

A report on

The Future of Funding for Dance

from a convening at the
White Oak Plantation

October 23-25, 1999
Yulee, Florida

New England Foundation for the Arts

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**Convening on the Future of Support for Dance
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SUMMARY OF MEETING

Introduction

The New England Foundation for the Arts invited a group of twenty-nine artists, artist managers, agents, funders, service organization representatives, and presenters to the White Oak Plantation to give intensive consideration to the future of dance in the United States. The meeting, which was generously supported by the Howard Gilman Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, was designed as a forum to identify and discuss a wide range of needs in the creation, presentation, and touring of dance, as well as the organizational and resource development that must support these interlocked activities.

The overall discussion was intended to be inclusive and in general reference to all forms of dance: modern, culturally-specific, ballet, and cross-over and hybrid dance-based artistic endeavors.

The group's charge was to define the needs, determine the extent to which those needs are or are not being met, and discuss how unmet needs should be addressed. The discussion was a highly practical one, focusing on the challenges the participants face every day as they work to "make dance happen," and on possible actions that could effect change on the levels of the individual, the organization, and the field.

This summary follows the course of the discussion over two days, and highlights topics and themes that emerged and that have informed a continuing process of discussion among the participants and others in the field.

An Inventory of the Field

The first day of the conference was devoted to taking stock of the field from the perspectives of each of the categories of participants—presenters, artists, managers and agents, and funders. The discussion began with a detailed “S.W.O.T. analysis,” inventorying each sector’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Presenters

The participants emphasized the growing strength of many presenters, as they redefine their role in developing and producing new work, and act more frequently as part of dynamic networks of artists and other presenters (such as the hub site network of the National Dance Project). Presenters at their best are building relationships with artists and artist managers, as well as within their communities, thinking about how dance can be presented in new spaces for new audiences.

A paper on the history of dance touring support, developed for this White Oak convening, noted in its conclusion that “dance is part of a new ecology of arts funding that combines limited public support with a diversified base of private support responding not only to traditional philanthropic or patronage interests, but to educational and social goals, entrepreneurial instincts, and marketing imperatives.” Many presenters have responded to this new ecology by developing strong entrepreneurial skills. They have discovered how to use non-arts structures to benefit their programs, their constituents, and the artists with whom they work.

At the same time, presenters face a range of challenges that often seem daunting. The non-profit context of the presenting world and the often scarce resources limit the time, resources, and experience available to expand their knowledge and work, engage in risky collaboration, develop international work, and execute promotional strategies that can compete with the commercial side of the business. Presenters may feel buffeted by trends as the field continues to evolve, and struggle to understand—and communicate to their audiences—how the old genres are changing and cross-fertilizing. And, in a field that often has been driven by strong, creative personalities, there is a sense that too few new leaders are coming up, and that greater diversity in leadership is needed to build a stronger base for the future.

The group agreed that, despite its risks, collaboration is a key to future strength. For some presenters, collaborations with local artists to develop projects may be a way to begin that minimizes risk. The commercial world, for all its differences, may offer non-profit presenters models for financing work, and for diversifying and maximizing revenue, that also reduce risk. In adapting such models, however, presenters should understand the extent of marketing expertise that is required, and should analyze how “venture capital” models may need to be adapted to be useful. Presenters also must understand the impact of

spectacle experiences and the clout of Broadway shows on the presenting marketplace, and know where they can and cannot compete.

Discussion acknowledged that successful competition will often rest on strong community connections. A stronger and more pervasive critical public dialogue about dance, especially in the press, would serve to further strengthen the role of dance in the community. Presenter-organized community residency activities, strategically connected with presenter missions, can communicate effectively the value of dance to audiences. The group warned against allowing financial pressures to decrease community residency efforts, as that will only feed a cycle of disconnection from community and from potential sources of support.

Artists

The strength of the artist community lies in its diversity and flexibility. Artists can work both in isolation and in collaboration. They are not bound by language and therefore can cross lines in diverse communities. With their “authentic voice” expressed in the instrument of their own bodies, dance artists can often act as instruments of change, “enlarging humanity through our striving to go beyond ourselves,” as one conference participant put it. And through change and challenge, dance has endured, building a rich and varied history that continues to feed the creativity of today’s artists.

