

DANCE/NYC COMMUNITY CONVERSATION # 2: DANCERS & CHOREOGRAPHERS

9:00-11:00 AM

Wednesday June 1, 2011

Mertz Gilmore Foundation, New York

Attendees:

Jen	Abrams		Jen Abrams Choreography
Jodi	Bender		
Melissa	Brading		
Laura	Brandel		www.laurabrandel.com
Danielle	Dybiec		
Ursula	Eagly		www.ursulaeagly.org
Saeko	Ichinohe	Founder & Artistic Director	Saeko Ichinoe Dance Company
Carmella	Imrie	Dancer	New York Theatre Ballet
Payal	Kadakia	Founder & Artistic Director	The Sa Dance Company
Maureen	Koelsch	Founder	Maureen Koelsch Imaginarium
Phyllis	Lamhut	Founder	Phyllis Lamhut Dance
Alma	Malabanan-McGrath		
Krishna	Marcano		
DJ	McDonald		
Steven	Melendez		
Moira	North	Founder & Artistic Director	The Ice Theatre of New York
Lisa	Parra	Co-Founder	Lana Productions
Benn	Rasmussen		
Sanjiv	Sanghavi	Dancer	The Sa Dance Company
Gus	Solomons, Jr.	Artistic Director and Choreographer	Paradigm
Adrienne	Westwood	Co-Founder	VIA Dance Collaborative

Regrets:

Brittany	Beyer		
Yvonne	Chow		Hip Hop Dance Conservatory at Lehman College
Yasmine	Fequiere		Hip Hop Dance Conservatory at Lehman College
Dana	Fisch	Artistic Director	Undertoe Dance
Badaweyah	Kareem	Noted Belly Dancing Teacher	
Andrew	Nemr	Co-Founder	Tap Legacy Foundation, Inc.
Silas	Riener	Dancer	Merce Cunningham Dance Company
Roberto	Ventura		

Do any of you have a relationship with Dance/NYC? What is it?

- As an artist, Dance/NYC is my “go-to” source. When I have a question, or need a birds-eye view, that’s where I go to get connected to the dance field in New York City.
- I serve on the Dance/NYC Junior Committee and am a dancer and choreographer. When I first moved here, I looked to Dance/NYC for audition postings. Now, it’s a place for research information, getting connected to other service organizations, and getting connected to other junior leaders in neighboring arts genres.
- I agree with those points, and for me, as well, I feel like there’s personal support and a direct connection to me and my art-making: they “see me,” and that’s so important in this big, lost town.
- Dance/NYC was the place I came for information when I moved here eight years ago, and it was a big help as I was starting to navigate the dance world here. Now, for the past three years I’ve served on the Dance/NYC Junior Committee, where I have a much more in-depth connection to the organization and deep connections to people in my field—in my own peer

group of 30 and under, as well as throughout the broader dance community. It's been an opportunity to get my hands dirty a little bit on the big leadership issues as the field has grappled with change.

- I've been a dancer in New York City for a very long time, and have done everything myself—like most of us here. But recently, my company's in a better financial situation—we even have a manager now—and so I actually have time to come to this session and meet Lane and meet some of you colleagues! I was excited to receive the invitation to participate.
- I've been a dancer, choreographer and teacher here for nearly 40 years. It's interesting that Dance/NYC came to New York as a representative of a national organization—which I thought was a really important move—nearly ten years ago. And it's taken all this time, I think, for it to start to have a wonderful New York City-specific identity, which is important. There were two previous directors, and it's interesting to see how the organization has continued to develop and add new layers under each person. For instance, I thought it was really a stroke of genius to establish the Junior Committee—to gather a younger group and give them the information that is *au courant* for their needs today—and for the rest of us to benefit from the dynamics of their energy, excitement and focus. The Junior Committee brings Dance/NYC right into the present moment.
- As one of the principal organizers of the Dance Parade, I try to have cooperative relationships with Dance/NYC, and as a culture writer, I like to connect with the events and the ideas they're promoting—like the mid-season Symposium, which I attended. I use Dance/NYC as a conduit for meeting my fellow artists in a different context than as fellow artists on the stage, or fellow audience members in the seats.
- We are a newly established multicultural dance company. We have no relationship yet, but we are interested to learn more.

