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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Renata Mond

IABD: Grant Puts Action Behind the Narrative

by Gregory King

When [Denise Saunders Thompson](#), the President and CEO of the [International Association of Blacks in Dance](#) announced that IABD received a grant in the amount of \$500,000 from [The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), I did my own version of a happy dance—because in the past, I skeptically questioned the functions and effectiveness of IABD and longed for the organization to be associated with more than its annual conference and festival. With the announcement, I hoped that the grant would add fuel to IABD's fire, augmenting support and resources for the organization to better serve blacks in dance.

Founded in 1991 by Philadanco's artistic director Joan Myers Brown, with the intention of documenting and addressing black aesthetics, IABD continues to be a service organization concentrating on the needs of the Black Dance Community. In speaking with Thompson, who carefully outlined the terms of the grant, she clarified the two-pronged phase while detailing the grant's objective, saying, "The first part of the grant is being used to provide salaries to the staff within the organization." She continued, "I am now a full-time salaried employee of IABD, and I am in the process of hiring a staff. This will help us build infrastructure over the next three years, from 2017 to 2020, making IABD the kind of organization that can more effectively serve practitioners, administrators, and organizations, championing African diasporic dance."

Enthusiastic in her delivery, Thompson articulated that the second part of the grant may be a bit more physical. It will allow her to travel around the country with independent arts consultant [Baraka Sele](#), collecting data from black-led dance organizations about the state of black dance in their area.

An integral part of the grant calls for IABD to work on a "financial diagnostic," a method of assessing an organization's finances. To this end, IABD will partner with The [Nonprofit Finance Fund](#) (NFF) with the intention of piloting a project that moves beyond conversation to strategizing actions. Based in New York, one of NFF's primary functions is to help tell an organization's story through its finances. The

NFF will also help IABD's members strengthen their respective organizations by addressing capital allocation and helping them move towards long-term stability.

In a moment of transparency, Thompson spoke in broad terms about how some organizations, in their roles as service provider, rarely stop to meritoriously concentrate on their business' finances or the impact of some of their programming. "I am the first to admit I usually allow the service to take precedence over factors like core objectives and financial sustainability. I'm often thinking that I need a certain amount of money to get a project done instead of intentionally strategizing, evaluating impact, or advantageously working to fortify specific programs."

I later queried how difficult it was for an arts organization to stay engaged with their programming and financials while satisfactorily providing the service it promised. Thompson explained that for twenty-nine years, IABD has been a volunteer service organization. One of its main functions was to get the annual conference and festival off the ground. "I don't think it was ever about leveraging partnerships and monies, because the work came first and everything else followed," said Thompson. "To be honest, not very many funding entities were offering assistance to black dance organizations, but now we have one of the largest funders in the United States welcoming the conversation around diversity. I believe that The Mellon Foundation is actually putting the action behind the narrative."

She continued, "The interesting thing is that with the partnership and the self-assessment process, I started realizing that we were already using funds to leverage programming. Funds were being put into programs like the summer auditions—which is a program we've been doing for twenty-nine years, the scholarship fund that serves students seeking assistance for summer studies, and the artist development fund. And let's not forget our emergency fund, available to individuals or organizations that are seeking immediate emergency assistance. This is a discretionary offer and is usually available if IABD has the financial capacity to extend itself."

Grateful for the grant, Thompson's enthusiasm was not rooted in the desire to create a new narrative for what already exists as IABD. Instead, the intent is on expanding its pool of resources for members, who are sometimes excluded from opportunities disproportionately given to their white equivalents.

And although in its infancy stage, the groundwork for fulfilling the objectives of the grant has been laid. So while Thompson and Sele continue to travel the country collecting data on the different organizations's needs, I quiver with sadness knowing the deficiency from which this organization was born. And as I think about how West African drum and dance groups are still not being produced at the same frequency and consistency as modern or ballet companies, and how black ballerinas are still not being hired or promoted in national ballet companies, my quiver subsides and is replaced by delight, knowing that organizations like IABD are upsides to the harshness of exclusion.

By Gregory King
July 19, 2017