

ART AND PLACE: THE LOCAL CONNECTION

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A View from the Field

I write to praise home-grown, local art--the kind of art that typically gets little respect, the kind we Americans have traditionally felt could not be as good as anything that comes in from out of town. I also write to make a case for the positive and important role local art can play in regular, sequential dance education at the K-12 level. This article grew from an exchange that I recently had while defending a grant proposal, an experience that made me think through my ideas about American culture and the preconceptions and indifference the arts regularly encounter on a local, everyday level. Because in my professional life I am a modern dance choreographer, the administrator of a dance festival, and a dance educator, my analysis necessarily includes all three perspectives.

I had written a proposal for funds to pay the fees of local artists participating in a statewide modern dance festival in North Carolina. The panel was evaluating requests for Grass Roots Grants, state money designated for distribution at the local level, and I had been asked to participate in a fifteen-minute discussion about my project. The panel members were all most gracious and friendly, letting me know how much funding they had to distribute and by how many thousands of dollars the requests exceeded that amount.

I told them about the history of the festival, describing how it began eight years ago as a two-night event and has since expanded to four venues around the state, two of them specifically designated for artists from the Greensboro, North Carolina, area. I noted that it was an occasion to showcase our own North Carolina choreographers and performers and to raise their profiles, while acquainting audiences with local work. And I pointed out that as the festival expands, it provides our modern dance artists with the relatively rare opportunity to have their work produced professionally at a number of sites around the state and receive a small fee to cover expenses. The panel seemed interested.

Then I was asked, "Have you launched any careers yet?"

I was confused. I replied that I knew a few dancers who had gone off to New York City, if that was what was meant. "Yes," came the response with smiles all around.

"But," I went on, "I don't count that as a particular triumph. I'd like more of our top choreographers and performers to stay around here."

Now they seemed confused. "But there is no work here," came the reply.

"Right," I said, "and the festival is an attempt to begin changing that situation."

I quickly pointed out that many dancers--and artists in general--have traditionally pieced their livelihoods together, taking a teaching job here and a modeling job there, or waiting tables, to have the flexibility to pursue their careers. I also mentioned that with excellent training now available in many locales throughout the country, there need no longer be one center for dance performance. Historically, young dance artists have left home for the big city because of the lack of opportunity and recognition anywhere else.

We were given the grant, but I am not sure I convinced them, and I left the room with a host of mixed feelings. The mindset represented on the panel is traditional: Sending young artists off to big cities has been the accepted way of helping them survive and develop their talents, and it has allowed us to bask in the glow of having given them a hand up and being known as a training center, of having known them when . . .

But the arts are in trouble these days, and cuts in government support are only a small part of the bad news. Equally troublesome are the reports of diminishing percentages of adults of all age groups attending "high culture" performing arts events in recent years (Sussman 1998). This is discouraging news, and arts organizations are looking for ways to reverse the trend. As a result, audience development has become a priority for artists and presenters alike, and market research has become a tool in deciding how to shape both the product and its image.

The need for some kind of change is widely acknowledged. Recognizing the growing concerns within the dance field, Dance/USA--the national service organization for nonprofit, professional dance--launched the National Task Force on Dance Audiences in the fall of 1996. The following year a 100-page report challenging dance organizations to become better community citizens was published. It included specific recommendations to counteract dance's image, which was described as elitist, contrived, boring, and irrelevant. Connecting art with everyday life was seen as crucial to building interest within any community, and dance groups were advised to think in terms of collaborating with presenters to find ways to reach out to potential audience members, to communicate the significance of what they do, and to devise fresh ways of making their work more accessible artistically.

In order to build those connections, perhaps it is time to reexamine how we define the field of professional modern dance and how we relate audience development to modern dance education for all students in our schools. At the same time, we might consider the possibility of a relationship between decreasing audience numbers and the traditional double standard that shows respect and provides funding for out-of-town professionals but not for local/regional artists. This double standard may have a profound influence on respect for local modern dance teaching and inclusion of dance in the K-12 curriculum.

The Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund is already supporting an exploration of audience development. Its Arts Partners Program was designed in 1989 to help "presenters develop well-informed, committed adult audiences for the performing arts" (Association of Performing Arts Presenters 1998). The projects reflect the fact that broad-based dance education is not a reality. They are experiments involving collaborations between out-of-town artists and local recruits. For example, Stuart Pimsler Dance and Theater recently announced that it has been awarded an Arts Partners Grant to support a five-week extended residency in Tucson, Arizona. Designed to "expand audiences for the arts and integrate the arts more closely into the life of the community" (Pimsler 1997), the residency will include movement workshops, panel discussions, and other interactive programs with members of the community.

The five weeks will culminate in the world premiere of a new dance/theater piece resulting from work begun a year earlier when Pimsler, supported by a planning grant from the same agency, began working with Tucson health-care workers, listening to their stories, and leading them in movement workshops. Pimsler has shaped the caregivers' experiences into material from which the final work will be made. The idea is to build a collaboration between the out-of-town professionals--Pimsler and his associates, including a composer--with the Tucson health-care community and local musicians as a way of creating meaning and interest for the Tucson audience. The grant then provides support for Pimsler to travel to Pittsburgh; New York City; and Columbus, Ohio (his home base), where he will recast and redevelop the work with each city's own communities of caregivers and musical talent. The project does not seem to include the local dance communities.

Choreographer Bill T. Jones also has received massive support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to work in communities across the country. His work is cited in a new publication, *The Dance Insider*. In "Inside Presenting: From the Cradle to the Grave, New Ways to Build Your Audience," ten ideas "for expanding the legions of dance maniacs" are presented, ranging from providing child care during performances to including

children in the cast. The article ends with a quote from Jones, who talks about the current situation and the pressure it puts on dance artists to change the way they have traditionally worked. Reaching out to the community is "not something that comes naturally to me," he says.

I'd rather be in the studio creating the work. But it [reaching out] seems to be part of my job as an artist and being a vital part of the society. If what I'm saying about my art is that it is a metaphorical rumination on society, then I should be out there in it. (Ben-Itzak 1998)

Speaking for the fund, program officer Rory MacPherson says that grants typically have been earmarked to help companies build audiences in their hometowns and other cities where they have long-term relationships. "Based on our past grant-making experience, giving people a chance to see the same companies perform many times, plus engaging them in the creation and presentation of dance, helps build audiences" (Ben-Itzak 1998).

It is a step in the right direction, and I would like to encourage the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and other funders, to go even further. By paying lesser known artists, who do not depend on touring, to work in their own regions, more communities will get to know their hometown groups. In sports we talk about the home-court advantage for the team playing on a familiar court or field with the support of local fans and press. Ballet companies use that advantage as well, often adopting the name of their city; staging numerous shows in the same theater each season, year after year; and building on the familiarity that viewers come to have with both dancers and repertory. Now perhaps it is time to cultivate that kind of loyalty for modern dance too. Perhaps, as with politics, all arts are local after all. I have noticed that, absent the media hype, at the university where I teach, audiences are biggest for local and student performances when there are numerous performers, and that the response to these concerts is enthusiastic and supportive.

Most National Endowment for the Arts grant money awarded in support of modern dance has focused on making artistic experiences available to as broad an audience as possible (Gawthrop 1998), helping selected companies to travel to communities all around the country. Though on its surface this seems both reasonable and public-spirited, the promotion of touring has not served to connect artists with audiences. It has removed companies from their home base for weeks and months out of the year and has tended to get in the way of establishing schools. The major companies do wonderful work and can be inspiring to all kinds of viewers; but when dancegoers are more familiar with David Parsons's choreography, for example, than with the dancing that emerges from their own region, they are not likely to feel much sense of connection or ownership. To develop this kind of pride and involvement, communities must begin to know their own artists. They must become acquainted with work that draws from life in their own region and come to value the shared sense of place and the common vision. As choreographer Liz Lerman notes:

