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NEA ARTS



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A Thorny but Wonderful Problem

Sustaining and Nourishing American Dance's Past and Future

In 1965, the first grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was personally delivered by Vice President Hubert Humphrey to American Ballet Theatre, beginning a long and productive relationship between the NEA and the American dance field. Other grants would soon follow, encouraging the proliferation of dance companies, presenters, choreographers, and service organizations that were making dance in all forms available to audiences across the country and, indeed, throughout the world.

Today, American dance is at a crossroads. The 20th century saw an explosion of creativity that has left us with an unmatched legacy of masterworks. The hallmark of the nation's dance artists, however, has always been forward looking, with resources rarely allocated to preserving the past. It is a thorny but wonderful problem



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ON THE COVER:

**Two dancers from DanceBrazil perform in Jelon Vieira's *Ritmos*.
Photo by Tom Pich.**



PHOTO BY KEVIN ALLEN

Dance Director Douglas Sonntag.

to have a history so rich that its stewardship creates a dilemma between supporting preservation of dances of the past and creation of dances for the future.

Mindful of the dual need to develop a new generation of dance artists as well as save the best of our heritage, the

NEA has allocated significant funds over the years to a variety of projects that achieve both goals. Most recently, the American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius initiative has proven to be a lifeline for dance companies seeking to revive works that have not been performed in many years and choreographers seeking to revisit their own earlier choreographic efforts.

Providing access to dance performances has been another ongoing commitment of the NEA that has not wavered over time. While touring is the financial lifeblood of a dance company, a performance outside of a company's home base is not an inexpensive proposition. Thus, the NEA supports touring by companies as well as education and community engagement activities that deepen the impact and reach of the art. Grants are awarded as well to presenters to ensure that dance remains an affordable offering in their communities.

Ensuring the strength of the ecosystem that sustains and nourishes American dance has been a continuing priority of the NEA. These pages highlight just a few of the ways in which the NEA helps dance artists and their audiences to flourish.

Douglas Sonntag
Director, Dance

First Steps

The NEA Fosters Dance Artists and Audiences Nationwide

In the mid-1960s, the U.S. boasted only a small contingent of professional dance companies clustered in a few urban centers. By contrast, for its first of two deadlines for fiscal year (FY) 2009 Access to Artistic Excellence funding, the NEA received more than 200 applications to support dance projects in 26 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The number of potential projects and geographic reach increase significantly with the inclusion of dance projects submitted through other grant categories. By its 40th anniversary in 2006, the Arts Endowment had awarded more than \$300 million to support dance companies, producers, choreographers, festivals, workshops, service organizations, and other projects.

The NEA has played a catalytic role in nurturing, growing, and preserving America's dance heritage.

Early funding from the NEA allowed companies to lengthen their seasons, employ more dancers, and develop national and regional touring schedules, often in partnership with the emerging state arts agencies. Through the Expansion Arts program (1971–95), the NEA also fostered diversity in the field via support for artists and organizations working in other cultural traditions, including the Dance Theater of Harlem and Ballet Hispanico. Most important, artistic and administrative dance staff were, for the first time, able to work full-time in their field.

The Arts Endowment helped broaden the audience for dance not only through touring support, but also by funding broadcast programs such as *Dance in America*, which exponentially increased the reach of live dance performances. These broadcasts also helped preserve dance presentations for future generations of artists and audiences. Another early preservation effort was the

NEA-commissioned *Images of American Dance*, a study of dance documentation and archival resources in six U.S. cities, which resulted in the Dance Heritage Coalition, a body committed to the preservation of dance works that, unlike in other performing arts, existed primarily in the memories of dance artists.

The Arts Endowment also produced research reports such as *Raising the Barre: The Geographic, Financial, and Economic Trends of Nonprofit Dance Companies* (2003), a comprehensive study of the nonprofit dance world.



PHOTO BY PAUL B. GOODE

The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's performance of *Another Evening: Serenade/The Proposition*, a new piece by Jones on the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, was featured at the NEA-supported 75th anniversary of the American Dance Festival, which was attended by participants of the NEA Arts Journalism Institute for Dance.

The following pages present a microcosm of the NEA's continuing support for projects in the dance field. These range from the creation of accessible dance works in northern California and a Southwestern dance festival for U.S. and world companies to the resurrection of underperformed historic ballets in New England and a tour of a new multimedia dance work created in the Midwest. In addition to performances, the NEA supports projects such as an education program aimed at creating new generations of dance artists and aficionados in central Texas as well as a national service organization based in the nation's capital that advocates to give the nation's dance professionals a voice.