The challenges are not to be underestimated, however—many of them lying in how artists may perceive themselves in today’s complex world. Too often, the group noted, artists define themselves as impoverished and isolated, and unable to communicate with their potential markets. They relinquish control to managers and presenters, and compromise their work to accommodate organizational structures, or existing models of presenting and residency. Funders may reinforce this problem in structuring much of their support to presenters, not directly to artists.

Dance, while enduring as an art form, is also of the moment—a fragile and fleeting experience that is easily lost. In a world where public dialogue is not always friendly to the artist, where dance literacy is limited, and where dance must compete for people’s time and attention, where might dance artists find tomorrow’s opportunities?

Conference participants urged artists to exercise their imaginations about how and where to develop and present work, and to concentrate on making connections. These connections may be in the community, where dance artists can serve as translators and facilitators of civic dialogue. They may be “virtual,” where dance artists can use the advantages of technology to create, develop, and market themselves and their work.

Agents/Managers

The agents and managers in the dance field offer perspectives that are different from, but complementary to, its other players. Agents and managers understand the necessary blend of business and art; they have an overview of the marketplace for dance. They offer stability and are accustomed to working productively in networks. And, in dance, the group agreed, management is more often supportive and passionate than driven by money and power.

Managers and agents face their share of challenges as well, as they seek to reconcile the needs of artists and presenters, find ways to address the needs of emerging artists, and recruit and retain new staff to ensure ongoing stability in the field. This latter challenge is made even more difficult by the low pay, high volume of work, and lack of mobility that characterize the business. The group acknowledged the business needs to change in response to today's environment, both in how a new generation of agents are brought along in the field and how this new generation manages the distribution of work in the Information Age.

Conference participants saw technology as an opportunity to effect some of this change, through sharing of information, marketing, and merchandising. But they also recognized that technology could pose a threat, as it might divert audiences and attention away from live dance performance. Even as agents and managers are tending their own store, by bringing in and mentoring young people in the profession, they must also work with their artists to convince communities, presenters, and funders to continue to support live dance.

Funders

Funders' contributions to the field go beyond simply writing checks. They collect and disseminate data, they develop and sponsor convenings, they provide structures for organizational development and evaluation, and they share their passion and knowledge to influence others. Funders also provide a kind of institutional overview of the field, understanding the big picture of arts and culture policy and funding, addressing the "big issues," and holding the histories of many constituent organizations. Impressive gains have been made in the entire field of dance thanks to the risks taken by funders to benefit the dance community.

The funders' arms-length, overview perspective, however, may distance them from the field they are trying to serve. Most funders lack direct practical experience in dance; they have a tendency to be prescriptive, theoretical, and risk-averse. They often must work within geographical or topical constraints, as well as financial limits and the limits of board interest and attention. Foundation interests and goals tend to shift, not always in sync with the field. And, while funders may offer an imprimatur to a grantee through their support, they also have the ability to derail the aspirations of applicants whom they choose not to support.

Nevertheless, funders have a unique role to play in ensuring the future viability of dance. The conference participants urged the funding community to set the stage for future support of dance, as advocates and educators about the art form's importance, as facilitators of honest dialogue and exchange of information, as case-makers with new and potential funders, and as sources of long-term capitalization for dance organizations.

Dance Field Needs

With the S.W.O.T. analysis in mind, the conference participants met to generate lists of specific needs in the creation, presentation, and touring of dance.

The needs in CREATION centered around:

- *People* – Loyal and talented staff and dancers; trustworthy partners with knowledge and experience in all aspects of the creative process.
- *Places* – Studio and theater space for research and development, rehearsal, and presentation.
- *Time/Money* – Resources that buy time to develop work, opportunity to present work, and ability to continue to refine work.
- *Creative capital* – The ideas and inspiration that nourish creativity, and the critical feedback that advances work in conception and execution.

The needs in PRESENTING focused on:

- *Networking* – Mechanisms for meeting, collaboration, partnership development, communications.
- *Research* – To develop knowledge about artists and audiences.
- *Mission* – Affirmation of identity, sense of mission, and excitement about the artistic experience.
- *Best practices* – Acknowledgment, codification, and diffusion of knowledge about the highest level of present practice.