A community bereft of practicing-on-the-edge artists is left without some very important functions. Artists vary in their pursuits but their actions can provide important mirroring, visions, activism; their actions can challenge the status quo, describe and define new ideas of beauty, inspire the imagination, and bring people together. (Lerman 1998)

Choreographer Elizabeth Streb has been experimenting with becoming more visible in her neighborhood. "There is a difference between doing community work and working in the community." Presence and accessibility count for a great deal. "About five years ago," she says, "we decided we would never do anything in private again." Her company rehearses in Brooklyn and leaves a door to the street open, waiting for people to walk in, and they do. Streb expresses surprise that dance has historically considered itself a public venture. She points out that typically,

The only moment audiences have access to what we do is when they pay for it. A real public venture has to do with access. . . . [Audiences] are not going to look under stones to find it. . . . It relates to the demystification of art and being an artist in the world. . . . We just happen to be working in a garage in a community. That we happen to be working there is a totally different thing than when you plan a program and go out there and do what you do. (Levine 1997)

The excitement of a real community connection was brought home to me recently when I attended the 25th Anniversary Season Concert of the Contemporary Dance Theater of Cincinnati (CDT), a dance company and school that also operates a community performance space. This event was attended by company alumni and audiences who spanned all twenty-five years. At the beginning of the evening, the mayor of Cincinnati presented director Jefferson James with a citation and the key to the city. Then came the concert with performances by Danny Buraczeski, who has been a guest artist many times over the years, and Peggy Lyman, who was a founding member of the company before going on to a career with the Martha Graham Company. I was there because veteran CDT dancers were performing "Spike," their so-called signature piece, a dance I choreographed for the company in 1982.

The highlight of the program, however, was "Update," a dance created from bits of repertory spanning the twenty-five years and performed by CDT alumni who came from around the country, some dancing for the first time in years, some dancing with their children, all--as choreographer Cheryl Wallace said in the program--"paying homage to our art form, our history, our dancing days, our artistic drive, to all the choreographers, to all the funders, the administrators, the teachers, to Jefferson, and to CDT" (Contemporary Dance Theater 1998).

Audience response was remarkable. People were excited and moved, they laughed and they cried, and in the end they left the theater talking about the fun they had. I cannot help thinking that everyone there was able to feel a sense of ownership that night, which might account for their enthusiasm and enjoyment. It was, in the very best sense, a fine example of the arts creating community through a shared history and vision. And that, it seems to me, is one thing that has been missing from much of what we see lately.

On the reverse side of that coin, when artists, seeing where the funding goes, emulate the look of the big traveling companies, they lose their sense of place. Over the years, I have often thought of how vulnerable we artists are to our surroundings, how inevitably influenced we are by the company we keep. Is there any reason why a New York aesthetic should prevail in New Mexico? I would like to think that each locale contains the seeds of a unique aesthetic that, given the chance, can create a new way of seeing. Dance has been slow to allow the symbiosis of art and place, perhaps because it does not trust its instincts. Although it is widely agreed that decentralization is a good idea, can it truly happen before we are ready to give equal weight to work from all areas of the country?

Choreographer Liz Lerman and her organization, the Dance Exchange, have also received major support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. After many years of renting rehearsal space in Washington, D.C., the group recently decided to buy a building and have a home. She writes about the difficulty of making that decision, but ultimately, she says,

We wanted to teach the same people for awhile instead of the intense but brief groups we form while on tour. We wanted to understand how time . . . measured in weeks and months and years can affect some of our working in community. (Lerman 1997)

They chose an old post office in Takoma Park, Maryland, just across the Washington, D.C., line. Takoma Park was so pleased to have its own dance company that officials threw a reception in honor of the group. And in a rare acknowledgment, the city councilman said in his opening remarks, "The Dance Exchange is to Takoma Park what GM is to Detroit," allowing that the city has something to gain from having a dance company in residence. Given the right circumstances, local support is waiting to be tapped.

