

## PROFESSIONAL ... OR NOT?

by John Munger, Director of Research and Information, Dance/USA

Most inquiries into the dance field come with an assumption, spoken or not, that the topic under discussion addresses only “professional” companies and artists. If someone asks how many companies exist in a particular community, state or even the nation as a whole, they mean “professional” companies, of course. If they ask what an average dancer is paid or how many staff are employed or how many dance-makers work in a particular genre, they mean “professionals,” of course. The problem is that there does not exist at this time a widely known, widely understood and widely accepted definition of the term “professional.”

Twenty to 30 years ago, the situation was different. At that time, there did exist such a definition. It included four elements, three of them specifically quantifiable and easily subject to verification:

- The company is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit corporation.
- The company pays dancers on a regular basis, usually as salaried employees.
- The company employs professional management and administrative staff.
- The company is engaged in “regular and ongoing” production of dance.

This definition was never enshrined in some centrally located and published manifesto or formal institution, but the general substance of it was widely understood, widely known and widely accepted. One can still see vestiges of this definition in some examples of long-standing criteria for grants and memberships. It can also be sensed quite often in conversations with journalists and other observers of the field.

But this old definition, clear and specific as it was, no longer holds up as well as it used to. Each of the four old criteria now carries a significant number of exceptions, caveats and alternatives. Too many serious, widely recognized dance-making entities cannot meet one or more of these criteria. In a nutshell:

- Less than half the dance-makers in America are 501(c)(3) corporations. In the recently completed census of NYC dance-makers only 200 out of 449 are 501(c)(3) corporations. In Chicago 116 out of 258 are 501(c)(3) corporations and in Washington DC the figure is 82 out of 186.
- The vast majority of dance-makers cannot afford to pay dancers on a salaried basis. Thirty-seven out of 449 in NYC offer salaries compared with 12 out of 258 in Chicago and 11 out of 186 in Washington, DC.
- The majority of dance-makers cannot afford paid staff, and the large amount of volunteerism filling this gap blurs any definition of what kind of staff should be regarded as “professional.” 176 out of 337 responding dance-makers in NYC, or 52 percent, have no paid staff at all. The figures are even more striking in Washington and Chicago.
- Many small, understaffed and undercapitalized dance-makers populating the field have neither the time nor the resources to mount extended productions or long-running seasons. Nearly 200 dance-makers in NYC reported fewer than 10 performances (approximately two weekends) in NYC itself in one year.
- In fact, only 31 out of 449 dance-makers in NYC satisfy all four of the old criteria. In Washington, DC the figure is 6 out of 186.

Why not take a hard-nosed stance on this issue? Why not just say that a grim reality to be faced is that there are very few “professional” dance companies or dance-making entities? Certainly, in the absence of an official and widely accepted definition of “professionalism,” anyone is free to adopt such a stance for their own purposes. To do so, however, does fly in the face of the reality that a whole population of serious, recognized, skilled, talented and trained dance-making entities would be excluded by such a stance.

What if dance-makers were excluded from recognition as “professional” according to each of the three old criteria that are quantifiable? Drawing on data from the recently-completed census of the NYC dance community, for example, we can determine which dance-makers would be excluded according to each criterion, respectively.

If the 249 dance-making entities documented as lacking 501(c)(3) status in NYC were excluded from “professionalism,” this would mean excluding 120 that have toured nationally in the 12 months preceding this study and 52 that have toured internationally. Also excluded would be seven with budgets of \$100,000 per year or higher and 35 with annual audiences of 5,000 or more. Notably, this would also exclude 49 of the 161 who do have paid staff and four of the especially scarce companies paying salaries to dancers.

If the 412 NYC dance-makers documented as unable to offer salaries to dancers were excluded from “professionalism,” this would mean excluding 53 of the 69 dance-making entities with budgets between \$100K and \$999K. It would exclude companies reaching 39 percent of the total audiences reported. It would exclude dance-makers working with 79 percent of the dancers reported and delivering 80 percent of the performances reported in NYC.

If the 176 dance-makers documented as lacking paid staff were excluded, this would mean leaving out 25 entities with 501(c)(3) status, nine with budgets of \$50,000 or more, 92 that have toured nationally and 39 that have toured overseas.

Similarly persuasive numbers come from the censuses of Washington, DC and Chicago. In both of these other cities, exclusion of dance-makers failing one or more of the “old” criteria results in leaving out a striking number of active and visible entities.

In short, it is difficult in 2007 to find large numbers of companies that are clearly and unquestionably “professional” by the old standards. By the same token, it is difficult to dismiss large numbers of dance-making entities simply because they fail to meet one or more of the old criteria. The old criteria for “professionalism” exclude too many serious artists and organizations. The old criteria are no longer reliable.

How has this unwieldy situation come to pass? Why are there so many dance-making entities defying seemingly reasonable means of classification as regards “professional” status? Absent hard data to confirm the hypothesis, it seems credible to theorize that this situation is a product of poverty and marginalization. Dance, in general, is so profoundly starved for resources, respect and general public acceptance that its practitioners are forced to develop ingenious and creative structures, processes and methodologies just to survive and keep putting work in front of audiences. These creative structures and processes do not conveniently fit into old categorizations.

Dance is a field with more guerillas than institutions.

It is not the place of this essay to put forward a proposed new definition for “professionalism.” Indeed, developing such a definition would be a major task and should appropriately be addressed at all levels of the field on a national scale with participation by many voices. This essay, therefore, is based on studies that are consciously all-inclusive. No dance-

making entity has been edited out or excluded for failure to pass any tests of “professionalism.” No such tests have been postulated, none have been applied, and no criteria for inclusion or exclusion have been used in this study other than the requirement of actively making dance in the cities cited here. The intent of this essay has been to draw as complete and inclusive a picture of dance-making in these communities as could be compiled.