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"Labor of Love?" JComm Weighs In

By Lauren Wingenroth

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Next Tuesday, April 17, the Dance/NYC Junior Committee will host "Labor of Love?: A Long Table," a conversation around labor, artistic love, and monetary and social value in the dance field. To get the conversation started, we asked JComm members to weigh in with their own relationships to the term "labor of love."

Nadia Khayrallah

"Labor of love" is a phrase brought up to justify not paying artists, with the assumption that we are so eager to practice and perform our craft for its own sake, we will be willing to do it for free. (In regard to myself, I can't say this isn't true.)

"Labor of love" is how I justified to my parents my desire to pursue a highly underpaid and unstable career in dance. They asked how health insurance fit into that. I didn't know.

Throughout high school and college, I was told by some (overwhelmingly kind and supportive) teachers and advisors that "the most important thing in life is to do what you love." In a sense, I am following that advice, but the reality is that not everyone has the privilege to view work as more than a means of survival. When we treat the choice to pursue our passions as a morally superior one, we can develop a disregard for work done "only" for money and the people who do it. (In other words, "labor of love" won't really help you pay your rent, but it can help you feel superior to the people living next to you.)

Believing in the moral purity of "labor of love" means dismissing those lucky enough to get significantly paid for their art as "sellouts." (I wouldn't mind selling out one day.)

In addition to art, I have heard the term "labor of love" used to refer to social justice-oriented work and childrearing.

A "labor of love" is usually supported by a labor of money (either yours or someone else's).

Margaret Tudor

I think that, like in all things, we should have a nuanced understanding of the different elements going into that phrase. There are a lot of different kinds of labor a person can do, a lot of different ways we can value that labor, and a lot of different ways we might feel about the combo of a type of labor and a type of value ascribed to it. Yes, absolutely the idea of "labor of love" is used to validate exploiting artists and being exploited. But everything is labor. The problem isn't that art is labor or that we love the labor of our art, it's that that labor isn't ascribed an appropriate value. AND that some kinds of labor in the arts are disproportionately valued.

Like, should people who are hard to work with pay their collaborators more for the emotional labor they'll have to do while working together? No, that's a kind of crazy thought, but also, yes, emotional labor is labor. Monetary compensation is one form of value. And a form that is way under represented in the dance field. But there are other ways to value a person's labor. And higher compensation alone won't fix a culture that thinks of dancers as "bodies for hire."

Stay tuned for more JComm members' perspectives this week! We hope to see you at the Long Table to share your own thoughts and experiences. Register (for free) [here!](#)

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