Demographically, they are young and old, experienced and not experienced, and of various ethnic backgrounds. They come to the dance community as dancers, funders, writers, service providers, and members of the public. That being said, it is interesting to note that Dance/NYC has found a particular niche among independent dancers/choreographers and small dance companies, who are engaged in a wide range of aesthetic expression and employed in situations ranging from oneperson choreography to large companies. Of the respondents to the survey, 58.3% identified themselves as dancers/choreographers, with fewer than half of the respondents self-identifying in all of the other categories combined, i.e. as dance administrators, presenters, funders, public members, and other. This seems to be an important niche constituency that has not felt adequately served by other organizations. It is also important to note that over one third of these constituents, 34.5%, found Dance/NYC through a colleague or friend, while another third found the branch through Dance/USA.

The other enormous challenge Dance/NYC faces is the busy, and often chaotic, lives of members of the dance community. On the one hand, they want more information, workshops, seminars, and roundtables. On the other hand, the primary impediment to participation is finding time to participate. Once they do, most feel supported. As one person expressed it, "Dance/NYC is the 'anti-frustration' organization."

FINDINGS

Since Dance/NYC focuses its efforts in four areas, it makes sense to evaluate its effectiveness in those areas.

Awareness

Interviewees and respondents to the questionnaire were particularly enthusiastic about Dance/NYC's web site, www.dancenyc.org, and e-mail

blasts; many thought these to be the most important services Dance/NYC offers and the focal points of the organization. Certainly, the sophisticated design work and thorough understanding of web technology provides important lessons for other Dance/USA branches, as they open.

Web Site

According to Dance/NYC staff, the web site receives over 20,000 discrete visits each month and is estimated to double in visitors every three months. Constituents consider it to be dynamic and user-friendly, well-designed, and frequently updated. The calendars of NYC performances and of dance-related events, and of NYC-based companies on tour throughout the world, are considered to be "valuable." The application deadline calendar for funding opportunities is considered to be particularly useful. Companies with limited development staffs particularly appreciate the lists of grant opportunities, which become their primary research tools. Larger more sophisticated development departments appreciate the "checkbox function" it fills, allowing them to doublecheck their own calendars of deadlines.

As a whole, interviewees described the web site as very well-organized and very clean. Some called for a bigger calendar, "especially with attention to what's going on in the boroughs." It should be noted that the most often-requested information was for audition announcements, which already exist on the web page, and may indicate that enhanced marketing may be needed. (In fact, Dance/NYC responded immediately to the first suggestion of this problem. Dance/NYC staff is currently addressing this issue by varying the headers on its weekly e-mail blasts, to remind readers that additional postings exist on the web site. Since highlighting jobs and auditions, the submissions have almost doubled.) Other ideas for web site content were expressed in interviews, through surveys, and the focus group. The focus group was particularly enthusiastic about the development of a "Yellow Pages" of dance resources, a need also expressed by Dance/NYC's administrator who fields most of the phone calls. Suggestions for content include:

- .. Festival deadlines
- .. Workshops, classes, and courses for dancers and dance teachers
- .. Contact information for freelance artists (lighting designers, set designers, stage managers, video artists, composers, etc.)
- .. Job postings for administrators, technical crew
- .. Teaching positions – short-term, long-term, university-based, and otherwise
- .. Resources for dance educators
- .. Master classes and workshops
- .. News of conventions
- .. Government and council meetings where dance should be represented
- .. Links to tech specs on dance venues
- .. Links to dance reviews
- .. Links to choreographers' and dancers' web sites
- .. Presenting/performing opportunities
- .. Software for creating press kits and electronic self-promotion kits
- .. Forum for dialog, such as a blog or chat room
- .. Friendster/freecycle for dancers to exchange goods, services, help
- .. Q and A of practical advice, on medical and/or financial questions

E-Mails

Weekly e-mails highlight dance performances with direct links to box offices and company web sites; it is distributed to almost 1800 dance enthusiasts. The e-mails come "all the time" and keep the dance community informed about what's going on both locally and nationally. They are particularly helpful when they link to discussions on such important topics as the ownership of work. The announcement of something as relevant as "free flu shots" can be a godsend to a struggling company that needs to protect its dancers. There is conflicting opinion as to the style of the e-mails. Some like the current, informal, catchy headers. Others want more specific subject headers that provide the recipient enough information to decide whether to open or not.

