

Eavesdropping on Dance Dialogues

By ROMALYN TILGHMAN

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN dance professionals convene in three focus groups, in three different parts of the country, to talk about dance, with no set agenda except an open and honest dialogue about the state of the field? The conversation is provocative, creative, insightful, often contradictory, and always stimulating.

The three discussions—in Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco—were lively and notably broad in

perspective and subject matter. Content varied somewhat from region to region, but together participants portrayed a field in flux, searching for new paradigms in the way business is done, as well as new expressions in the work itself. Although people expressed frustration at the lack of resources, they also had extended conversations about innovation and artist-driven solutions to new and chronic problems. Participants described a field that is on one hand vibrant,

Dance Dialogues

In the fall of 2006, DANCE/USA was contracted by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to conduct a series of "Dance Dialogues," at three sites across the country. The intent was to explore current issues pertaining to the dance field in the United States today. Twenty participants were invited at each of three sites, representing a wide range of perspectives—among genres, ages, ethnic backgrounds, professional involvement, and geographic bases. They were members and non-members of DANCE/USA, old and new to the field.

The sessions took place in Philadelphia (October 23), Chicago (November 6), and San Francisco

(November 10). Cynthia Mayeda, currently deputy director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and formerly acting director of the NEA Dance Program, served as the facilitator. Romalyn Tilghman, veteran arts management consultant and writer, documented the sessions. Ben Cameron, arts program director at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and DANCE/USA staff members observed.

Participants were encouraged to describe the dance field as they perceived it, allowing for the widest range of topics to emerge. In general, the conversations covered categories originally outlined by DANCE/USA, including:

- ▶ Perception of the current state of affairs

- ▶ Chronic issues/changing issues (such as audience building, career transition and maintenance, dance writing/media opportunities)
- ▶ Role of dance organizations in their communities
- ▶ Touring issues (both domestic and international)
- ▶ Development of new work
- ▶ Balancing institutional, organizational, and artistic needs
- ▶ Opportunities for dance artists, companies, and the field

DANCE/USA would like to thank the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation for this invaluable opportunity to promote dialogue in the dance field.

artist-centric, diversified, resilient, and collaborative and on the other facing chronic issues of under-capitalization, under-compensation, and competition with commercial/entertainment dance.

In many cases, there was a healthy diversity of opinion and, often, downright disagreement. A sense of optimism and love of the art permeated the gatherings even as participants described daunting challenges.

The objective was not to reach consensus, nor was it to set directions for the field—only to bring perspectives and insights to the table for discussion. Therefore, this summary may provide a starting point for more discussion still.

The Dance Itself

A wealth of creativity is emerging. There is consensus on this one essential point. There are enormous numbers of talented dance artists representing a wide diversity of work. Dance in this country was once categorized as “ballet,” “modern,” and “other,” but there is now recognition of both the importance of diversity and the frequent blurring of boundaries between forms that were previously viewed as unambiguously different. Dance programs now feature culturally specific work from around the world, jazz, tap, hip-hop, aerial/circus, and other forms—traditional and contemporary, authentic and hybrid—as well as dance forms more traditionally presented in the past. The diversity of forms leads to the creation of yet more forms, as artists explore, cross over, fuse, morph, and collaborate. Dancers are collaborating not only with each other, but also with fashion designers, DJs, musicians, photographers, videographers, and others. Training opportunities for dancers are seen as plentiful and strong, both at academic institutions and at schools of dance run by companies. All of these factors contribute to exciting aesthetic developments in the field—a field participants characterized as “artistically vibrant,” “experiencing a renaissance,” and featuring “a rich array of voices.”

The Audience

Patterns of attendance are changing. Audience members are buying tickets later, often online, resisting added ticketing charges, and noticeably changing their preference for the times of the week when they see work. (In some parts of the country, it's easier to sell tickets on Monday than Friday and at least one company is considering dropping its Friday night

performances.) Limited runs of a single weekend make it difficult to attract audiences through word-of-mouth or from reviews.

