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Poverty Amidst Plenty for Philadelphia's Dance Adjuncts

by Carolyn Merritt

Esteemed scholar Susan Foster recently dubbed Philadelphia the nation's "dance capital." But while the city's wide range of genres, plentiful university dance programs, low rents, edgy but communal spirit, supportive arts community, and full roster of informal presenting opportunities lure new performers and continue to entice more settled residents, the financial and spiritual health of Philly's dancers are in constant jeopardy.

How are the city's dance laborers faring in these troubled times? For this two-part piece, I interviewed Philadelphians working in education, dance theatre, modern dance, contact improvisation, and social dance. My sample is far from representative of Philadelphia's myriad and often disconnected movement communities; rather, I offer first-hand accounts of individuals who have managed to piece together a life as professional dancers/ artists/ scholars. In this first article, I focus on dance educators in a tenuous university employment system, and in my follow-up, I'll look at how choreographers, directors, and performers are adjusting to a changing funding landscape.

Note: Pseudonyms were used and identifying details were slightly changed to protect identities throughout.

Adjunct Nation

"If money was all that important to me I would have chosen a different direction."

-Catherine, modern dancer

Dancers who support their creative lives through part-time university teaching cited the perks of adjuncting: they earn more teaching in colleges than they will in the community, and they are generally absolved from administrative duties, so aside from contact and office hours, exercise great freedom in structuring their lives. This means more time for training and rehearsals, and as Catherine explained, it helps subsidize a performance career:

It helps pay my bills so I can take on dance work that often does not pay well. My other jobs give me the freedom to keep dancing.

Even though Philadelphia's ratio of adjuncts to full-time staff aligns with national trends, the percentage of local dance faculty whose status is "adjunct" is shocking given that many hold advanced degrees and would happily accept a full-time position, not to mention that many universities are billion dollar operations with major land holdings. If "struggling artist" conjures many a clichéd image, "welfare academe" may be gaining ground as an American stereotype. Over the past few decades, full-time, salaried, tenure track positions have steadily disappeared as colleges and universities have become increasingly reliant upon the labor of adjunct faculty and graduate student instructors. Modern Language Association (MLA) President Michael Bérubé notes that 1 million of the country's 1.5 million college and university instructors are adjuncts, a startling number when you consider their working conditions:

Many of them are working at or under the poverty line, without health insurance; they have no academic freedom worthy of the name, because they can be fired at will; and, when fired, many remain ineligible for unemployment benefits, because institutions routinely invoke the "reasonable assurance of continued employment" clause in federal unemployment law even for faculty members on yearly contracts who have no reasonable assurance of anything. (Bérubé in MLA)

Given that adjunct faculty may earn less annually than university custodial and support staff, it should come as no surprise that public assistance to graduate degree holders has more than doubled between 2007 and 2010 (see Chronicle of Higher Education). The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the median salary for a janitor at a college as $27,710 (see http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes372011.htm). Among the adjuncts I spoke with, compensation ranged from $2000-$5000 per course, with $3000-$3500 per 3- or 4-credit course being the average. Because most colleges and universities limit the number of courses adjunct faculty may teach, accruing an annual salary of $27,000 requires taking on work at more than one institution, and finding outside work as well. As Julie, a dance history scholar, explained, she can only teach 8 credits per semester at one school (9 credits would be full-time and require benefits), which means a semester salary of approximately $9,600. A typical semester is 15 weeks, however planning and grading extend this work period to 4-5 months, and the lighter summer schedule at most colleges and universities means this may be half a year's salary at one institution, or the equivalent of $19,200 per year.

For many, this translates into a constant juggling act, like that described by Michael, an M.Ed. holder, who admitted to teaching seven courses one semester (three 4-credit and four 2-credit), and still taking out loans to cover his living expenses. Meanwhile, Margaret, who earned an M.F.A. before relocating to Philadelphia, currently teaches six days a week at as many different institutions, including two universities (3 courses per semester), a charter school, a public school, a private school, and a private dance studio.

Jonathan, a choreographer, described his struggles negotiating health insurance. His monthly rate constitutes 15% of his gross salary, "a significant portion of what [he] makes in a year," and he would like to take advantage of a discount offered to long-term adjuncts at the university where he teaches, but he doesn't because there is never any guarantee he will continue to have this job. Jonathan has a pre-existing condition and he feels blessed to be on a conversion plan through COBRA, the government act that allows individuals to pay to extend group health insurance benefits they would otherwise lose. He can keep this plan for life. With the university discount he could save $1200 a year, but the chance that his job could disappear and he could be left with no coverage whatsoever is too frightening a prospect.

This compensation model also forces educators into a cost-benefit analysis of their labor. When asked if they ever calculated their hourly salary accounting for contact hours, planning, preparation, grading, and office hours, adjuncts responded with figures ranging from $3/ hour (large general education classes with hefty paper grading) to $40/ hour (yoga), though most admitted they had never done the math and were reluctant to do so. But spreading oneself thin in various (often poorly-paying) teaching positions has implications for students and one's self-image, as Margaret concedes:

...it makes me a lot more money-focused than I ever expected to be, because I can see myself saying 'I'm not paid to do that, I'm not going to do that.' And I didn't think I'd be that type of person. (...) It's kind of an embarrassing mindset in some ways to me, but I find it happens a lot. Maybe I'll think 'I don't get paid enough to assign as many papers as I should,' or 'let's do group projects at the end because then there'll be less grading for me.' And that's totally self-centered, you know?