DancePass

DancePass was also lauded as "amazing" and "important" by interviewees. Over half of the survey respondents considered DancePass to be valuable to the dance community, but ranked it of less importance to their own lives, and most had never used DancePass themselves. There were also a few requests that DancePass become easier to access, especially since there's a tendency to lose or forget passwords. The question of DancePass, especially in the focus group, led to a broader discussion of the necessity of marketing not only to those "who already love dance" but also to those "who don't yet know they love it." One of the suggestions of the focus group was to approach American Express, or another corporate sponsor, about extensive marketing for the entire dance community. Dance/NYC would host the calendar and promote it through subway and bus placards, radio spots, and newspaper ads. Camera-ready copy with the monthly calendar would be available online to any dance company, so that it could be downloaded for individual programs. (Staff reports that it is already actively seeking money for such a campaign, but will delay the announcement until funds are in hand.)

Advocacy & Data Gathering:

Dance/NYC has completed two major research studies. "Where the Money Goes," an analysis of where contributed income goes to NYC dance companies in terms of small, medium, and large organizations, has been widely distributed to the funding community. "The Economic Activity of Dance in New York City" is a major analysis of the role dance plays in the NYC economy. According to interviewees, even more important are the smaller, less formal studies Dance/NYC has done, such as analysis of the number of dance reviews published by the NY Times, space needs, etc. A few perceived the feasibility and economic impact studies as "lots of money," and wanted more resources spent on creating "something that impacts artists now" such as rehearsal space and administrative help. The focus group believed the reports to be important but wanted more information as to how and when they are used and how effective the advocacy efforts are. They suggested that the director report from time to time on meetings with key funders and other officials.

Survey respondents suggested a wide range of potential topics for future research, including:

- .. Nonprofit salaries
- .. Demographic breakdown of audiences
- .. Gender breakdowns of distribution of support
- .. Income levels of dancers/choreographers in relation to cost of producing work
- .. Salary differentials between dancers and administrators.

(It should be noted that Dance/NYC has already done preliminary research on gender inequality in grant making, which is available on its web page, indicating another marketing challenge.)

In general, respondents give high marks to the advocacy work, believing Dance/NYC has been able to make inroads in places that individual dance companies can't impact. "It keeps dance in the mix," was expressed several times. They believe Dance/NYC has helped fill a void by being the dance voice at city and state levels. They appreciate the reporting role Dance/NYC plays in providing information about government funding sources, so they can plan according to budget windfalls or shortfalls. They are especially appreciative of the advocacy work with the press. They understand that it is difficult to be heard and that it will take time to develop clout and results.

Real Estate:

One of the most important contributions Dance/NYC makes in the area of real estate is in sharing its own offices. Its conference room serves as a convening place for its own meetings and is also used by companies that do not have meeting spaces of their own. "It makes our board

meetings seem more professional when we meet there," was offered by several interviewees. Those companies lucky enough to rent an office cubicle in Dance/NYC's space are particularly effusive about its importance. "As a tenant, Dance/NYC provides an incredible opportunity. You don't want to see my last office!" was the blunt statement of one interviewee.

The question of how far Dance/NYC can and/or should go in solving the rehearsal needs of dance companies is still an open question.

Dance/NYC has been proactive in researching and pursuing other issues, including the creation of affordable rehearsal space and even a New York dance center. Although most interviewees were enthusiastic about these prospects, others were either unaware or felt it was a lesser priority than the professional development services that Dance/NYC offers. In any case, interviewees believed that conversation about space is a critical first step in solving an acknowledged problem. Survey results showed more support for Dance/NYC's exploration of real estate than any other single topic. In fact, 72.3% ranked it as very important and another 15.5% as important. Again, this indicates that "space" for the majority of Dance/NYC's constituency of smaller companies and individual choreographers, is a critical issue.