Different dance forms present different challenges. Ethnic and world dance artists often have ‘built in’ audiences within their communities, which is an advantage in providing performance opportunities but sometimes acts as an isolating factor by separating these genres from the rest of the dance community. For ballet companies and mature modern companies, audiences are getting older; dance artists are trying to find new ways to attract an audience with as much knowledge and passion as audiences in the past. Artists and producers of tap, hip-hop, and world dance forms would like to attract crossover dance audiences.

Participants perceive a lack of education among audience members, which they attribute to a dearth of arts education in the schools. There is an increased desire of core audience members to know more, and companies are using web communications and “talk-backs” to deepen their relationships. Some presenters and dance artists have been successful at expanding their base of committed audiences by deepening their knowledge and appreciation of the work through multiple encounters, pre- and post-performance opportunities for conversations, and/or email exchanges. However, people noted these efforts require increased time, attention, staff, and other administrative resources that can overburden companies and presenters.

Dancemakers are also developing new collaborative efforts with non-dance organizations in their communities. One used a children's choir in its *Nutcracker* production; another is producing a commercial to raise awareness about HIV-AIDS; others are artists-in-residence at art museums. Chicago now has 12 companies in residence in 12 city park districts. One Chicago company offers 50 percent of the ticket sales to any nonprofit organization in the city that sells tickets to its performance. In San Diego and San Francisco, annual “Trolley Dances” put dancers at trolley stops to encourage hundreds of people to see new work. In Washington, DC, the major ballet company shares space with the Boys and Girls clubs. A Los Angeles dance company that owns its own space delights in housing a church group that sees dance as a form of religious expression. As the executive director said, “The more we can do this, the more we can combat the isolation.” In San Diego, a presenter is using a neighborhood bar to produce “Ten Tiny

ers don't really have a system; the issue is they don't have an appropriate space [or the] appropriate sort of mechanism to do something with smaller and mid-sized companies. We don't see enough crashing and burning. There's nothing wrong with seeing work performed when it's not ready." Some participants believe there is a trend to separate presenters from the academic structure in universities, which is seen as detrimental to a broad view of dance. They also see presenters being called "CEOs" and believe presenters are experiencing greater pressure to meet bottom-line expectations rather than develop mechanisms for academic and/or aesthetic exploration.

Many dancemakers look with envy to the theater field, where plays are put up for extended periods. Even Broadway shows enjoy out-of-town "tryouts" to gauge audience reactions in a situation where the stakes aren't so high. As one artistic director articulated, "In the dance world, you perform for the reviewer the first day. I wish we had more time after the creative time and could fix things after a public reaction, correct what went sour."

There are an increasing number of venues for the performing arts, but they don't necessarily present more dance, and there may also be competition from the Internet and television, which allow dance enthusiasts to bypass the live experience. Given the increased competition for audiences, dancemakers are conflicted about whether to make work that will appeal to an audience or work that seems important to do.

Marketing/Promotion/Criticism

The ways dance must be marketed are changing dramatically as audiences are changing and the media are changing. There is a great need for marketing studies as patterns shift. Participants are exploring new ways of reaching both presenters and their own audiences for self-produced performances.

There is increased use of the Internet to market the work, to both audiences and presenters, but no one believes web capacity has been reached. The artistic director of a jazz tap company provided the example of being booked directly off her webpage by a European jazz festival to which she never expected to gain access. Those in Chicago cite SeeChicagoDance.com as an innovative website that provides hot deals every Thursday and provides a mechanism for offering free tickets if a company needs to paper its house. In short, the Internet offers unrealized resources.

"I've not felt impoverished in terms of my imagination. That is the most valuable thing to me."

The demise of dance criticism is seen as a huge blow to the field. Newspapers are reducing the number of critics, often using one critic to review several art forms. This, coupled with lack of arts education in the schools, inaccessibility of historically relevant dance history, and decline of dance on television (e.g., *Great Performances*, *Dance in America*) has resulted in decreasing dance literacy. Dancers and choreographers hunger for enlightened critical conversation and a way for audiences to enhance their understanding. In some communities, previews and blogs play an important part in informing audience members about the work; companies are attempting to explore new mechanisms such as YouTube and MySpace.

