



**Production Residencies for Dance:
Pilot Program Evaluation
Summary Findings**

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In a 2009 study¹ the New England Foundation for the Arts found that U.S. dance work is often premiered before it has been fully produced and tours before it is ready, making the work less competitive internationally and placing both artists and audiences at a disadvantage. With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, NEFA launched Production Residencies for Dance (PRD) as part of its National Dance Project (NDP) in 2010. The experiment supported the refinement of new dance projects in later stages of development in order to produce works that are more fully realized and ready to tour, develop new residency partners, and give greater visibility to residency opportunities.

Lessons from the first dance companies funded in the PRD experiment have implications for dance administrators, dance producers, and funders as they consider how to maximize the value of various types of residencies. Six dance companies received funding during PRD’s initial phase to refine new works and prepare them for premiere and touring. By all accounts and from multiple perspectives, the production residencies contributed in major ways to the perceived quality of each company’s presentation of work at the time of premiere and in subsequent touring.²

PRD Cohort 1

| Dance Company | New Work | Residency Partner | Premiere Venue |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---|---|
| Dayna Hanson | <i>Gloria’s Cause</i> | On The Boards | On The Boards |
| Big Dance | <i>Supernatural Wife</i> | Pace University | Jacob’s Pillow |
| Dean Moss | <i>Nameless Forest</i> | The World Performance Project and Yale Repertory | The Kitchen |
| Ragamala | <i>Sacred Earth</i> | The Cowles Center for Dance and the Performing Arts | The Cowles Center for Dance and the Performing Arts |
| Martha Clarke | <i>Angel Reapers</i> | Hopkins Center, Dartmouth | Hopkins Center, Dartmouth |
| Everett Dance | <i>Brain Storm</i> | Hopkins Center, Dartmouth | Hopkins Center, Dartmouth |
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¹ Supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

² The first cohort was tracked in an evaluation conducted by RMC Research; the lessons in this brief were derived from the evaluation.

What is a production residency?

The production residency is a residency opportunity scheduled either prior to premiere or post-premiere and prior to tour. Unlike other types of residencies, the focus of production residencies is on access to technical facilities and staff and, depending on need, other types of onsite support, i.e. artistic, directorial, and/or dramaturgical support. Typically the production residency is the final (or almost final) opportunity to bring together all elements of production in a performance space, and potentially in front of audiences.

In the first cohort of six residencies, there was no “one size fits all” residency model. Residencies varied in length from three days to two weeks; by point in time in the development-premiere-tour cycle; in structure and continuity (for example, some broke the residency time period up into segments and/or different venues); and by the focus of work during the residency—some refined one or more components such as lighting or music, some reworked a section, some obtained audience feedback, and most worked on coordinating separately-developed production elements.

Lesson #1: Advance funding and planning are critical, but timing is tricky.

It is difficult to predict very far in advance when and whether a company will be in the position to take full advantage of a production residency—which may pose challenges for funders with fixed funding cycles. A production residency must be scheduled at a time when the dance company can focus on refining production elements rather than carrying out early stage or mid-stage work development.³ While the line between development and production refinement is admittedly blurry, production residencies seem to work better when the work is pre-determined, that is, it is more than a “work-in-progress,” and the dance company can take full advantage of extended time in a carefully-selected performance space.

One implication is that funders interested in late-stage production residencies may need to establish and communicate expectations about benchmarks that should be achieved in a work prior to scheduling a residency. Another implication is that funders will need to allow some leeway in proposed plans to allow scheduling of residencies at optimal times—a fact that may not be known at the time of making application for funding.

Similarly, it is difficult for a dance company to predict even six months in advance the specific goals for a production residency: *Will the time best be spent on working out a lighting problem that has emerged as the scenery was completed? How much reworking of a segment is needed to accommodate substitutions of dancers? What technology is best for boosting the audio for vocalizations?* Assuming a fairly lengthy development process, the specific objectives for the production residency will take shape over a period of time.

³ Some dance companies employ a development process which is iterative in nature, making it difficult to know when a work moves from mid to late-stage.

Lesson #2: Finding the right residency partner takes time and effort.

