

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Marcel Williams Foster

What is Professional Dance? DANCE/USA, Philly dance

By **Ellen Gerdes**

[DANCE/USA](#), with a mission to be a “national voice for professional dance,” held its annual conference in Philadelphia for the first time this June. The greatest potential for any conference is that like-minded members of a community can share research and conversation. Breakout sessions focused on arts administration and advocacy, including discussions on the relationship between executive directors and artistic directors, what presenters are looking for, fundraising, collective business models, and racial diversity in the arts.

In the opening plenary, MacArthur Fellow [Aaron Dworkin](#) spoke from his perspective as Founder/President of the [Sphinx Organization](#), which provides access to classical music education in Detroit and Flint, Michigan, and runs two free summer performance academies for youth. He sees a direct impact of his work in increased numbers of classical musicians of color in the nation's

DANCE/USA and I were born in the same year. I started attending dance classes at age four. When I graduated from college, I hadn't the foggiest idea what it meant to be a professional dancer. But even so, I was certain I wasn't good enough. I had this image of sculpted bodies in national touring companies.

As I prepare for a move from Philly to LA, I find myself reflecting on all that five years in the Philly dance scene has taught me.

Dance as a profession is multiple jobs sustained by commitment, self-reflection, risk-taking, multi-tasking, and yes, funding...but most importantly, the support of a community. It is color-coded schedules, doodle polls, and collaborative discovery. And as Greg Holt said to me recently, “It isn't about talent; it's about disposition.”

It is in Philly where I have been able to do

orchestras. This talk occurred during the same week that the Philadelphia school district laid off 66 itinerant instrumental music teachers who teach at 190 schools. In light of Dworkin's talk, this news is heart-breaking; like many others, I began learning music in the instrumental and choir ensembles of public schools. The impact of these programs is not simply numerical.

Philadelphia's turn hosting the DANCE/USA conference showcased local companies/artists to over 500 dance professionals. The performance committee (Lora Allen, Terry Fox, Rachael Glashan, Lela Aisha Jones, Olive Prince, Deneane Richburg, Dara Schmoyer, and Judy Williams), acknowledged the challenge of their task and highlighted their vision to choose "companies who have been making dance in, and bringing national attention to, Philadelphia as a dance hub for a substantial number of years." The committee also notably created several lottery slots for emerging artists.

The Philadelphia dance community is actually a collection of dance communities. I enjoyed the multi-authored programs and viewing new bodies on stage—seeing past my own immediate dance circle. Some highlights: Elba Hevia y Vaca and KC Chun Manning explored the use of the body as archive via flamenco and post-modern dance. The Lady Hoofers proved with textured polyrhythms and precise synchronization that they are a new, driving force. [Pew fellow](#) Raphael Xavier and Jery Valme investigated breaking improvisation, which made me eager to see more of Xavier's research. The men of Voloshky Ukrainian Dance Ensemble bounded while the women stepped in symmetrical formations.

Although the two conference performances privileged proscenium stage works, the opening reception Wednesday night featured

all of my work through dance. On any given day, I do some of the following: teach dance to children or college students, go to rehearsal, take class, perform, write about dance, grade papers about dance, read critical writings on dance, and see shows.

I often change clothes in public bathrooms and make lesson plans on trolley rides.

THIS is my profession. And so many of you reading here do the same. Add in choreographing, marketing, administrating, body-working, video-editing, producing, and web-designing. And bartending! THIS is being a professional dancer.

One drawback of all my multiple roles (I don't have the space here to address the tragic lack of health insurance and living wages for dancers) is that it can feel lonely. One exciting benefit of the conference for me was the chance to eat lunch with dance friends whose schedules never align with mine. We need this time. Dustin Hurt and Anna Drozdowski of thirdbird agree: "We don't see each other enough, with our big country and our small field (with our even tinier segment nestled within that)." So they hosted a table talk. Anna declared it a "no bitching allowed" session, and so we talked...for 2 hours...about marketing, programming, audience development, potential reach of art, fundraising, and community. Take a look at curator Michele [Steinwald's vision](#) for presenting: empathy, community, and dialogue.

Joan Myers Brown, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Lela Aisha Jones, and Deneane Richberg also hosted a much-needed discussion. Myers Brown, [awardee](#) at this year's conference, spoke of the barriers to ballet that she faced as a black woman. In 1988, she founded the

[International Association of Blacks in Dance](#) because black dance companies' needs were not being met by dance organizations. An open conversation

improvised site-specific work at the new Barnes Foundation Museum. Ann Marie-Mulgrew's *Dances for Imaginary Places (The Umbrella Dance)* and Merian Soto's Branch Dance Practice from *SoMoS* beautifully engaged with the evening light, outdoor sculpture, grass, trees, and water. Unfortunately, performances by Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers and Tori Lawrence + Co. were lost in the crowded reception of those networking inside.