Infrastructure

Artists are creating new organizational models, often out of necessity—presenting themselves and each other, sharing venues and programs, performing at clubs and parks, collaborating on work, exploring organizational models beyond the 501(c)3, and developing extensive education programs. Most of the innovation in developing new business paradigms is artist-driven. As an artistic director said, "There's a trend of artist-run organizations developing through necessity. Artists are just taking the reins and creating what they need. It's positive and negative. It's all that much more difficult. At the same time, we're creating new models. We're finding new ways to make things happen, make work happen." Although there is acknowledgement that this has led to creative new models, there is also frustration at the amount of time it takes to accomplish tasks from booking to marketing to "cleaning the toilet." And, although there is a sense among some that "dance has always been artist-driven," there is concern that "some of the best artistically is not surviving."

There is a call for increased leadership throughout the field to support dance—including among dance

recognition that "works that come with people who work with the same people every day is richer than work that comes from a choreographer who comes in for one dance." Some of the best dancers are lost to the commercial and entertainment dance worlds of Broadway, theme parks, rock stars, and music videos. In general, those who work in the nonprofit dance field are over-extended and inadequately compensated.

"Artists who are driving their own companies may not be the best leaders for their organizations.... We're heroes at making this happen, but I'm not sure this is what the field needs."

Participants worry about work in danger of being lost, whether through the death of an important choreographer or the fragility or demise of a company. "Martha Graham and Erick Hawkins are gone," said one dance artist. An executive director said, "In dance, you see companies that are always on the brink of going out of business, like Dance Theatre of Harlem. Across the country, you see companies start, then go out of business because it's just too hard. There is not enough support, financial support." An experienced ballet manager lamented the passing of companies with illustrious histories. "Oakland Ballet was a tragedy to lose; it had one of the great repertoires. Cleveland Ballet has gone under. Ohio Ballet has closed shop. The rep is what matters. The loss of work worries me a lot."

There is a sense of polarization within the dance field itself. One described the field as being made up of "large and successful and small and struggling and not much in-between." Another described it as "those with endowments and those without." There is still a feeling among some of a schism between ballet and modern worlds, while others are clear about the interdependence of all and believe the field has opened up to include diversity of movement in all forms.

There is a perception among dancemakers that there's confusion among funders and the general public "about where dance is right now." As one participant said, "They lack the ability to assess what dance is doing. They're very reluctant to get involved, to invest long-term in organizations, not for lack of interest but because program officers don't understand the levels of quality or how to assess those levels. There's a lot of confusion about what constitutes good dance and how to create the benchmarks."

There is acknowledgement that there will never be enough resources, because dancemakers will always have bigger dreams. As one artist-manager said, "It's a constant. If we had more money, we'd find ways to make bigger, better work; then we wouldn't have money any more." There is a growing entrepreneurial spirit and increased interest in finding new ways to support the work, especially among young dancemakers. Participants cite the participatory nature of the art form and "the innate human desire to move" as reasons for the resilience of the dance field, which faces chronic, constant issues of inadequate resources of time, space, and money to commission, rehearse, and present new work. One established choreographer said, "I've not felt impoverished in terms of my imagination. That is the most valuable thing to me. Even the challenges and difficulties become fertilizer for the imagination, so you become inventive."

Needs of the Field

► **OPERATING SUPPORT** is listed as the number one priority among participants. They would like to see grant ranges become larger and more meaningful and to move beyond one-year funding cycles. They mention grants of \$50,000 and larger generated from new sources of funding, and new earned income streams. One participant expressed the belief that there is reliable local funding support in only about 15 cities in the country, even though reliable funding should be available in 50 cities. As one manager put it, "We need to think in terms of sustainability. We are now seeing some of the work begin to collapse. You can only survive so long on a project-to-project basis."

► **HEALTH CARE** is also rated highly as a priority. Participants call for a National Health Plan for artists.

