

DANCE/NYC COMMUNITY CONVERSATION # 1: SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

9:00-11:00 AM

Thursday May 26, 2011

Mertz Gilmore Foundation, New York

Attendees:

Jen	Abrams	Co-Founder	<i>OurGoods.org, a barter network for creative people</i>
Robert	Abrams	Founder	Dance Critics' Association
Emily	Bass	Marketing & Events Coordinator	Broadway Dance Center
Jodi	Bender	Finance Manager	Danspace Projects
Julian	Christenberry	Director of Ticket Programs	TDF: Theatre Development Fund
Eugenie	Cowan	Founder & Director	Exploring the Metropolis
Tim	Cynova	Deputy Director	Fractured Atlas
Jacqueline	Davis	Executive Director	New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
Stephanie	Dockery	<i>Emerging Leaders in New York Arts</i> Coordinator	Arts & Business Council of New York
Wiley	Hausam	Executive Director	Performing Arts Center at Purchase College
Jonathan	Hollander	President & Artistic Director	Battery Dance/Lower Manhattan Arts League
David	Johnston	Associate Director	Exploring the Metropolis
J.J.	Lind	Director of External Affairs	New York Live Arts
Virginia	Louloudes	Executive Director	A.R.T./NY
Tasha	Norman	Organizer	National Dance Week New York
Christy	Park	Executive Director	Dance Films Association
Catherine	Peila	Executive & Artistic Director	DNA: Dance New Amsterdam
Kaylen	Ratto	Gala Coordinator	Career Transition for Dancers
Charles	Rice-Gonzalez	Executive Director	B.A.A.D./ Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance
Mark	Rossier	Deputy Director	New York Foundation for the Arts
Ivan	Sygoda	Director	Pentacle
Will M.	Weiss	Executive Director	Arts & Business Council of New York
Rebecca	Wender	Director of Operations	Movement Research
Jennifer	Wright Cook	Founder	The Field

Regrets:

Anne	Coates	Vice President	Alliance for the Arts
Nicole Ajahi	Adams	Director of Development	Career Transition for Dancers
Sarah A.O.	Rosner	Founder & Director	A. O. Collective - Dance Theatre Workshop

There were 25 attendees from 23 organizations in attendance. The meeting convened at 9:10 AM. Dance/NYC Director Lane Harwell welcomed those present and introduced Emma Dunch and Andrea Sholler of Dunch Arts, LLC, who gave brief opening remarks.

How many of your organizations receive more than 50% of your budget from contributed income?

A: 12 organizations

How many of your organizations have a membership structure that contributes to earned income?

A: 10 organizations

How many of your organizations charge for programs and consultancies?

A: 13 organizations

For those of you with a dance focus, are there issues that you believe are unique to dance and/or to dance in New York City, specifically? (topics regrouped by area here)

- **SPACE:** having to use facilities with a specific professional sprung-floor setup. It's difficult to find space and competitive to get it.
- **AUDIENCES:** Someone once said, "If the public won't come, nothing will stop them." Our problem isn't people who want to *make* dance; it's that we haven't really built an audience of people who want to *see* dance. It's an opportunity for New York specifically: because of the concentration of people and audiences and dancers here, I feel that we have more opportunities to solve this audience puzzle here in New York than anywhere else.
- **AUDIENCES:** I think there is a distinction between people who are social dancers and who dance casually (swing, salsa) to go and see ballet and modern – and, on the flip side, getting those in the audiences for the latter to go take dance lessons themselves. I believe that if we can get people experiencing dance in both these ways, their commitments to dance overall will be much stronger. How do we get more people dancing?
- **AUDIENCES:** In New York City, there is an overabundance of supply: dancers just keep coming here, despite the fact that the services and support structures keeps eroding. Our town is packed with dancers, but with no audience, no funding, no rehearsal space, and not enough opportunity to show the work.
- **CAREER TRANSITION:** A unique issue is the short professional life span of a dancer, and the transitions that happen – the whole emotional impact of that is a big issue in dance. The fact is, there is only a finite amount of time for us to do what we do – just like professional athletes – and then we need a new life plan.
- **CAREER TRANSITION:** Yes, and in New York City, dancers often lack formal education, depending on their genre, so when they're looking at life transition, they don't have the financial savings to get the training they need to make that transition—and then the cost of living in New York is prohibitive to making that transition an easy one.
- **FUNDING PRESSURE:** Over the last three years, there has been a significant drop in dance funding, and with that, such pressure to fight for survival. If you decide that you're going to fight to survive, it means that you have to commit to radical restructuring everything you knew, and it's really hard. It's hard to see how exactly to do that, but at the same time, it's very expensive to get outside consultants in to help you downsize, tell you how to do things differently, how to cut things, how to get your staff to do two jobs, instead of one. I think that Dance/NYC could help us with executive coaching, and help us be coaches and consultants to each other, to be able to guide people and help them figure out how to think completely outside the box in this new environment.
- **FUNDING PRESSURE:** Particularly in this recession, the drop-out in funding for mid-career choreographers is dramatic. As a service organization, we simply no longer receive that re-granting money, and so we've had to weed out those mid-career people altogether, and focus only on emerging artists. It's awful!
- **REGULATION:** Does anyone here realize that the New York State Depts. of Labor and Taxation-Finance have recently joined the Worker's Compensation Board to create a joint task force on labor law enforcement? And that they're going industry by industry and are currently reviewing "Entertainment," including the New York City dance community? They do not understand what we do; we need to find organized ways to inform them and advocate for ourselves; we need to educate all levels of this regulatory community about legal and labor issues—making sure that they understand what non-profits are, and the situation we're in—but also helping our own organizations, making sure that we are all in compliance, because the fines are very stiff. It's a big problem.
- **REGULATION:** The previous Director of Dance/NYC was tackling labor issues, and I was grateful that someone was doing it: whatever happened to that?
- **REGULATION:** Yes, we got into some labor hot water and had to put tons of part-timers on as our employees. It has created huge tax hassles for us, as well as expenses.
- **HEALTH INSURANCE:** We need it!
- **DISTANCE FROM MANHATTAN:** One issue that's particular to New York City dance is the distance that we all have to live from Manhattan. We're all out in far-flung areas of the Bronx and Brooklyn – because that's where we can afford to live – and commuting here is expensive. I would think solutions and convening opportunities that are borough-specific would be an excellent service of Dance/NYC.

