DANCE/NYC JUNIOR COMMITTEE MEMBER'S RESPONSE TO DISCOVERING FISCALLY SPONSORED NYC DANCE MAKERS

Wednesday, September 12, 2012

Dance/NYC Junior Committee Member's Response to Discovering Fiscally Sponsored NYC Dance Makers

▶ Share | Print | Download

By Alexandar Thompson, Dance/NYC Junior Committee Member

On Friday, September 7th, Dance/NYC released its much anticipated report, Discovering Fiscally Sponsored NYC Dance Makers. The report contains data collected from New York Live Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, Foundation for Independent Artists, Fractured Atlas, and the Field on the members of their respective programs that qualify as dance makers operating within the five boroughs of New York City.

The numbers presented in this report tell a story about a vital segment of the dance community: those artists who are working without the benefit of 501(c)(3) status. Although community grants for individual artists and crowd funding platforms like RocketHub, Kickstarter, and IndieGoGo have made it easier for artists without non-profit status to raise funds, many granting organizations and donors remain inaccessible to those without the once coveted and difficult to obtain 501(c)(3) designation. Fiscal sponsorship, whereby a legally recognized 501(c)(3) organization provides legal and financial oversight for an entity operating independently of that organization, allows independent artists much greater fundraising potential. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal, The Nonprofit as Nonstarter, suggests that many artists are turning to fiscal sponsorship as a viable financial alternative to setting up their own nonprofit organization.

So what does all of this mean?

The story that emerges from the report is that of a determined group of artists operating under difficult circumstances with significant constraints finding ways to produce work in spite of tremendous adversity. It's the story of a vibrant community of makers and doers trying to figure out a way to make work in a landscape that is increasingly challenging, amongst skyrocketing rents and amidst a funding environment that is neither stable nor predictable. It is a story about artists whose sense of commitment is so deeply rooted that they are willing to make extraordinary sacrifices, to seek out alternative revenue streams that sap their time and energy in order to support the exploration, development, and production of their work because, even with the structural support of fiscal sponsorship, they are still unable to make a living wage as an artist.

To stave off the risk of hyperbole and of romanticizing a struggle that is very tangible and very real let me say that as noble as this story may be it is not, at this point, sustainable. The work is not done. Fiscal sponsorship provides an answer, not the answer, and we're still figuring out how best to make it work for artists. Dance/NYC calls its report a call to action for better data collection so that we can tell a better, more complete story, but it is also a call to action for artists to start owning the very real things that define them: creativity, ingenuity, resourcefulness, dedication, entrepreneurship, the list goes on and on. We have to start valuing ourselves and our work and avoid falling into the trap of the culture of poverty that we have resigned ourselves to for so long. But we also have to continue to seek out viable solutions, to explore different ways of thinking about and utilizing the models at hand, and to educate ourselves and advocate for our work in any and all capacities that we can. With all of that said, here are the numbers:

The study's findings show that, in comparison to non-profit dance companies represented by information collected in the Cultural Data Project (CDP), fiscally sponsored artists are operating with much smaller budgets. Whereas the majority of non-profit companies have operating budgets in the $25,000-$500,000 range, the average fiscally sponsored dance maker is operating with a budget of less than $16,000. That is a significant gap. What is interesting, however, is the difference in how those funds are spent.

Fiscally sponsored artists spend an average of 83% of their budgets directly on programmatic expenses, such as artist fees, space rental, costumes, and materials. This is in relation to comparable non-profitdance companies, of whose budgets only 73% goes directly to programmatic expenses. The considerable administrative overhead required by the corporate structure of nonprofits most likely accounts for this difference. Because smaller independently run companies and collectives don't necessarily have the hierarchy and administrative staff of nonprofit organizations they can distribute funds with much greater discretion and because, in most cases, it is the artists themselves making that decision, more funds are funneled directly into the projects.

Which brings us to the next interesting finding: fiscally sponsored dance makers spend fully 51% of their budgets on their dancers and collaborators. This number is significantly higher than the 32% paid by similarly sized non-profit companies. What does this tell us? There is a very different valuation of the dancer as artist among fiscally sponsored makers, if not ideologically, at least in practice. Perhaps the lack of hierarchy amongst fiscally sponsored artists creates a greater sense of connection, empathy, and community with their dancers. The dance company is not an entity in and of itself, but rather an organism composed of all of its parts, a slight difference in perception that accounts for the commitment to people over commitment to the organization. This statistic is tempered, however, by the fact that 52% of a $16,000 budget, even if the entirety was paid solely to one dancer, is hardly a living wage.

The report highlights the resourcefulness and ingenuity of dance makers, the evidence of an entrepreneurial spirit amongst independent artists, and the efficiency by which they are able to make use of limited resources. Evidence suggests that fiscally sponsored artists rely heavily on word of mouth and grassroots advertising, and that fiscally sponsored artists may be contributing more to their local communities. Of the entire pool of projects involved in the study, more were based in Brooklyn and Queens combined than were located in Manhattan. This is in stark contrast to 75% of nonprofit dance companies that are located in Manhattan.

The report closes with the supposition that fiscal sponsorship may be contributing to a richer, broader, and more robust body of work by making it possible for more dance makers to participate in the act of creation. It is this fact more than any other that gives me hope. Any program that creates more opportunities for artists to make work, that democratizes the art making process, that enlivens and makes possible the development of work that would otherwise not exist seems to me to be a vital and worthwhile endeavor and one worthy of continued investigation and investment.