► **COMMISSIONING SUPPORT AND FELLOWSHIPS** for choreographers are important in developing new work, and equally important across the broad

PHILADELPHIA DIALOGUES

- ▶ **LARUE ALLEN**, executive director, Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, New York, NY
- ▶ **ARTHUR AVILES**, artistic director, Aviles Typical Theatre, New York, NY
- ▶ **CAROLELINDA DICKEY**, consultant, Pittsburgh, PA
- ▶ **RANDAL FIPPINGER**, executive director, José Limón Dance Foundation, New York, NY
- ▶ **ROKO KAWAI**, independent choreographer, Philadelphia, PA
- ▶ **SHARON LUCKMAN**, executive director, Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, New York, NY
- ▶ **GRAHAM LUSTIG**, artistic director, American Repertory Ballet, New Brunswick, NJ
- ▶ **KEN MALDONADO**, director, Zia Artists-Gotham Arts Exchange, Inc., New York, NY
- ▶ **RACHEL MOORE**, executive director, American Ballet Theatre, New York, NY
- ▶ **CARLA PERLO**, founder/executive director, DancePlace, Washington, DC
- ▶ **CARLOTA SANTANA**, artistic director/founder, Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana, Bahama, NC
- ▶ **MERIÁN SOTO**, artistic director/co-founder, Papatíán, Bronx, NY
- ▶ **NICK STUCCO**, producing director, Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, Philadelphia, PA
- ▶ **PAZ TANJUAQUIO**, co-director, TOPAZ ARTS, Inc., New York, NY
- ▶ **TOM THIELEN**, executive director, Florida Dance Association, Miami Beach, FL
- ▶ **EDWARD VILLELLA**, founding artistic director, Miami City Ballet, Miami Beach, FL
- ▶ **TONY WAAG**, executive director, American Tap Dance Foundation, New York, NY
- ▶ **JURGEN WEISS**, executive director, Snappy Dance Theatre, Boston, MA
- ▶ **BRIAN WILLIAMS**, founder/executive director, Step Afrika, Washington, DC

- ▶ **RAPHAEL XAVIER**, co-founder/choreographer, olive Dance Theatre, Inc., Philadelphia, PA

SAN FRANCISCO DIALOGUES

- ▶ **D. DAVID BROWN**, executive director, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle, WA
- ▶ **DONALD BYRD**, artistic director, Spectrum Dance Theatre, Seattle, WA
- ▶ **CHARYA BURT**, artistic director, Charya Burt Cambodian Dance Company, Windsor, CA
- ▶ **RACHEL COHEN**, president, Cadence Arts Network, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **LYNN DALLY**, co-founder, JAZZ TAP ENSEMBLE, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **EVA ENCINIAS-SANDOVAL**, founder/director, National Institute of Flamenco; Albuquerque, NM
- ▶ **JEREMY GAUCHER**, artistic director, Sushi, San Diego, CA
- ▶ **WAYNE HAZZARD**, director, Dancers Group, San Francisco, CA
- ▶ **ALONZO KING**, choreographer/artistic director, LINES Ballet, San Francisco, CA
- ▶ **RALPH LEMON**, independent dancer/choreographer, New York, NY
- ▶ **ROBERT MOSES**, founder/artistic director, Robert Moses Kin, San Francisco, CA
- ▶ **MICHAEL REED**, senior director of cultural participation and programming, Arizona State University Public Events, Tempe, AZ
- ▶ **AMELIA RUDOLPH**, founder/artistic director, Project Bandaloop, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **GEMA SANDOVAL**, founder/artistic director, Danza Floricanto/USA, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **BANAFSHEH SAYYAD**, artistic director, Namah Ensemble, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **CHRISTOPHER STOWELL**, artistic director, Oregon Ballet Theatre, Portland, OR

- ▶ **ERWIN WASHINGTON**, co-founder/executive director, Lula Washington Dance Theatre, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ **SAN SAN WONG**, independent consultant, San Francisco, CA