- **UNIONS:** I'm always interested in how unions hinder or help the dance world. How do we help dancers to feel empowered to talk directly to choreographers about financials? How can we learn from the advocacy of the theatre community? I feel like the dance community is the ugly stepchild: we're not nearly as loud, pushy, or aggressive as the theatre community is.
- **IMMIGRANT CULTURES:** In addition to us coming the New York City to be dancers, we also have the largest metropolitan population of immigrants. I can't think of any ethnic culture that doesn't have dance in its culture. How do we tap into dance, in all its forms, being a human unifier? It can bring us all together across cultures: what shall we do with that opportunity? How can it strengthen the whole community?
- **COLLABORATION:** My personal opinion is that choreographers don't work together! They won't! Ever!

Does your organization currently have a relationship with Dance/NYC? If so, how?

- We used to: we worked with the previous director and were trying to identify a way to make Dance/NYC the "home for dance," the entity to connect with the find all the answers, the place to get your problems solved.
- We used to: we used it for marketing exchange: we used to send a lot of clients there for business planning services, for fiscal sponsorships—and, of course, for social drinks!
- We're involved now, as co-producers of the Dance Wave: Dance, College and Beyond college fair; I myself am a Dance/NYC Junior Committee member and we're working on the Work Force Census now.
- We use the website to post and find classes, auditions, workshops.
- We offer our programs free if you are a Dance/USA member, and we've pushed Dance/NYC learning content to our online teaching portal.
- We've collaborated on advocacy for city and state funding; right now, we're partnering on lobbying for a real estate tax abatement for performing arts organizations that have space.
- We've used their space for meetings and we've posted our information to its website. We get a lot of calls looking for classes, and we have the local information for our borough, but we refer other people on to Dance/NYC and now, of course, they also have the Bessies.
- We run an affiliate discount program: if you're a member of a Dance/USA affiliate, you can get a reduced registration price to our national conference.
- I've attended workshops there and participated in the Work Force Census effort of the Junior Committee.
- We use their website and send people to it; we've used Dance/NYC to convene meetings.
- Dance/NYC used to convene service organizations once a month—it was useful to me; I wish they'd restart that. They also loan out equipment like video projectors.
- We used to have a history of information-sharing with Dance/NYC, dating back to the early days—things like rehearsal space studies and the original Dance Industry Census back in 2004.
- We were a featured speaker at Dance/NYC's Winter Symposium, which I thought was a fantastic event.

Bearing in mind that Dance/NYC currently only has a staff of two people: what is the single *most important* role that the organization can play?

- Its power to convene is its greatest usefulness. This room we're in right now is a very precious resource.
- Political advocacy is really important. We don't have a voice.
- The role of clearinghouse for information: for example, they used to produce a funding calendar laying out everything you could possibly apply for – that was really useful for all of us in smaller shops without access to those databases. I don't think anyone does that anymore; it just "went away." Rather than replicating everyone else's work, maybe it can serve up new things for us.
- I think the importance of having a fresh leader with energy, a public profile, and the willingness to reach out, is incredibly important. For a number of years after Bob Yesselman departed, my organization just didn't have any

relationship at all to Dance/NYC. But Lane Harwell got on the job and just marched right in to my office and asked how we should work together. He's really out there being energetic and getting the conversation going. He's fantastic.