The most important part of the dance company's advance planning is selection of a residency partner who has the appropriate resources and skills needed to advance a particular work. Because it is difficult for dance companies to gather adequate information about possible residency partners⁴, decisions tend to be made opportunistically rather than strategically--leading to potential disappointments in configuration of space, schedule interruptions, miscommunications about technical resources, and so forth. Pre-planning, including a "must do" scouting visit to the venue, prior to commitment to a partner is essential. It's also important to work out proposed roles and responsibilities as well as estimated cost factors well in advance of making a formal commitment. Other topics to include in the pre-planning discussion, including: availability/extra costs associated with equipment; crew schedules; any outreach activities planned or expected; interest in feedback from audiences, and the desired characteristics of audiences.

An ideal plan is to select a residency partner who will later present the work because they typically become strongly invested in their role in refining the technical quality of the work, and often go far beyond expected commitments to ensure a quality product. Even with the best-laid plans, various types of setbacks crunch the time available in the venue and unanticipated hurdles need to be overcome. In the pilot, there were many examples of staff from the residency partners overcoming obstacles and rising to the challenge of ensuring that the work on stage met artists' visions.

Lesson #3: Expressing an explicit commitment to production residency goals is a good practice.

During the production residency pilot, dance companies were asked as part of the project's evaluation to identify in writing specific goals for the production residency period a few weeks in advance of the start. A short list of written objectives facilitated discussion with the members of the dance company, production partners (e.g., technical designer, composer), and staff from the residency partner, ensuring that everyone knew the expected outcomes of the intense residency period. Sharing written goals is a way to build the buy-in that becomes necessary when extra effort is required. The goals can be used for daily check-in meetings to guide discussion with the partner about adjustments that may become necessary, e.g., providing additional lighting, assisting with set changes, securing alternative equipment.

Lesson #4: Technical staff are key players in a production residency.

In most of the production residencies, the day-to-day interface between the dance company and the residency partner is handled by technical managers and production supervisors. Their direct involvement in planning conversations from the outset is critical along with participation in end-of-day check-in meetings about progress on the residency goals. Residency partners' technical staff members were critical to the success of the residencies—providing advice about practical problems, problem solving, and freely sharing their expertise. As more companies create work that demands integration of multiple technological elements, the roles played by technical staff will become even more critical.

⁴ The problem was well-documented in Strokosch, C. & Weisz, L. (2011). *Mind the gap: Artist residencies and dance*. Providence, RI: Alliance of Artists Communities.

Lesson #5: Ideally, both dance companies and residency partners achieve capacity-building goals.

Even though the focus is on the refinement of a particular pre-determined work, ideally a dance company would be able to take away skills and capacities from a production residency that are generalizable to future projects. For example, a company might try out different work routines, learn to use digital images in a new way, expand their ways of deepening connections to audience members, figure out how to scale a work for different size tour venues, and so forth.

It's important that both partners in the relationship think about what they will gain from the residency in terms of generalizable experience and capacity. For example, does the residency partner see an opportunity to build new skills for technical staff? Or, to connect to new audiences? Or perhaps, to try out forms of outreach? Or, to develop a new relationship with a group within their own community that they had not reached previously?

Lesson #6: Production residencies can be opportunities for gaining feedback from trusted colleagues and audiences.

Extended production residencies provide a valuable opportunity to obtain authentic feedback, and dance artists in the first cohort did so in different ways although in most cases, they had not necessarily planned in advance how to do so. In retrospect, the feedback, especially from residency partners, was critical in refinement of the work. Previewing work for potential presenters is also a possibility for the late-stage residency but should be approached with caution. It is often difficult for viewers to grasp a sense of a fully realized work from a sample or portion, especially when works incorporate many technical elements. Suggestions from the pilot about previewing include: control the situation by showing segments interspersed with description in a lecture-demo approach; show only segments in final form; and/or invite only observers who have enough studio experiences themselves to "fill in" a vision of the finished work.

Lesson #7: The building of longer-term relationships between dance companies and residency partners should be an explicit goal.

Production residencies can have longer-term value for both parties if the relationship potential is considered in advance, and especially if the dance company has adequate time (and perhaps help) to think through the ramifications of different choices. Ideally for the return on investments for the entire dance field, production residencies should be seen as much more than "rental" opportunities. The intention is to build up the field with more seasoned and committed dance producers and advocates who can nurture the development of new works and develop new audiences for dance. A robust and supportive touring network depends on solid relationships among presenters and dance companies.