Finally, the needs in TOURING were identified as:

- *Marketing* – Advancing the ability of both presenters and artists to develop promotional strategies and materials, and to engage in targeted marketing in communities.
- *Community engagement* – Finding the balance between residency and performance, and matching artist and community interests and needs.
- *Coordination* – The development of good touring arrangements for artists, a balanced approach to venue types and sizes, and strategic use of sponsorship.

Looking Forward and Taking Action

With the inventory of the field and its needs as a basis, the conference participants devoted their second day of deliberations to discussing goals and strategies for developing the capacity, sustainability, and productive creativity of the dance field.

The group identified five general areas of concern: “turning the lights on” (which includes education and advocacy), linkages and access, space, personnel, and financial resources. Extended discussion at the conference generated an initial list of goals and strategies in each area. Subsequent to the conference, participants, organized in five working groups, have considered further the recommendations of the conference, refined those recommendations, and determined priorities.

This section summarizes the action ideas forwarded by the conference to the working groups, and then outlines the working group priority recommendations. These priority recommendations should form the basis for continued discussion and responsive action in the field.

Turning the Lights On

Audiences, one conference participant noted, too often just sit in the dark and look at the stage. What further commitment could be developed among audiences and in communities if dance “turned the lights on” and offered compelling reasons for involvement beyond the passive act of watching a performance?

There may be many ways to turn the lights on, including education and advocacy that connects dance to people’s lives, increases the awareness and understanding of dance, and influences opinion leaders; the sophisticated application of technology so that dance is a full player in the digital economy; and the development of multiple paths for critical response and feedback in the field.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Design and implement a national dance literacy campaign to extend how the general public grasps, uses, includes, and experiences dance as an art form. Key components would include:
 - (a) Development – creation of a dance literacy curriculum (for all age groups, not just K-12) to provide a basic framework for dance, its study and experience, both as a participant and as an audience member. Work from dance “classics” (across cultures) to create a common base of understanding of what dance is and can be.

- (b) Dissemination and use – a comprehensive strategy for engaging a wide audience in developing dance literacy through such avenues as:
- Use of the Internet to educate and connect around dance information and activity
 - Developing dance at the community level to provide opportunities for celebration, fact-to-face interaction, and exploration of issues
 - Further development of educational programs that enable audiences to meet with dance scholars and dance practitioners before and after performances
 - Training for choreographers, dancers, and students of dance to help them communicate better verbally with audiences about the art form

Linkages and Access

A clear theme throughout the two days at White Oak was that strengthening the dance field depends on making stronger connections among its many players. Conferees talked about collaborations, networks, sharing of information, partnerships—all words recognizing that the key to progress will be in the continual and active exchange of information and experience among linked participants. The elements of this category included:

Networks – Existing networks—especially the National Dance Project, which is the only national network focusing exclusively on dance—could be the basis for the further development of linkages in the field. The National Presenters Network and projects active in particularly geographic regions (e.g. the Ohio Presenters Network, the California Arts Presenters, and the New England Dance Touring Program) are examples of potential models and network components.

International – The group urged the extension of existing networks into the international arena to expand the potential for collaboration and the markets for work.

Best Practices – Identifying, understanding, and disseminating information about practices and models that work—both within and outside dance and the arts—could be a key function of networks.

Convening – The field already relies heavily on meetings and conferences to exchange information and “do business.” These convenings are important, not only for their formal content, but for the informal interchange that takes place. As the network is developed, it will benefit from increased direct exchange among participants, and the energy and creativity that can be generated in gatherings of committed, involved individuals.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:

2. Affirm, strengthen, and extend existing networks that provide support for dance both at the creation/production stage, as well as the presentation/touring stage by:

- Supporting artists to engage in “research” that does not require a product
 - Providing flexible backing to successful projects to extend their touring life and support presenters to take them on
 - Encouraging the development of relationships with international networks
 - Extending more consistent support to artists
 - Using technology to provide broader access to information and to enhance the functioning of the network
3. Strengthen and expand opportunities for dance professionals to convene, with particular attention to how such opportunities can be opened up to provide greater linkage and access among the different players in the field (artists, presenters, agents/managers, audiences, funders), as well as between dance in this country and abroad.
 4. Engage dance practitioners, presenters, consultants, funders, service organizations, and managers to find a “network solution” to the problem of weak and inadequate administrative infrastructure in the field. Develop a “stable” of expertise to provide services and counsel to dance practitioners in a timely and flexible way.