How many of you are members of Dance/USA?

4

How many of you have attended a Dance/USA Conference?

6

How is Dance/NYC unique from other service providers in the city?

- It's a conduit to the national dance organization, and a source for information from the national sphere, as well as internationally.
- It's important that there be a service organization that is dance-specific in our city. There are many service organizations that offer a lot of services for the "performing arts in general"—but I think that it's important that we have our own.
- Let's face it: the dance community in New York City is very diverse, and it's a bit like herding cats! But to the extent that anyone can get us to speak with one voice, Dance/NYC can do that work, and it should.
- Dance/NYC is good because it offers opportunities to meet and talk with fellow artists and colleagues. There is so much learning in those gatherings. I liked the mid-season Symposium very much.

Just out of curiosity, how many people here are native New Yorkers?

(Only) 6

What do you think are the challenges unique to being an artist in New York, specifically?

- I was born here and have lived here most of my life, but I moved away for a while, and was really surprised to learn that dancing [elsewhere] doesn't have to be as difficult as it is in New York! Where I realized this most was in Buenos Aires, where the dance community is small and close-knit and supportive. New York City dance has such a wide-ranging field of disciplines that when dance gets bundled into other genres—like "arts in general"—a lot of the nuance is lost. When I was away, I knew everyone in my field [there].
- I think that opportunities and challenges are two sides of the same coin. This is a media center, a fashion center: dancers are exposed to things from all over the world, as well as to a really strong and vibrant homegrown arts community. On the other hand, one of the biggest challenges, in all that, is to be seen and heard. Breaking through to a more general arts and dance audience is also a huge challenge. It's definitely a curse and a blessing to be here.
- I spent time in the Midwest and Minneapolis, and what I experience here in New York is that [aesthetic] lines get drawn really hard and fast. And it's hard to find time to speak with your colleagues outside of rehearsals or specific classes. New York's pressures are constant: we're always racing, always ahead of ourselves all the time. Also, I believe that people here are reluctant to take chances, because you're judged very quickly here, and damned very fast [if you are not good].
- One of the biggest challenges for me is finding the focus and the time to create. There is so much stimulation here—which is also wonderful—but it can be really distracting. Last year, I spent the year in Virginia, and did much better in terms of

creating great work during that period [away]. On another front, I've also noticed a difference in dance audiences from New York City to Winston-Salem and France [- two other places I've spent time]. In those places, the audience was what I might call "people who happened to come to see the performance, and it was dance"—but here, it's "dance lovers and other dancers." As a dance maker, I find that frustrating, because I want to reach general audiences. But I'm not sure how.

- I've made over 100 dances—but only *one* outside of New York! New York City is where I can create. I need the dancers to come to *my room* where I create [in New York]—otherwise the work comes from and to another place.
- I work outside the country, mostly, and it's easiest if it's a residency situation where everyone is there to do that one thing.
- I lived in Chicago for five years before I came here, and found that it was really the opposite of New York—dance is really "nowhere" in Chicago: there are no venues, and no audiences! We were a small, tight-knit community, and we were all very interested in each other—but I felt that I was only eating "one dish" creatively. Plus, we were all "medium-sized fish" in a "small pond"—but here in New York, we're all "plankton" in this "massive ocean!"
- I noticed one thing about making dance on the West Coast, which is that the dancers were always [staged] bigger, and took up more room [physically]. Here, our dances tend to be small; because that's the space we make them in.
- What I've been noticing more recently is the idea of collaboration between artists of different disciplines, which cross-breeds the audiences, because the fans of each medium tend to come to that performance and maybe become fans of the other artforms that are involved. In Europe, people tend to be fans of art [in all its genres]—because [as a culture] they [Europeans] find art [per se] an interesting thing to discuss. Art has intrinsic value. But here in America, the arts only have value to the extent that they are a product to be sold. The making of work [here in the nonprofit sector] is what feeds the field, because the ideas that start out in some loft downtown? They wind up on Broadway. The arts are what they are, and the creative act, the creative process, is unique and important in and of itself. In New York, the opportunity to make work is constant, and I think that organizations like Dance/NYC can help find [artists] the means of support [to keep making the work]. I don't know whether it ever will be "green pastures," but it [life as a creator in New York] needs to be survivable [and Dance/NYC can help].