Similarly, Michael confessed to adjusting his efforts according to the paycheck and the students' level of engagement. If people in all professions do this to a certain extent, such a nickel and dime attitude–arguably a survival strategy for overworked adjuncts–means that university students run the risk of being reduced to their institutional surroundings and classmates, rather than their individual attributes. At the same time, Michael told me he felt an obligation to go above and beyond his job requirements because students were paying so much for college, even if little of that money would reach him:

My students had to give presentations to pass one course. It wasn't a job requirement, but I would meet with them one week in advance because I felt I owed it to them. It wasn't their fault that I was being badly compensated, and they were paying a lot of money for classes, so as a matter of ethics, I would meet students beforehand.

Professor for Hire

"Adjunct? What it means is that you don't know from one semester to the next if you'll be teaching anything or what that might be."
-Adriana

For the dancer who aspires to financial stability and enjoys research or loves teaching, the university path that once provided a veritable career path may be no more. In a conversation with Julie, a dancer and educator who returned to graduate school as much for an interest in scholarship as her desire for a sustainable career, she lamented the plight of many an advanced degree holder today:

It used to seem really stable to me... the way to make it in dance and be in this kind of stable route was to be a professor, and I've stopped seeing it in that way.

Daniel, who taught two courses per semester at the same college for years, described his shock when he was offered no classes after taking a semester off for a performance project. After nearly a decade, he told me, he felt he was "hustling all over again." Not only may one's course load change or disappear from one semester to the next, but most colleges reserve the right to cancel classes as late as two weeks into the semester if they are under-enrolled (this minimum enrollment has nearly doubled at one college in recent years), or to pro-rate the instructor's pay according to the number of students when enrollment is low, ranging anywhere from 4-12 students, depending on the school. Of the eight adjuncts I spoke with, only one had a class cancelled after she'd begun teaching, however the reality is that adjuncts can never truly plan ahead financially. And even if such policies apply to full-time faculty, they are arguably harder felt by contingent professors who barely earn a livable wage to begin with.

Some of the adjuncts I spoke with expressed gratitude for consistent schedules and course loads, however others underscored the importance of flexibility. As Daniel put it, he could convey preferences, but ultimately felt lucky to be offered work at all. Another shared his disappointment when a college offered him two courses whose days did not coincide; accepting such a schedule, one 90-minute class in the middle of the day Monday-Friday, would have made it nearly impossible for Raul to take on the other work he would need to pay rent. And though several taught the same courses over successive semesters, others were asked to design a new course each semester, sometimes with little advance notice and no guidelines or sample syllabi to assist in preparation.

Adjuncts may also lack institutional support, such as adequate office space (examples included none, a closet, an office shared with 5-10 people with no working computer), collegial relations, and professional development funds. As Michael put it, adjuncts are at the bottom of the institutional totem pole, regardless of how essential their labor is to its functioning:

It also impacts your standing, among students and with colleagues. In the hierarchy, it implies that you are, literally, at the bottom, and that has implications on how people regard you in the institutions.

While Michael was fortunate to receive research support from one college, Julie's requests have never yielded results, despite years of service to the same university where she regularly teaches large general education courses that fulfill core requirements for all undergraduates. Research presentation is expected of dance scholars on the job market, yet there is often little accommodation for adjuncts whose paltry wages don't cover such activities. Julie described her particular frustration when she was advised to better plan her finances after inquiring about adjunct registration rates, noting with irony that she was better equipped to attend conferences living on a graduate stipend, thanks to student registration rates and travel grants. Admitting her wish to stay current with the field and to beef up her resume, Julie also confessed to feeling professionally lonely. Ambivalent about the costs, which she covers with a combination of credit cards, airline miles, and tax write-offs, she also goes to conferences to find the community she misses in her daily scramble from one job to the next:

Sometimes it's really thrilling to go to rehearsal, then teach 3 year olds, then go teach college students, and I'm thrilled that there's a dance community and multiple components of it, but the balancing act... I'm always conscious of renegotiating the balance of my life.... And then there are days when I feel like I have no colleagues at all. I have all these students–hundreds, and I love them–but no one to share it with, and that's really hard for me. And I think sometimes it's about the money and the justice, and sometimes it's just about wanting a community and not wanting to be lonely.

Beautiful Struggle?

"I always knew that a career in dance would be hard, but I thought it would get easier. In reality, it has remained consistently difficult."

-Daniel

If such contingent labor represents a crisis in our higher education system, it remains an important source of income for many local dancers, especially those with family or performance obligations who may find the flexibility of adjuncting suits them better than full-time work. Despite his recent struggles, for instance, Daniel insisted that he "loves adjuncting" because it affords him the freedom to perform. Likewise, Catherine prefers her current situation and has no intention to seek a full-time job. Indeed, both speak to the idea that sacrifice is par for the course, for passion has no exchange value.

But what of the others? One dancer estimated that 80% of her adjunct colleagues would eagerly accept a tenure track appointment, then admitted their chances were slim. With fully two-thirds of today's college instructors employed as adjuncts, it's no wonder.

We expect our artists to struggle in the U.S., with the idea that grit, talent and perseverance will be rewarded in the end. But as stable employment and a decent standard of living appear every day more an illusion, it seems the city's dance adjuncts are destined to scrape by for years to come. How long they can sustain this, and the implications for them as they age, are worthwhile questions.

Disclaimer: The author is adjunct professor of anthropology at Arcadia University, where she has taught 2-3 courses a semester consistently since 2009, and who have generously provided support for her research.

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