CHICAGO DIALOGUES

- ▶ **LANE ALEXANDER**, founder/artistic director; Chicago Human Rhythm Project, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **BONNIE BROOKS**, chairperson of dance, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **ASIMINA CHREMOS**, founder, Asimina Chremos Dance, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **GINGER FARLEY**, independent choreographer, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **KATS FUKASAWA**, artistic director, Paneer Project, Twin Cities, MN
- ▶ **JOAN GRAY**, president, Muntu Dance Theatre, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **MICHAEL HOLDEN**, co-founder; Holden & Arts Associates, Austin, TX
- ▶ **GAIL KALVER**, executive director, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **JACK LEMON**, executive director, Louisville Ballet; Louisville, KY
- ▶ **AMY MARSHALL**, executive director, Milwaukee Ballet, Milwaukee, WI
- ▶ **STEPHEN MILLS**, artistic director, Ballet Austin, Austin, TX
- ▶ **MARGARET MORRIS**, independent choreographer, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **LEAH NELSON**, independent choreographer, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **APARNA RAMASWAMY**, artistic director, Ragamala Music and Dance Theater, Twin Cities, MN
- ▶ **BRIAN REEDER**, independent choreographer, New York, NY.
- ▶ **HARRIET ROSS**, general manager, Joffrey Ballet, Chicago, IL
- ▶ **MIKE ROSS**, director, Krannert Center, Champaign-Urbana, IL
- ▶ **DAVID SHIMOTAKAHARA**, artistic director, Groundworks Dance Theater, Cleveland, OH

Above all, participants believe the field is artistically vibrant. There is consensus that there is a wealth of creativity emerging, and "it's a time of huge opportunities."

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, participants are excited about new aesthetic forms that are being developed and hope the next decade will bring a dance renaissance. They see the immigration of dancers from all over the world as an amazing opportunity to explore traditional forms and create new ones and to develop new dance enthusiasts from ethnically specific communities. As dancers develop cross-discipline collaborations and morph forms, exciting new dance aesthetics are emerging. Ballet companies are commissioning pieces from young modern choreographers; modern choreographers are incorporating movement from traditional world forms; and ethnically based dancemakers are looking for dancers trained in other traditions. As a presenter said, "It does amaze me what is the 'dance field' in this country. The scope of artistic expression and cultural styles is astonishing to me."

Participants look for ways to harness the increased public interest in dance generated by popular entertainment and believe the Internet provides unlimited opportunities for marketing the work to individuals and to presenters. A few companies are being booked directly from their websites, especially by non-traditional dance presenters. The Internet is also beginning to serve as a place for dialogue about the art form.

One of the bright spots is increased interest and interaction with universities, which provide teaching and rehearsal opportunities, as well as critical discourse about dance. A few have dance companies

in residence. Those dancemakers who have chosen to work in university settings are among the few in the field who have health insurance and retirement plans.

Participants believe, for the most part, they will be able to develop new partnerships, new networking opportunities, and new funding mechanisms, and to reach new heights of artistic expression. They cite the difference made by a few key funding programs. "The Dance Touring Program changed us entirely. The Ford Foundation changed us entirely. NEFA's funding new work," said one. They can cite examples of communities where funding has made a significant difference in the development of dance. "In Philadelphia, the foundation community has been incredibly supportive. It's an affordable city. The fellowship program is happening there. The audience component is real, even beyond ballet. Audiences are willing to see work outside their comfort zone. Contemporary ballet is selling like crazy. Contemporary thinking is creeping into their thinking."

Above all, participants believe the field is artistically vibrant. There is consensus that there is a wealth of creativity emerging, and "it's a time of huge opportunities." As one dance advocate said, "I am really excited by the moment we're in, because of all the comments that have been made.... When I think of the arts, I always think of dance as the discipline exhibiting the greatest level of creativity. I'm so excited about the explorations and the hybrids, how they relate to the past and how kids are downloading dance clips to their iPods." Participants agreed there is a high level of training, an enormous amount of talent, a great richness of voices, and a wide variety of perspectives in the dance field today.

ROMALYN TILGHMAN is a freelance writer, consultant, and arts administrator, who started her career developing community arts councils in rural Kansas. She became regional representative for the National Endowment for the Arts, first for the Plains States and then for the Pacific Rim. For the past 16 years, she has been a freelance consultant involved in a number of different projects including writing a book on audience development for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Last year, she helped launch American Masterpieces: Dance for New England Foundation for the Arts; conducted a dance scan for The James Irvine Foundation and assessed its New Connections Fund; and documented DANCE/USA focus groups held in response to a request from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. She is currently conducting an ongoing assessment of the Irvine Dance in California program for DANCE/USA.