

CITY COUNCIL TESTIMONY

Friday, October 28, 2005

City Council Testimony

By Marion Koltun Dienstag

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Councilman Recchia and members of the Committee – thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. I'm Marion Dienstag, Executive Director of Dance Theater Workshop. It is my privilege to speak on behalf of independent dance artists and midsized dance organizations. New York City's brand as an entrepreneurial hub of thought leaders, taste makers and trend setters is fueled by the availability of live performance. Studies have proven, and thanks to Dance NYC for the most recent economic impact review, that the arts and in particular dance pump money into the local economy and spark urban revitalization throughout the five boroughs.

Yet, we continue to collude with the existence of harsh realities facing the dance community- many of them admittedly nation-wide challenges- as if to say we need the arts to secure New York's competitive advantage BUT we expect and assume that artists and arts organizations will accomplish this feat with undercapitalized tool kits to build powerful product.

Dance artists- choreographers, dancers, musicians, designers, and the entourage that supports them pour into our community from professional training programs and the land of moxy every year. They are asked not to make a living wage in their careers of choice, not to live in affordable housing, not to carry health, life, or disability insurances, and not to plan for retirement. When they self produce- and most do- there is a dearth of quality rehearsal space- whether or not affordable, no ability to afford workers compensation, and scarce resources to market their work in an environment where live performance is racing to keep up with society's appetite for electronic media.

Our most mature artists flee to Europe in no small measure because they can't live a life of integrity here AND they can't travel elsewhere given the impossible visa block for world artists to come to the U.S., and in particular, New York. When they do settle down, often attempting to develop their own live-work spaces, they must do it with no asset, strategic, or business planning let alone loans like the ones they likely responsibly paid off for college.

Traditionally, these artists look to mid-sized arts organizations such as Dance Theater Workshop to help. Together, we form an army of small businesses focused on partnership to pool resources as we adopt more and more for-profit business philosophies in running our operations. Strategic thinking is beginning to enter our world through lead Foundations such as Mellon and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Corporations such as Altria. We applaud the recent partnership announced between Time Warner, the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Kennedy Center. But this is the tip of the iceberg and we are starting to wonder if the for-profit sector has more business acumen to contribute than simply observing how a choreographer problem-solves.

Our businesses don't enjoy venture capital investment because the profit we turn merely feeds the mind, heart and soul while transforming lives. We struggle in isolation to build and diversify our Boards with no resources to train and nurture Board leadership. We cannot turn back the clock to a time when corporate agendas were dictated by philanthropic and visionary CEOs who talked civic responsibility not marketing impressions. And we have little recourse in obtaining the most common business instruments like lines of credit or loans since our hard-won assets can collateralize only polite rejection.

What can you do?

Let's celebrate what you are already doing. Kudos to the Department of Education and Joan Finklestein for the impressive dance curriculum-based blueprint for the City school system. Bravo, Commissioner Levin and her team for elevating the arts profile to Corporations and forging active partnerships with the likes of the Economic Development Corporation. Heartfelt thanks to Council member Christine Quinn and the City Council's commitment to supporting health insurance for independent contractors. Commissioner Walsh and Deputy Commissioner Newhouse really "get" that the arts in New York make up some of the very best small business enterprises.

What's next?

*Build affordable housing.

*Increase the inventories of quality rehearsal space and by that I don't just mean give capital funds, but look at creative zoning and broker community relationships city wide.

*Influence and be a part of the funding engine for dance and growing its audiences.

*Convince the banking industry to loan and to do so at incentive rates.

*Broker and support opportunities for quality of life and business insurance.

And most importantly, go see performances- talk about what you saw in your day to day conversation. Value our partnership, and come dance with us.

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