What are the core program areas most needed by the field in New York?

- This question is similar to the last question: the same things that make it so incredible also make it very difficult. There are so many options, places to go, things to do. For people who are not inclined to go to any dance whatsoever—or who only go to what they know—they don't know enough [about what we do]. Dance/NYC could help those interested people who are on the fence to go choose something different to see—to navigate their choices. Maybe some kind of promotional effort to send people out to see more and different dance.
- The programs that I've found most useful are gatherings like this one, where people are brought together. We don't have enough time to get together—unlike the first time I went to Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, when I suddenly found that we all actually had time to speak to each other! So this kind of gathering, and excursions to different kinds of dance around the city to see dance, would be attractive to me. And the excursions should have a discussion component, where you go out afterwards with a few people and have a few drinks and socialize and talk about the art.
- When I first came to New York, I definitely turned to Dance/NYC as an aggregator of information, and then I sort of lost the organization for a while, once I became hooked into the parts of the community that resonated with me. But now I'm coming back, and looking for that community aggregator function. I'm also championing Dance/NYC as an advocate: we need Dance/NYC as a voice for what the field needs to talk to our City about: real estate, finance, taxes, employment law, visas—those things that affect every one of us, no matter where our creative aesthetic lies.
- I see Dance/NYC as being an introduction [mechanism for people] to the whole dance community. But with only two staffers, is there some way for Dance/NYC to convene a group of volunteer leadership docents from the field to help? For example, if we could define areas where Dance/NYC needs to be an information aggregator, and then find volunteers to take one- or two-year terms leading each area, we [would] constantly develop new leadership for our field while disseminating crucial information. I think it would work.
- Dance/NYC needs doyennes! Dance/NYC has cachet—let's use that to attract donors! I think the information docents idea is terrific—like at the Chamber of Commerce, or MOMA, or the Met. I also think that Dance/NYC should have a group of outreach volunteers who promote what we do in dance to the City, with intelligence and a commitment to volunteerism—so that our political advocacy efforts are not just limited to the extent of two paid staff.

Where do you turn for resources? What service organizations do you use the most?

- The Field was really useful to me when I first moved to New York. I purchased health insurance through Fractured Atlas. The Actors' Fund also does health insurance. I feel very strongly that Dance/NYC must be an advocate for us on the level of policy making—not providing services available elsewhere.

- I've used the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, but for its residencies and for its professional development training programs for artists.
- The Field, for fiscal sponsorship and workshops; Fractured Atlas for insurance. Dance/NYC has directed me to the appropriate other service organization when I have called.
- I've used Career Transition for Dancers.

Other than money and free space, what tools could DNYC provide that would make it easy for you to succeed?

- I think that training help with strategic planning and marketing would be very helpful.
- I agree. I came to New York not knowing the practical stuff: which theatre to rent, or how to get the word out about my performance. I would have loved to be told how to market my show: "Here are the five key places to list your performance," and so on.
- I think Dance/NYC has a role to play in media relations for dance in general: there's a need for a buffer between the media and artists. An impartial but positive voice for the field.
- I'm not sure about Dance/NYC providing professional development, because everyone in this room is at a different point. How can they cover it all? I think it might be more sensible for Dance/NYC to gather information and field examples and case studies that we could all look at, as we work on our own plans and ideas. Aggregate the resources for us. In my case, The Actors' Fund is one of the only places that I've ever seen a "cash flow for artists" training session, and Dance/NYC could direct us to these sorts of programs that already exist and are specific enough for each artist in their own particular point of the professional development journey. They don't have to try to mount the training with only two people on staff.

What does advocacy mean to you in the context of dance? Who does that work now?