Professional Development:

Dance/NYC offers a full range of professional development activities to the dance community, including roundtables, panel discussions, seminars, and workshops.

Roundtables

Interviewees gave particularly high marks to the quarterly roundtable meetings, which gather persons in "like" jobs in dance. They are designed to reduce the sense of isolation, to create networking opportunities, and to share information. Interviewees often cited the "confidentiality" of roundtable discussions as the reason for success and offered kudos to Dance/NYC for providing the "neutral Switzerland" of the dance field. Sometimes, the benefits cited were ones of breaking down the sense of isolation, allowing a person to feel "I'm not the only one with these problems." Other times, very specific solutions were cited. "How did you deal with the musicians' union?" was an example given as the kind of question that deserved honest, confidential discussion. The major obstacle to participation is lack of time and/or scheduling conflicts.

Seminars, workshops, panel discussions

Interviewees cited the challenges of widening the net so that more dancers, choreographers, and administrators participate in professional development opportunities. It was suggested that a core group be solicited to take a more active role in recruiting new participants, by making a personal phone call or sending a note, inviting a peer to come along to the next function. The fact that 34.5% of the survey respondents found out about Dance/NYC through a friend or colleague would indicate that word-of-mouth is an effective and important marketing tool. Respondents to the survey provided a long dream list for seminar topics. Some, such as marketing and fundraising, already exist, and constituents simply want more of them, with more scheduling options. The topics which came up most often (many of which are currently offered) include:

- .. Dance unions (AGMA, Equity, etc.) When is it time to join? Advantages/disadvantages?
- .. Insurance (health, liability, workers comp)
- .. Health, maintenance, including for maturing dancers
- .. Legal issues, including intellectual property
- .. Financial management and tax preparation
- .. Fundraising for dance – how to approach funders, proposal writing, gala events, etc.
- .. Issues of touring, getting an agent, APAP network
- .. Collaboration across genres
- .. Costuming on a budget
- .. Photographing dance
- .. Dance education – opportunities and protocols
- .. How to transition from performing to administration
- .. Senior choreographer forum on preparation of dancers
- .. Audience development
- .. Self-producing and presenting

(Dance/NYC reports it will use this list as a tool for planning next year's series of seminars.)

Most important to many interviewees was the informal, relevant networking that was facilitated through Dance/NYC. They appreciated being able to contact colleagues about best practices, concerning everything from buying computers to buying health insurance. They acknowledge the continuous process of keeping the dance community together and seeing itself as a community. They understand the challenges inherent in identifying issues that unify the wide variety of dance constituents. The importance of building a community was articulated as important to the mission of Dance/NYC and one that should be pursued ... through social and professional networking events and online.

In the interviews and focus group, several people expressed the desire to help make the networking happen, both in real time and in virtual space. Although the Dance/NYC staff has been notably responsive in addressing needs as they are brought forward, it might be interesting to develop a mechanism in which a member could take the lead in developing a discussion group. Although initially this would require additional work by staff, ultimately it could increase the reach of the organization. Currently, there are message boards hosted at the Dance/NYC web site, but they are used infrequently. Other organizations are experimenting with "celebrity hosts" who agree to participate for a given time in order to ensure lively dialog.

Many of the suggestions for increased services are cited above. In addition, it was suggested that Dance/NYC:

- .. Be involved with the tourism department. If New York is the dance capital of the world, there should be reminders, maybe even with signage at JFK and La Guardia.
- .. Coordinate opening nights so that there is not the conflict for reviews and space for advance stories.
- .. Convene a group to look at cutting touring costs, perhaps even grouping companies to bloc book the same out-of-town sites.