There are so many issues that enter into this discussion that it is hard to keep them straight, and all of them relate to the general education base for dance as well as for performance. Most of all, hometown pride, regular accessibility, and a sense of ownership that comes with familiarity and participation--these seem obvious requirements for building audience involvement, a sense of community, and a general education that includes the arts. With respect to modern dance, at this point it is important for artists and audiences alike to stop thinking of it as something that only happens in New York City. For the best possible outcome, we should consider co-opting the environmental movement's slogan, "Think globally; act locally." It is time to get down to

the business of building respect for the artists in our midst, by providing them teaching opportunities, thereby allowing them to maximize their years of training and to develop as professionals while connecting with the communities in which they have chosen to work. By making connections with daily life as it occurs within a community, the artist becomes one human being among the group. He or she forms relationships and learns from them. In return, he or she helps people shape the way they view their existence and, in so doing, comes to see what people have in common, what is real, and what is worth recording. The artistic product will be valued by the people if they find themselves in it. Over time, the work develops a context.

The implications for K-12 modern dance education seem clear. Schools have long benefited from federal funding to bring in artists from elsewhere; now, with shifts in funding, schools can go a long way toward assimilating their own region's artists into the community. By using available resources to hire performers from the neighborhood, schools not only provide financial support to the local artistic community, they also provide students with accessible role models, a sense of place, and a means of understanding themselves. The dance artists that students see will provide the models for a lifetime's impressions of what modern dance can be. If the main access to modern dance for students is from videos or limited to times that the occasional big city company passes through, it will not seem to be an important, or even normal, activity. Bringing in local artists on a regular basis to teach what they know can provide an important addition to the K-12 daily curriculum as well as encourage appreciation and understanding for the local arts community. Making art meaningful is a matter of making it part of life: It has to be seen as something that grows close to home. It has to be seen as something worth studying.

Dr. Sue Stinson, a professor of dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, helped write the National Voluntary K-12 Standards for Dance Education and for nineteen years has been heavily involved in the development of dance in the schools. In North Carolina, state-mandated curriculum guides include teaching about career opportunities. Stinson asks whether we want schoolchildren to think that the only opportunities to dance are in faraway cities. An emphasis on out-of-town dance groups reinforces that perception and creates the notion that to dance one must leave the area. She points out that this tends to make the field seem elitist, forcing the aspiring dancer to choose between the home community and a career, and devaluing those who choose to stay in their hometowns.

Stinson also notes that as long as the arts are seen as unstable career choices, they will be marginalized in education. Every choice made in the professional world has an impact on arts education, and change is within the realm of possibility. "Let's create the kind of dance world we want to teach about," she says (Stinson 1998).

Perhaps most important, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the arts are, and should be, participatory activities, and that education should validate the experience of making art at all levels of expertise. Education should increase individual competence. If we are all active in the arts in one way or another within our communities, we will be caught up together in the interaction of life and art. It is hard to feel sympathy for a pain we have never felt, imagine joy if we have never enjoyed, or understand a subject we have never studied. Mary MacArthur Griffin points out that while the President's Commission on Fitness urges everyone to partake in sports, the Commission on the Arts recommends that we visit museums and donate to our local opera company rather than write a poem or make a dance (Griffin 1997).

That advice does us all a disservice. In the long run, it seems a lack of interest often stems from a lack of acquaintance. Taking a cue from sports, by helping others to participate locally in both experience and study, we are taking steps toward creating demand. By simply making creative work physically accessible we help to make it more broadly attainable and meaningful on a deeper level. To find the meaning in art, we must first find our own relationship with it. Our culture is our construction. If we can bring the values inherent in the process of making and viewing art to the fore, give them importance, and teach about them seriously, I think we will see a powerful change.

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