- Writing to politicians! It's very important, and I get the nicest letters back!
- For me, it's also this idea of dance docents and dance ambassadors: advocating for the field by educating—by bringing someone you know who may not be interested in dance, but helping them to further their knowledge.
- The Junior Committee seems to be effective at spreading the word.
- Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts is also a useful organization, and maybe they could assign a volunteer attorney to Dance/NYC who could help with political advocacy. They assigned a lawyer to my company who has been with us for a very long time.
- I think that advocating towards politicians and the general public simultaneously is very important. In fact, I think that a lot of the problems the dance community has can probably be solved by people who know how to do those things properly.
- I think of advocacy as grassroots volunteerism—what we do every day, with everyone we know, to promote dance—and as a banding together of our community into a cohesive group with a common voice.
- Yesterday's Dance/NYC e-blast telling us all to attend the Department of Cultural Affairs' public hearings was advocacy, and the other component is all of us [individual artists] having the cachet of *that* name, "*Dance New York City*," in the room, as a voice at the table—at *every* table!

As an artist, do you have needs that are different than managers?

- Yes. I think there is a need for conversations, just like this one, but that deal with artistic issues—because we're always talking about money and space. We don't talk about the art enough. Dance/NYC could provide opportunities for us to share aesthetic ideas with each other in situations convened specifically for that purpose, which would help the level of discourse and understanding about what we're doing as a field.
- For me, I think there's a big gap in mentorship in the city, but I don't know how Dance/NYC could fill that hole. It would be so wonderful as an emerging artist to find an older choreographer who could help me be really rigorous about my work in some kind of long-term way, and maybe help me figure out how to grow my career and form a company
- I'm personally doing that already, and I've noticed that younger artists are starting to realize they need it, and each other, to grow creatively.
- Yes, me too! If some poor soul wanted to start a company now, I have a whole list of the "do's and don'ts!" I bet a lot of us could write about them and share that information via Dance/NYC—sort of a "Lessons Learned" file online.
- When you talk about aesthetics, you raise a good point: I see so many of us making that choice to talk about our art in a business context—but that doesn't fulfill the greater question of what art is and means in our lives. That's where inter-generational mentorship and collegial work is really important.
- But remember that different organizations are already trying to address these same issues. I believe that Dance/NYC doesn't need to create new programs, so much as make us all aware of where these services already exist.

Would you be interested in a membership model for DNYC? What would that mean for you?

- I wouldn't, because I have no money—although I am interested in opportunities like this one, for all of us to meet in person. There is value in forums where people can be connected to other people in person, not online.
- Yes, all the [other] service organizations are very active and [they all] have membership programs. There's also the idea of a volunteer help desk phone where questions could be referred to or answered. As regards introducing membership, Dance/NYC is in a funny position because it's part of a national organization, Dance/USA, and to belong to Dance/USA, you already pay a membership—I think that this financial relationship needs to be cleaned up a little bit [first], and then the question becomes, what does membership of Dance/NYC offer on a good, healthy scale that's different from anything else that's around? I suspect that when you finish all these Community Conversations, you'll have a list of ideas that will define Dance/NYC as being different in some way or other, and once that's clarified, and the mission statement is [newly] clear and pertinent, then you'll have a good case for introducing a membership program.
- I think you could take the public broadcasting model and adapt very effectively: lots of people listen to public radio, but only 10% are members—but it's the "right" 10%. If the purpose of a membership program is to gain financial support for the organization, perhaps the artists whom Dance/NYC serves are not always in a position to support it financially—but there are lots of other wealthy people who support the idea of a strong dance community in New York City, and who are in a position to support Dance/NYC. To do this, I think you'd need to clearly enunciate the value and services that Dance/NYC provides to the whole field, and then invite "sustaining members"—just like in public radio. The argument should be that "what's important is that Dance/NYC and its services exist for the dance community as a whole—free services for all." And then, like public radio, you can invite those people who can give, to give. It works for public radio; it can work for dance.
- I'm worried that a membership program would exclude colleagues with whom I also want to speak to. I want all of to be at the table, regardless of our financial ability.
- On the other hand, with the other service organizations, like Fractured Atlas, you do need to become a financial member to access the crucial services, like insurance. Dance/NYC could do the same thing, but preserve the "town hall" spirit of this meeting today by continuing to hold free, open, in-person gatherings for the field.