Like any conference, registration costs can be prohibitive. Several local independent artists attended thanks to scholarships generously offered by DANCE/USA, but a common criticism I heard is that the conference neglected the needs of such artists. ([DANCE/USA's national roster](#) is made of 501c3 companies with expense budgets greater than \$100,000.) Self-producing artists, smaller companies, and individual artists/administrators/presenters pushed their way into conversations. One artist wrote: "I felt alienated, marginalized and craving acknowledgment of the very real, challenging and prevalent situation I find myself in as an individual artist forging my own path."

Philadelphia asked DANCE/USA to broaden its view of professional dance. The listing of [Dance Around Town](#) events, unsponsored by the conference and happening concurrently, integrated some self-producing artists. Illstyle and Peace Productions used Dance/UP's portable floor for a hip-hop performance/demonstration at City Hall. Thirdbird's triple bill *Show or Tell* represented an "experimental" aesthetic not seen elsewhere. *Forestillinger* performed by Club Fisk (Denmark) made me laugh so hard I cried! Site-specific work (which seems to me a hallmark of Philadelphia dance) was represented by Alie Vidich's *Invisible River*. (See Whitney Weinstein's response [here](#)). PA Ballet, although a large-

focused on the still-segregated ballet world and "big name" companies; in a circle, participants stood up to voice questions of access, tokenism, marketing, and training. It was just a beginning—a group admitting that we are not living in a post-racial society. Choreographer Merian Soto said she was troubled that the social change narrated by the opening plenary seemed like a new idea. Soto: "Discussions on racism and imagining our future feel urgent; we must deepen these. Let's brainstorm TOGETHER."

At the conference, I wished for movement breakout sessions where we could learn about one another as movers. I think of my own enriching experiences teaching, learning in class or in a community, rehearsing—dance experiences that are collective, social, and embodied. Many of my moving moments in dance have happened in Philly classrooms, where I have seen huge shifts of energy and smart choreography. In my experience, K-12 dance education is not just about building future audiences (please!), but rather an acknowledgment of children's strength, creativity and cultural knowledge. Fired up by the keynote speaker, Lois Welk is excited for a conversation on free dance education in Philly's schools.

Philly is a city where dancers can collaborate and challenge one another; yet we are not immune to race/class/aesthetic hierarchies. What existing divisions can we critique? What are the connections we can find? The conference made me think a lot about supposed classical/postmodern divisions. I admired Gabrielle Revlock's dancing in Meg Foley's piece *Utah...* thinking, "Look at all the 'classical' training her body has to have for it to be placed and tossed about so matter-of-factly."

So what are the dialogues you are excited

profile company, was also listed in the Dance Around Town options. It was exhilarating to see the sheer number of bodies on-stage in William Forsythe's *Artifact Suite*. (See Kirsten Kaschock's response [here](#)). Finally, because the performance committee was constrained to venues that could seat large audience numbers, the Performance Garage donated space for a late night show by self-producing artists working in African diasporic, post-modern, ballet, and aerial idioms. Whenever there is a selection process, something is left out. As Lois Welk said before one concert, "Philadelphia is a robust and diverse dance city. This is only the tip of the iceberg."

about? As for me, I've had the chance to cover three conferences (Congress on Research in Dance, Society for Dance History Scholars, and DANCE/USA) in Philly, and I would love to see more overlap between these sub-sets of the dance field. I know many Philly dancers whose work reaches to all three spaces.

Thank you, Philly dance, for teaching me how to define success for myself, for re-defining what it means to be virtuosic, and for daring to start so many conversations...

As someone who is about to leave Philadelphia, I found the week of dance a wonderful send-off in its breadth of performances: Philadelphia dance is multiple genres; Philadelphia dance is highly-funded, long-standing institutions; Philadelphia dance is recent college graduates testing out their choreographic chops; Philadelphia dance is grassroots curation and collective art-making. Philadelphia dance is potential dialogue, proposed and percolating, if not yet fully realized.

Editor's Note: While this article appears to be correctly formatted in our uploading system, readers have reported formatting issues. We apologize for any glitches you may have encountered.

Editor's Note: A correction has been made to the original to reflect that scholarships to the conference were funded by DANCE/USA, the national organization, and administered by a local committee.

By Ellen Gerdes
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