

SMART AUDIENCES WILL KEEP MORE ``HOME-GROWN' ARTISTS AT HOME: A COMMUNITY'S ESTHETIC REFLECTS THE INTELLIGENCE OF PATRONS

By Jan Van Dyke

Van Dyke, J. 1998: *Smart Audiences Will Keep More Homegrown Artists at Home*, Greensboro News & Record, October 25.

Made available courtesy of The Greensboro News & Record: <http://www.news-record.com/>

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

I am writing in praise of home-grown, local art, the kind that typically gets little respect - the kind we Americans have traditionally felt couldn't be as good as anything from out of town. My interest stems from an exchange I had recently while defending a grant proposal.

I'd written a proposal for funds to pay local artists participating in a statewide dance festival. The panel was evaluating requests for the Grass Roots Program, state money designated for distribution locally. I had been asked to come in for a 15-minute discussion. The panel members were most gracious, letting me know how much funding they had to distribute and by how many thousands of dollars requests exceeded that amount. I told them about the history of the festival, describing how it had begun eight years ago as a two-night event and has since expanded to four venues around the state, with four nights here in Greensboro. Two nights are designated for artists from the Triad.

I noted that it was an occasion to showcase our own North Carolina choreographers and performers, to raise their profiles while acquainting audiences with work from North Carolina. And I pointed out that as the festival expands it provides our artists with the relatively rare opportunity of having their work produced professionally at a number of sites.

The panel seemed interested. Then I was asked, ``Have you launched any careers?'

I was confused. I replied that I knew a few dancers who had gone to New York City, if that's 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 although it wasn't ideal, dancers - and artists in general - have pieced their livelihood together, taking a teaching job here and a modeling job there, sometimes waiting tables, in order to have the flexibility to pursue their careers. Historically, young dancers have had to leave home for New York because of a lack of opportunities anywhere else. With

excellent training now available in many locales throughout the country, however, there need no longer be just one center for dance.

Here in North Carolina, with the dance programs at the N.C. School of the Arts and UNCG and the American Dance Festival in Durham, we have the best training facilities we could hope for, yet we have taken little care to help our dancers stay in the state when they are ready to launch their careers.

We were given the grant, but I'm not sure I convinced that panel. The mindset represented on the panel is traditional: Sending young artists off to the big city has been the accepted way of helping them survive and develop their talent, and it has allowed us to bask in the glow of being known as a training center, of having known them 'back when.'

But the arts are in trouble these days, and cuts in government support are only part of the bad news. Equally troublesome are reports of diminishing percentages of all age groups attending 'high culture' performing arts events. Arts organizations everywhere are looking for solutions. As a result, audience development has become a priority and market research a tool.

Recognizing the growing concerns, Dance/USA, a national service organization, launched the National Task Force on Dance Audiences in 1996. The following year a 100-page report was published. Specific recommendations aimed at counteracting dance's image, which was described as elitist, contrived, boring and irrelevant. Connecting art with everyday life was seen as crucial to building interest, and dance groups were urged to find fresh ways of allowing public access to their work.

Perhaps it is time to re-examine how we define the field of professional dance, and, at the same time, to look into the double standard of respect and funding for artists who have left the state to the exclusion of those who stay. By booking lesser-known artists who work locally and do not depend on touring for survival, communities will get to know home-grown groups.

Ballet companies have tended to operate this way, often adopting the names of their cities, staging numerous shows in the same theaters each season, year after year, and building on the familiarity that viewers come to have with both dancers and repertoires. Perhaps it is time to cultivate that kind of loyalty for all the arts. Perhaps, as with politics, all arts are local.

Is there any reason a New York esthetic should prevail anywhere except in New York? I would like to think that each locale contains the seeds of an esthetic which, given the chance, can create a new way of seeing.

It is time to get down to the business of building opportunities for the artists in our midst, allowing them to maximize the years of training and develop as professionals while connecting with the communities in which they have chosen to work. Art will be valued by people if they find themselves in it. The work develops a context. To find the meaning in art, we must find our relationship with it.

Our culture is our own construction.

