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Ugly Numbers Part II: Presenters and Dance Artists Respond

by Nicole Bindler

Ugly Numbers is a three-part series on gender inequity in contemporary American dance. Part I (http://thinkingdance.net/articles/2014/09/03/Ugly-Numbers-Part-I-Just-the-Facts) investigated the data on gender discrimination in Philadelphia dance presenting. Part II includes analysis of the data and interviews with select Philadelphia dance presenters and makers.[1] The final installment will be a first person account of my experience navigating the uneven playing field.

A dance scholar writes to me anonymously: “I have been told outright that I was declined a professorship for which I was more qualified than the successful candidate solely because I was female.”

Few women have such unquestionable evidence of discrimination against them, yet the numbers do speak to their predicament. The aim of this piece is to understand how and why gender bias arises in dance presenting.

While this work might unfortunately reinforce the gender binary, the data available is limited to discussion around male/female inequity. I was unable to find any dance makers currently living in Philadelphia who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming or other gender identities. (The two transgender artists and the one genderqueer artist mentioned in Part I live in other cities.) Their absence in the Philadelphia statistics and thus the discourse is conspicuous and demonstrates how marginalized they are in the field.

Similarly, the lack of support and visibility for dance artists of color in Philadelphia demands its own piece. For example, the Community Education Center, which has historically served dancemakers of color through residencies and presenting opportunities, has lost so much of its funding in recent years that it didn't meet the criteria for this study (four curated performances per year in the years 2011-13).

Those I did interview theorized several possible causes of gender inequity in dance presenting: women are perceived just as dancers, not makers; men are viewed/favored as the minority in dance; men have more access to educational and funding opportunities; there is a fetishization of the male body and a prioritization of male stories; men are socialized to be more assertive in building their careers. What follows are examples of these causes and some suggestions for change.

Amy Smith, co-founder and Co-Director of Headlong Dance Theater, has worked in collaboration with men for many years: "I have had many experiences where I was understood to be 'just a dancer' in Headlong, and it was assumed that Andrew or David was the decision maker or choreographer. I think being in a collaboration with two men both helped and hindered us. The unconscious biases of funders and presenters and press was satisfied by the presence of men, but a collaborative company was very confusing to everyone. The implicit questions being: Who is in charge? Who really made that piece? (We shared credit for all the work.)"

Men are the numerical minority in dance, but they are an elite class. As we see from the numbers in Part I, 19% of Philadelphia dancemakers are men, but they receive approximately 40% of the presenting opportunities.[2] Dancemaker Chelsea Murphy says: "I wonder if the imbalance sometimes occurs because organizations, especially non-profits, like to give opportunities to minorities, and in the performing arts men are the minority." Nanette Hudson Joyce, the Production Manager at Temple University's Conwell Dance Theater speculates: "It may have to do with the fact that men are rare in the field of dance and so sometimes seem to be valued more than perhaps they should be."

Dancemaker Curt Haworth speaks of how he benefited from this minority status: "When I was a beginning dancer, I got a lot of opportunities for which I was not as experienced as the women in the work because the choreographer felt they needed a man. This gave me not only more on-the-job training than my female peers, but also the confidence to become a dancer. This definitely helped me get ahead."

I posed the question to Haworth, *Are young men offered more scholarships because of their minority/elite status in dance?* "There is a dearth of men in the field, especially in the private studios and higher education. These institutions often kowtow to young men in order to attract them and keep them in their fold," says Haworth.

Not all minority statuses in dance confer such privileges, however. MJ Kaufman, a transgender playwright who trained as a dancer at Wesleyan speaks to barriers in dance education for transgender dance artists: "Often trans artists don't have access to education because the programs will be very gender normative. Many trans people struggle to access medical care, surgery, hormone treatment or just regular doctor visits. This can be an obstacle for a performing artist who depends on their body."

Gender inequity is also present in dance funding. For example, according to this Artists U statistical analysis of last year's Map Fund dance projects,[3] "Projects that didn't have a male leading or co-leading were half as likely to be funded as projects that included a male… But the applicant pool was not equally divided by gender; there were 38 applications from women and 25 from men."

This inequity in funding impacts presenting, as Terry Fox, Executive Director of Philadelphia Dance Projects (PDP), points out: "Funding plays a role in presenting for PDP. Contributed income is the only way we can sustain our projects and programs. It then could indirectly affect curating." If an artist who brings funding to the table is more appealing to presenters, and the study of the Map Fund above is representative of larger trends, then male dancemakers are much better positioned than their female peers to get their work on the stage.

Randy Swartz, Artistic Director of Dance Affiliates (based at the Annenberg Center), also finds that funding has a direct result on his

programming: “Look at your numbers another way. Rank all the companies by budget. I would bet that men dominate the top of the heap. Way more women are in the profession but have less access to resources, dancers and the means to a successful career. Since I present those international touring companies, I literally have fewer women to choose from.”

