

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Gregory King

Dance/USA and The Quest for Heterogeneity in Diversity

by Gregory King

I believe that to be diverse is to expand our worldliness as it accommodates interaction with people from different cultural, economic and political backgrounds. Diversity promotes a universal appeal to be inclusive and supports a platform for variety. It also enhances social development and frees us from ethno- and egocentric viewpoints. So why is it that the frequent use of the word often alludes only to race and ethnicity?

The Dance/USA 2015 conference in Miami was the incubator for this question and many other conversations around inclusion, inequality, and diversity. The conference provided opportunities for these conversations to take place and while many included personal memories and emotional stories, transparency, and “realness” was the entry point to start dissecting the constructs of race.

A session titled *Off Balance: Resembling All of America Throughout Our Field is Still an Aspirational Goal—What are we prepared to do about it?*, addressed issues of homogeneity regarding dancers' ethnicity, size, and body type in companies, among the recipients of funding, and in faculty hiring. Panelist Toni Pierce, former Alvin Ailey dancer and co-artistic director of TU Dance in Minnesota, spoke persuasively about deconstructing ideologies set forth by her predecessors. She called for the examination of a newer, more inclusive model of approaching the way we teach and the expectations we have for our students. She added that by creating new standards to replace older ones (such as how high your arabesque should be for you to succeed as a dancer) in various dance genres, educators may start to embrace a more diverse range of students.

I listened to comments about issues that affected dancers, funders, presenters, choreographers, schools, and teachers. But after suggestions from the panelists and some audience members about what was necessary to effect change, I became increasingly aware

that addressing only skin color will not solve the quest for diversity—that diversity was about leveling the playing field in terms of how we value genres across the board, who gets funded, the language used on grant applications, multiple representation from different ethnic groups, and the opportunity for children to see themselves reflected in the teachers who teach and train them.

As the session continued and the conversations deepened, I asked myself four questions that I thought would help me understand the “whys” of homogeneity and “hows” of inclusion. (I was secretly hoping that institutional leaders were asking these same questions as they address diversity.)

1. Why should I care about what experiences my colleagues bring with them to the workplace?
2. Why should I care about the cultural differences of the people around me and do I ever consider how these differences uplift, aid, and benefit our community?
3. How am I sensitive to conversations on difference and inclusion?
4. Why do people need to dress, look, and speak like me, for me to feel safe?

With engaging dialogue, I became aware that diversity and inclusion were multi-faceted concepts for everyone; that they meant different things for different people, and conjured up various responses. Diversity and inclusion were negative for some, connoting separation, but positive for others, speaking to the idea of coming together. My personal reflection on diversity meant constantly trying to piece together my connection as a Jamaican-born artist to my African roots, while continuing to assert my purpose in America.

Africa–America, past–future, black–white, remember–move on: sometimes these dichotomies carry unbearable pain, undeniable anger, immeasurable pride, and the resounding power to survive. So believe me, there cannot be inclusion without acknowledgement of the lineage your colleagues carry with them, recognition of the present state of a country that continues to remind your colleague that their lives may not matter, and the willingness to stand beside and support those whose voices may not be heard—whose voices are sometimes silenced.

In a conversation with Amy Fitterer, executive director of Dance/USA, she candidly articulated that, as artists, it is our job to be responsive to our community. While she prefers to use the word equity instead of diversity, she believes that we must be aware of, inclusive of, and responsive to policies and practices that will level the playing field. Her impassioned attempts to continue to expand the conversation around equitability are a noteworthy commitment. Fitterer believes that equity is essential for all communities. She acknowledged that “the dance field is more radically diverse than that which is represented in the Dance/USA constituency,” adding, “Dance/USA will continue to recognize great ballet but we will also elevate all other dance models and dance makers.”

Although the session was conversation-heavy and ended without clearly stated solutions, core points of interest dominated the dialogue. These points of interest were addressed by way of four main questions:

1. What are the opportunities afforded white artists/dancers that are not afforded other ethnic groups that result in white artists being more likely to make, present, and tour work?
2. Are presenters and funding organizations doing enough to attract applicants across genres, ethnic groupings, level of visibility, popularity, fiscal standing and budget size, and artistic content (i.e., subject matter of works being performed)?
3. Are white artists writing better grants, with language more attuned to funders?
4. Are we really doing all we can to support and advocate for flamenco, tap, tango, Kathakali, special-needs artists, aerial art, belly dancing, Caribbean folk dance, and practitioners in public spaces who use the art form to address complex social issues?

Fitterer and her staff provided a platform for sensitive and candid conversations as we questioned, shared, and were adamant about change. The 2015 conference was engaging and edifying, and we intend to continue to remind ourselves that change starts closer to home; change starts with us.

With a glass in hand, I say, here's to seeing a shift in arts programming, cultural sensitivity to those who don't look like us, and an awareness and ownership of some of the things we take for granted.

Dance/USA 2015 Conference, *Diversity, Dance and Race*, Miami, June 17– 20, www.danceusa.org

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June 29, 2015