Space

Even in the Age of Technology, dance continues, for the most part, to take place in physical venues—studios and stages of various kinds, as well as classrooms, offices, meeting places—although these venues are increasingly tied to technological infrastructure. Creating, supporting, and making effective use of a broad range of quality dance spaces is a significant need of the field.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION:

5. Develop a network of regional dance centers around the country to provide:
 - *Dance laboratories* – research and development space
 - *Production centers* – where dance ideas can be developed into live productions and media-based productions
 - *Performance venues* – places where performances, workshops, and residency activities can take place

Dance centers would also become the hubs of a network of venues capable of supporting commissioning and touring (as in the current National Dance Project), and would welcome a broad definition of dance that encompasses interdisciplinary work and dance by-products.

Personnel

The people of the dance field—on stage, behind the scenes, in administrative offices, etc.—are the fuel that keeps dance vital and alive. The field must look to support and strengthen its people and their capacity to do good work. Within this category, therefore, conferees identified two themes:

Mentorship and professional development – dancers at many stages of their careers, presenters, and agents and managers can all benefit from learning relationships with experienced practitioners, forums and workshops, academic programs, and conferences and other convenings.

Research – The various sectors in the field all require time and resources for gathering information, reflecting on current practices, and generating new ideas and creative material.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:

6. Identify and develop key mentorship and professional development opportunities in the field, especially for presenters and for dancers in periods of career transition. Reverse the isolation of individuals in the field by plugging them into networks and membership opportunities. Build on existing efforts, strengthening them and linking them to each other and to those who could benefit from them.
7. Recognize the resources that exist already in college and university arts administration programs, and work to link those resources with the people in the dance field who seek training, advanced education, and individualized learning relationships.

Financial Resources

Action on the scope of what has emerged from the White Oak conference will require significant and sustained new resources for dance. Dance practitioners, administrators, and supporters must develop a comprehensive approach that moves beyond the daily struggle for “just enough” funds to a long-term, diversified resource strategy.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:

8. Develop an endowment strategy to aggregate a significant corpus of funds to be used to fund a network of creative, presenting, and touring activity in dance in perpetuity. Build on the existing network represented by the National Dance Project to develop and implement this strategy.

9. Support diversification of earned income by developing risk capital and other mechanisms that encourage creative and entrepreneurial risk taking and new approaches to the creation and distribution of dance.

Next Steps

White Oak brought together a varied and representative group of stakeholders, practitioners, and thoughtful activists in the dance field. Each participant left the meeting having expressed a commitment to work on an individual basis to address the issues raised by the convening, and to work within their organizations and across organizational and sector boundaries, as well. The group also recognized the benefits of continued deliberation and collective action to advance the thinking developed at White Oak, with particular reference to the nine priority recommendation outlined above.

This work on multiple levels will be guided and sustained by certain principles that were implicit throughout the White Oak discussions:

- We should work “from dance out,” that is, we should continue to explore the critical needs of the field to ensure its vitality and stability over time.
- We should balance supply and demand responses, understanding that as we commit resources and energy to developing audiences and outlets for dance (demand), we should also nourish creativity and new work (supply).
- The space, the people, and the resources to advance the vision developed at White Oak should be acquired, developed, managed, and sustained collaboratively and systemically. An interdependent network with many centers and cooperating sectors will form the strongest base for the long-term development of the dance field.

Different elements of this network may take on different roles, based to some extent on roles assumed and carried out in the past. NEFA is committed to a two-fold response to the ideas and recommendations developed at White Oak:

1. NEFA will continue to play a convening and facilitating role with its service organization partners and the White Oak participants, to establish ongoing working groups to focus on development and implementation of specific recommendations. A second convening will be planned to assess progress and advance next steps.
2. NEFA will take a lead role in testing a key idea to come out of White Oak—that of the development of significant endowment-based funding for dance creation, presentation, and touring. Working from the base of the National Dance Project, NEFA will explore the feasibility of an endowment effort that might combine national challenge incentives with regionally and locally-based fund raising.

In conclusion, NEFA is extremely grateful for the ongoing partnerships and participation so integral to the vitality of these assessment and planning efforts.

Convening and Report Acknowledgements

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The Future of Funding for Dance **White Oak Plantation, October 23-25, 1999**

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