In addition to educational and funding opportunities, accolades such as awards might disproportionately represent men’s work. Samuel Antonio Reyes, who choreographs for theater and was nominated for a 2014 Barrymore Award, notes: “Less than half of the nominees for choreography were women and I was the only black choreographer nominated.” These Barrymore Award nominations do not reflect the pool of choreographers in Philadelphia. It is unclear as to whether the nomination committee is discriminatory or whether women and people of color simply don’t make it to the level of visibility to be considered. Both potential reasons are problematic.

The numbers and the testimonies above suggest that there is a largely uninterrogated affirmative action effort to balance the gender scales in a field which is populated by a majority of women. This disparity raises the question – do larger cultural forces support men’s ultimate advantages over women in contemporary dance? In my conversations with presenters and dance artists, topics including audience desires and attitudes surrounding gender, behavior and work all arose as possible explanations for this inequity.

According to a 2011 Dance/USA survey,[4] dance audiences are 73% female.[5] Could the presence of male bodies onstage drive ticket sales? Dance maker Gregory Holt suggests as much when he discusses the role of the male body and mind in dance: “I think audiences (both panel audiences and ticket-paying audiences) display sexism in who/what they want to see in dance. I think some audiences respond excitedly to the chance to look at dancing men. In terms of dancemakers rather than performers, I think male stories and male perspectives are given more weight.”

Might women’s disappearance at the upper echelons have to do with child rearing? Fox alludes to this when she attests: “Women in our society still deal with control of their lives.” Women frequently remain the primary caregivers for children in our society, limiting their capacity for sustaining and building a career.

And how much of men’s success may be due to their assertiveness? Holt points out that we still expect and reward different behaviors from men and women: “Masculine modes of talking, self-presentation, and negotiating are looked on favorably. However, even worse, when women empower themselves within this patriarchal scheme, or when they assume aggressive, ‘masculinized’ roles in a conversation, they are sometimes negatively perceived as being pushy or bossy.”

Lisa Kraus, Coordinator of the Bryn Mawr College Performing Arts Series, expands upon Holt’s ideas when she describes the kind of dance artist who succeeds: “The person has the strength of belief in their own work to keep at it despite the difficulties. This is huge. It's not entitlement exactly but related. I've seen in more men a sense that they should be able to get their work out, and a corresponding continual and dogged effort to do so. Being unafraid to offend, to cajole, to ask, to put themselves forward.”

The numbers show that grassroots organizations present more women. Megan Bridge and Peter Price, co-directors of thefidget space, explain why they present significantly higher numbers of female dancemakers: “When an organization is close to the ground, it is more likely to reflect ground conditions. We have very little institutional support at thefidget space, relying mostly on partnerships, community support, and individual donors. As difficult as that is in terms of sustainability, what it does mean is that our presenting platform is not dictated by institutions. It is very much an organic outgrowth of the people and artists that make up our community.”

The problem of gender inequity in dance presenting tends to grow as budgets increase, although that is not always the case. For instance, Kraus explains that Bryn Mawr College presents many female artists: “Bryn Mawr is an all-women's college, so in a way weare skewed relative to other presenters because it's part of the mission in presenting to represent the work of strong female artists in the field. We are concerned with representing different cultures and ethnicities. It's essentially an unpredictable mix that we end up with, but focusing in each area, when possible, on women who are doing great work.”

The reasons why gender inequity often increases in the higher echelons are woven into biases in education and funding and are arguably supported by larger cultural suppositions regarding behavior, capability, numerical equity and audience desire. It isn’t possible for presenters to change the landscape of the field alone, yet their role in choosing who is seen can perpetuate discrimination. Can bringing these numbers out of the shadows make any difference? Fox acknowledges: “If this happens unconsciously, than perhaps presenters have to “raise their consciousness” to right the balance... I think I am more concerned when a season (like the last one) does not present many Black, Asian or Latino artists on it, men or women. This is more troublesome to me.” Swartz admits, “I have never considered gender in making my decisions yet now because of the unbalance of opportunities I would be more inclined to present women-based companies.”

1 Of the nine presenters whose numbers I analyzed, five responded to my request for interviews. I was responsible for much of the programming at Mascher Space Cooperative during the timeframe of this research, and it is therefore not represented in this response because I considered this a conflict of interest. I will address my experience in this role in Part III of this series. I emailed forty philadelphia-based dancemakers and received responses from six of them, three men and three women. Additionally, one transgender former dancer responded.

2 I averaged the percentages of all nine presenters and found that while some are more equitable than others, overall male dancemakers are represented 40% of the time on Philadelphia stages.

3 This study looked at one funder for one year, the Multi-Arts Production Fund, based in New York. A broader look at multiple funders over multiple years is needed to understand the full scope of gender bias in dance funding.

4 *How Dance Audiences Engage: Summary Report from a National Survey of Dance Audiences* was an extensive survey commissioned by Dance/USA, conducted by Wolf Brown and supported by Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation.

5 This study gave a male/female gender breakdown but did not include sexual preference so we do not know how many of these dance concert-goers prefer men as sexual partners.

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