What is the ideal program mix for Dance/NYC?

- I think it's got to be the most comprehensive resource for dance and dancers in New York City—the one place to go where the information has all been vetted and is an objective resource whose recommendations you can trust. A place you can go to get answers and advice for the problems you have.
- I think it needs to be the spearhead of our field's advocacy with the political community, and also with the greater financial and funding community. Dance/NYC should be the voice of authority speaking for us all.
- Dance/NYC could also advocate with the education community, because New York City public school all need to competitively attract a population to their schools now. Remember, if we get to the kids, we get to the community of the future. There must be something Dance/NYC can do to help in education.

What is the value of Dance/NYC undertaking research into the dance field in New York City?

- To me, the purpose of the research is to be able to do advocacy with the findings.
- Yes, we were at a meeting at another service organization, talking about how Dance/NYC and others could help disseminate the findings of one of our studies. Lane was there as an advocate for the dance community in that discussion.
- I think research also includes aggregating and disseminating the best practices that are occurring in the field, and providing research and examples for the rest of us to study. Lane could write editorials or a blog, and upload materials to the website. There are websites like "Tech Crunch" for entrepreneurs to check every day: this could be the dance world's equivalent!

How many of you use the Dance/NYC website?

All

Talk to us about the Dance/NYC website:

- I've been concerned recently that the calendar of events used to be super-comprehensive, but now it's not.
- Yes, I wish the calendar were more comprehensive. I would like to look in one place for all that's going on.
- Isn't it something that we all submit our own stuff to? So if it's not there, it's because an artist hasn't submitted it? I don't think the staff updates it.
- Do people realize that they can submit? Is Dance/NYC constantly inviting us to participate? Perhaps it could go on the bottom of every e-blast or something.
- I use it all the time, and I read the whole thing!

- Also, I'm not sure what this would look like—but as these research initiatives begin to be more important, perhaps snapshots or summaries of research projects could be posted there; it might become a place of education for people in the field and outside to find information and facts.
- The website right now feels to me like a site for the dance enthusiast and audience member—but if the mission of Dance/NYC shifts more towards advocacy in future, then I'd imagine the focus of the site and the home page content would be very different.
- I almost never reach the site directly [by opening a web browser]—I navigate to it by clicking on the e-blast email links that interest me. The e-blasts are an important tool for reaching site content of interest.

Promotion, information, communication: how do you like to be reached? How should DNYC communicate with you?

- I'd like one email per week that basically lists everything I need to know about dance in New York for the coming week.
- You might consider adding an invitation to submit calendar listings on the bottom of every email.
- I think it takes a lot of effort to administer a company website, compared to what you get back from it: what about the hidden power of Facebook and Google? Is it possible to make partnerships with them? For instance, on Facebook, you can design your own page and they track all the people that "like" your organization. Is there some way we can tap into those people? And their friends?

Do you have any other general comments for us to consider?

- Yes, I have two ideas. First, I was thinking about the Dance/USA conference, and the way they deal with the diversity of their constituents: they put them into councils of people who are doing similar jobs and the fellow council members serve as a year-round body and resource network. It's a good model for how Dance/NYC could form convenings without a lot of work. Secondly, I think a dance wiki on the web could be good, as a way for Dance/NYC to be an aggregator of information without necessarily having to write it.
- I want to stress again that what we need from Dance/NYC is advocacy, on things like workers' compensation, which is a big issue, and getting bigger.
- I won a workers' compensation lawsuit; talk to me.
- Professional development and education about business models in the field are related to advocacy for the field. That's because we don't understand our rights, and we like to live "off the grid" as creative people. There's a huge lack of education about business models, legal obligations, finance. Dancers don't know how to fight for themselves. We all say "I don't want to deal with this; I want to do my art!" – but then we want to form a nonprofit, raise money, and tour. Those are business issues, and you need to understand them. You have to be really savvy if you want to succeed.
- You also have to know all the rules. We have a lawyer who is our accountant as well. He makes us follow the rules. Every person who dances with us is a W2. A lot of larger companies don't do that, but we do. It's expensive, actually—but he won't let us skirt the edges. He's a good guy.

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