- I'd like to emphasize the advocacy part: in other fields, there are efforts and organizing bodies to have us go present to legislators, etc. Dance/NYC should help us to organize ourselves, because the whole field would be served if we could do so.
- I think that with this grant, Dance/NYC should be requesting more money. I don't know about you, but I seem to see Lane everywhere: he's constantly charming, and he's always smiling, and he's never tired—but he will burn out. Two people just can't do it. This community needs more than two people advocating for it. This foundation should be giving another capacity grant and spearheading other funders to do that as well, without taking away funding from other companies, so that Dance/NYC can grow and truly serve the field moving forward.
- Yes, for us it's definitely about the advocacy—and Lane's the energizer bunny—and Lacey, who's held the organization together through some tough times—she's also critical, because she makes it possible for Lane to be out there! So where is the funding for this effort? What is Dance USA's role as the mother ship for this? If New York City truly is the "dance capital of the world," where is the funding from the mother ship for that? Why are there only two staff?
- Those are good questions, all. But as long as there are only two staff, Dance/NYC has to make sure it is focused: pick 1-2 things, and do them really, really well, and make public strides that are noticeable. Rather than try to plug lots of little holes. Keeping focused is really the key, because it will help the organization achieve some public progress that both funders and constituents will notice.
- I believe that advocacy and convening seem to be emerging as those dominant 1-2 areas.

Does your organization currently have a relationship with Dance/USA?

A: 6 organizations.

If so, how do you perceive the relationship between Dance/USA and Dance/NYC?

- It seems to me that at the very beginning, Dance/USA was doing a lot of good stuff for us, including providing multi-year funding for some major field-wide efforts. But somewhere along the line, the equation changed: instead of "What can we do for dance in New York?" it became "What revenue can we raise from dance in New York?" I believe that Dance/NYC needs to be unleashed, and it can't do that unless it separates itself from Dance/USA.
- I agree with that. If we're all saying how important the dance community in New York City is, then it deserves more than something that is a mere program of a national organization. It seems completely unsustainable, and I'm shocked that it's continued this long. I'm glad we're having this meeting. Dance/NYC needs to do its own fundraising and have its own Board.
- At the same time, it needs to have sufficient funding to do that. If the financial support isn't there, don't separate.

Dance/USA has a membership base and Dance/NYC currently does not. Should Dance/NYC have a membership base? What do you think people would get out of a membership to Dance/NYC?

10 are membership-based.

- For our sector, it was about providing membership and services to a group not served by our national entity. Their membership dues are \$750 and our average is \$150. But for Dance/NYC, I don't believe it should be "either/or." Maybe the smartest thing is mutual discounting, where the member of Dance/USA gets a discount membership to Dance/NYC, and vice-versa.
- If advocacy is going to be the most important priority—which I think it should be—then a firm link to DC is useful. Perhaps a *closer* collaboration between the two organizations is the way to go, to place a real focus on

- this [advocacy] piece. As a national field, we need that advocacy, and so that argues for a singular purpose and a tight connection between the two organizations. Related, I think Lane can do that work locally with only two people, if that's the goal: he could set up a regular annual calendar with City officials, State legislators, and national representatives—dancers have to understand that they all have to come together: we need not 5, but 500, people in the room to meet and overwhelm Senator Chuck Schumer on a regular schedule. We have to represent our size, scale, and reach, and Dance/NYC could be critical in that galvanizing effort.
- For me, a big part of the issue is a mismatch of missions. I'm a departing Dance/USA member, because I've been struggling with a way to have Dance/USA feel relevant to my world—the world of individual choreographers and small dance companies. I've been to the conference, and I understand that the focus of Dance/USA really has to be on the large, national companies—that's important. But Dance/USA doesn't understand how to advocate for people at my level, and I feel there's a large area of mission *non*-overlap between Dance/USA and Dance/NYC. To the limited extent that the two organizations' missions can overlap, the alliance is great, but mostly, I feel it's just a hindrance to Dance/NYC's local efforts for us.
 - I think that if you adopt a membership model, you need to be really careful. I've seen some regional dance service organizations listen to a cacophony of individual member priorities and go under trying to satisfy all their member-masters. If Lane is going to be subject to intense "member pressure," none of us want that, and it doesn't help our field.
 - One thing we've noticed in our own strategic analysis is that we think the advocacy and the member services are "of a piece." The services create a feeling of connection to the organization, which engages the individuals to participate in the advocacy. But people won't necessarily pay the fees "just" to be advocated for. You need more than that. Also, there is already a lot of replication of services in the field: rather than inventing new services for members, can Dance/NYC just serve as a partnership organization, instead? Where, perhaps, if you have a membership of Dance/NYC, you can get a discount on the excellent fundraising training courses over at another service provider, or you can get fiscal sponsorship through another service organization, etc.?
 - For us artists already living in poverty, there's a lot of skepticism and resistance to an organization that opens itself up as a membership organization right off the bat. There has to be a really distinct benefit visible. It would be better to advocate first, and demonstrate value for small organizations not represented by Dance/USA, and then invite us to become members of something that works and demonstrates value.
 - Our organization is also looking at a membership model, to build a community of dancers who are advocates for us, specifically. I think it makes sense for Dance/NYC to stay connected to Dance/USA—but only if Dance/NYC can do its own fundraising and control the money and how it is spent on services for dancers and the field *in this city*.
 - In our sector, what our organization did was search for the constituencies that other organizations were *not* serving, and we settled upon our mission "slice" that way. And now, when people come to me with their pet issue, I tell them "Don't join if you only have this one priority. We don't do that, and we can't support your issue. But *do* join if you realize that if our chosen efforts *are* successful, you will benefit, and we all will."