Interviewees were satisfied, even pleased, with the way NYC dance service organizations are working together. They do not see an overlap in services and believe Dance/NYC has been helpful in steering constituents to appropriate agencies. As one interviewee said, "There was some initial wariness, but that has dissolved. They have found ways to distinguish what each does. Where they overlap, they've come together. I give them all credit for finding the way through what could've been a prickly path. The effort to collaborate has been a key element."

RELATIONSHIP WITH DANCE/USA:

When asked about the relationship between Dance/NYC and Dance/USA, interviewees described it as productive and mutually beneficial.

Some gave enormous credit to Dance/USA for seeing the need for a New York branch. More than one said, "Dance/NYC is Dance/USA in New York." A few articulated how "relevant" Dance/NYC was to their own work and how "distant" or "abstract" Dance/USA seemed. Several of those interviewed pointed out that it was difficult and expensive to attend mid-winter meetings of Dance/USA and that they feel they have little in common with dance companies in other parts of the country. "A regional ballet company that tours has little in common with a New York City modern company," was an opinion expressed several times.

The survey results on this question show more difference of opinion than on any other topic. Over one-fourth simply had no opinion, and less than half ranked the relationship as "important" or "very important." When pressed, most focus group members thought that the responses probably indicated that people simply didn't know, or care, where the services came from, but that it was important that they were available.

FUNDING:

Interviewees from the funding community were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the work of Dance/NYC in the interviews. They feel as if their expectations have been surpassed. One funder commented, "It has more successful than I ever dreamt it would be. It was something I pushed, but I'm still amazed at how it has taken off." Another funder commented, "Funders should be in on the ongoing

sustenance of the organization." Several interviewees remarked on the fact that the lack of charge and/or membership was important to Dance/NYC's effectiveness.

The focus group expressed the desire for a sub-granting program of Dance/NYC. They believe the organization has the potential to raise a large pot of money from one or more corporations and foundations, which are not able to fund smaller companies and that would benefit greatly from \$2000-\$5000 grants.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Interviewees were asked if there were lessons to be passed on to other communities considering the establishment of a Dance/USA branch. This question generated many superlative comments about Dance/NYC's executive director and his leadership. His knowledge of the field and its challenges, sensitivity to issues, and creativity in providing service were cited.

The other common advice was to set the stage by providing extensive and inclusive planning within a community before establishing the branch. "It is important that the dance community has a responsibility in creating this space." It was recommended that a good look be taken at other service organizations before another is started and that there be acknowledgement of what already exists. From that observation, it is important to identify the holes.

One interviewee recommended that communities "Dig deep and listen hard to all, from big to small, younger artists to institutionalized companies." Another observed: "If a Dance/Chicago were to form, does it have to look like Dance/NYC? My answer is 'no.' It would defeat the purpose and intent. Flexibility is key. Each branch will have its own priorities, demographics, and problems."

CONCLUSION:

Dance/NYC has done a remarkable job in positioning itself at the center of the New York dance community in just a few years. Respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their support of the organization. The fact that respondents want more services indicates a faith and confidence in the organization. Dance/USA is to be commended for its foresight and commitment to creating this important branch. The challenge of building community as well as providing service is an important one for Dance/USA to consider. Those who already participate in its national meetings understand the importance of knowing colleagues. Individual dancers/choreographers and members of smaller companies may always lack the resources to attend conferences outside the region. Does Dance/NYC consider these to be important members of its constituency? Is it able/willing to raise the funds to serve them? Is it important that those served understand the connection? If so, how is that best accomplished? In other words, it may be more of a marketing issue than an organizational one, to help users understand the connection. Links between the branch and the national organization may need to be enhanced in such a way that the connection is never overlooked.

The dance field believes itself to be under extreme pressure, at this writing. Members of the dance community feel themselves to be besieged with challenges, especially those related to the resources of time and money. Primarily, they look to service organizations to lighten those pressures, through information, advocacy, and, ultimately, access to money and saved time. In addition, they understand the importance of collaborating on solutions to shared problems and of offering support to one another. The work of Dance/NYC and Dance/USA is critical to their work; and individuals are, almost entirely, effusive about that importance, when asked.

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