How *isn't* the New York City dance community being served? Where is a hole that could be filled?

- Midcareer artists who have been practicing their craft and doing seasons in New York City for 10+ years. This seems to be one area where people are underserved.
- What I hear is that the traditional 501(c)(3) model is failing single-choreographer companies. I hear this over and over again. If you look at the theater sector, the artistic directors there are [also the] lead arts administrators. But choreographers tend to work more on their own, and they focus on innovation and flexible structures. There are a lot of services available to young artists to become administrators or learn those technical assistance skills in other sectors, but there isn't this same structure for dance. Maybe that's what we need for our field.
- I think, if you want to understand Dance/USA, think of it as a trade association for dance companies. That makes sense to me—and every national industry needs its trade organization. But locally, for the very diverse New York City dance field, do we have to balance being at the one end, a trade organization for small, non-represented dance organizations, and at the other end, being a voice for all the "crazy voices?"
- So we have identified advocacy, mid-career artists, and how to structure their organizations. What else?

- Helping choreographers develop their work. In the theater, the process “from page to stage” is almost natural. But choreographers who are working on their own need the organized forums and the interaction opportunities.
- I would say advocacy, defined in terms of a “sense of identity.” We’re a very bootleg discipline; most of us work outside almost any organized structure. We have to do it all ourselves, and we don’t connect with each other. This field does a good job of serving the needs of us do-it-yourself bootleggers, but what’s missing is a sense of shared identity for us. Dance/NYC could help develop or promote or legitimize that.

Are there other service organization models that you think are relevant?

- The Chester Group of artists who empowered themselves in Chester Springs, PA. It was very powerful. They would gather to share discussions, show works. I picture Dance/NYC facilitating something like this. People paid to go to it.
- I feel really mixed about our group service provision, because we all constantly pass our efforts around—the cultural mapping, strategic planning, the workforce census, the research, the classes. What exactly is the definition of necessary?
- I’ve funded some dance companies who have been short for programming purposes, and then I get flooded with other applicants, so I’ve ended up contacting a lot of my friends who have no problems funding dance companies, but no one ever asks them to. Maybe Dance/NYC can create a program or outreach for individuals who are interested in supporting dance or commissioning new works.
- Yes, Meet the Composer has a national music commissioning program aimed at the general public and it tells individuals exactly how to commission new works. There is a handbook. It’s been very successful.
- And let’s talk about the whole rise of www.Kickstarter.com: on one level, it’s really great, but on another, it’s so detrimental in that it’s a bunch of poor dancers just donating money to each other, and then Amazon.com makes a profit, because they run that program online. Can Dance/NYC provide a facilitator in our own community who can help us find financial resources and be our funding champion?
- Organizations merge because there is a lot of “sameness” between their service offerings. But I don’t see this with Dance/NYC. It’s more about showing the leadership and finding the right issues to fight and advocate for. And about the membership issue, why would we do that? We’d just have to hire people to manage the program. Is it worth it?
- The minute I hear words like membership and merger: those are homogenizing frameworks and we all lose a lot if we’re forced into those boxes by our funders. We should resist it all.

Thank you all! Any closing comments or remarks?

- I think Lane Harwell is excellent and he should be here in person with us to join the discussion.
- I expected to be here today with the 4-5 “usual suspects.” I’m thrilled that all the sessions are sold out, and also that there are so many new faces whom I’ve never met.
- That’s very true: everyone’s coming here because we’re very interested in the future viability of this organization, no matter what form it’s in. thank you for leading the discussion and I hope there are more of them.

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