Tudor Revival

Boston Ballet Restages *Dark Elegies*

In 2008, the ballet world celebrated the centennial of the birth of Antony Tudor, one of the 20th century's foremost choreographers. Boston Ballet Artistic Director Mikko Nissinen saw this anniversary as the perfect opportunity to introduce his dancers and his audience to Tudor's work, which had rarely been seen in Boston or performed by the company. Boston Ballet chose to present *Dark Elegies*, one of the choreographer's most well-known "psychological" ballets, a mode pioneered by Tudor and characterized by an emphasis on the exploration of the characters' emotions.

working directly with Tudor made Mahler "intimately knowledgeable about the style and this particular ballet. First he sets the ballet and then he starts coaching the different casts so that the intent behind everything is correct. That way you control the integrity."

Nissinen also felt strongly that having live music was important to the production's aesthetic. *Dark Elegies* is set to Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*). The company engaged local baritone Philip Lima to perform alongside the Boston Ballet Orchestra, a performance hailed by the *Boston Globe* as

"impassioned, mellifluous."

Performed as part of a trio of ballets titled *Three Masterpieces*, *Dark Elegies* was bookended by George Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* and Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*, ballets that both complemented and contrasted with Tudor's work. Nissinen said, "[*Concerto Barocco* has] a spiritual similarity [with *Dark Elegies*] and yet they're so contrasting. I felt it really cleansed the palate for the audience to receive *Dark Elegies*...

In the Upper Room is a contemporary, abstract, sort of triple espresso overdrive ballet. So you come from a calm, profound place to a dizzying environment."

Three Masterpieces ran for six performances March 15–18, 2008, and was attended by more than 9,000 people. The *Boston Globe* described *Dark Elegies* as the "quiet heart of the evening." The *Globe's* review also questioned why it had taken so long to bring the work to Boston, proving that Boston Ballet's efforts and thoughtfulness were not only appreciated, but also resulted in a performance that successfully embodied Tudor's original masterpiece.



PHOTO BY ROSALIE O'CONNOR

Boston Ballet dancers perform Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies*.

Nissinen credits the NEA's more than 20 years of support for Boston Ballet with alleviating budget constraints and helping the organization to present productions of the highest quality. When done correctly, Nissinen asserted, *Dark Elegies* can be an "emotional earthquake." In order to ensure artistic excellence, the Antony Tudor Ballet Trust provided Boston Ballet with not only permission to perform the ballet, but most importantly, the knowledge of Tudor expert Donald Mahler. Mahler worked with the company on everything from casting the ballet to teaching the choreography. Nissinen explained that Mahler's past experience

Full Exposure

Ballet East Brings Modern Dance to East Austin

“**Ballet East** shatters the myth that one has to live west of Interstate 35 to be a highly trained dancer,” said dance critic Sondra Lomax. This is a testament to the work of Rodolfo Mendez, who in 1978 founded the Ballet East Dance Company. Mendez’s determination exposed the low-income neighborhood of East Austin to modern dance, providing opportunities for local dancers and choreographers to develop their skills.

Ballet East presents a minimum of eight performances a year, including new works and restagings set on the company by local and nationally recognized choreographers. The company also provides youth internships in stagecraft, presents community-wide folk and traditional arts festivals, and runs Dare to Dance, an afterschool dance program for students ages 7 to 15 who are at risk of dropping out of school. Dare to Dance was recognized in 2002 and 2003 as a Coming Up Taller semifinalist.

In order to broaden its reach among East Austin youth, Ballet East partnered with East Memorial High School (formerly Johnston High School) for the 2007-2008 school year. In partnership with the school, the company presented two dance demonstrations and seven in-school performances for the entire student body. With 80 percent of the students coming from families with limited economic means, this opportunity to view live, professional dance was rare. “You wonder if the kids will be interested,” said Mendez. “But they sat through all the performances... Seeing dance live keeps their attention better than viewing a tape.”

The company also took 240 eleventh- and twelfth-grade students to dance productions by Ballet East and fellow local companies Ballet Austin and Tapestry Dance Company, an opportunity Mendez said would not have been possible without NEA grant support. For many of the students, this was their first experience in a



PHOTO BY JOSE MEDINA

The Ballet East Dance Company works with high schools in the low-income neighborhood of East Austin.

professional theater, seeing how the lighting, sound, and set all contribute to the final production. As part of the field trips, Ballet East arranged for the students to meet the dancers and choreographers.

Through the school’s Arts Academy, company dancers and choreographers held in-school classes in dance fundamentals and Horton modern technique. Ballet East also opened up master classes to the entire school, which were taught by Regina Larkin, artistic director of New York City’s Joyce Trisler Danscompany, and Francisco Gella, a freelance choreographer who has worked with Philadanco.

“Exposure” was the key word for Ballet East’s year at East Memorial High School. From in-school demonstrations to master classes to field trips to professional productions, Ballet East was invested in providing the students with as much access to the world of dance as possible, creating a new generation of dance audiences, and—for the students who have gone on to take Ballet East classes full-time—perhaps a future as a dancer.

Team Work

The Bebe Miller Company's Collaborative Effort for *Necessary Beauty*

The NEA has a long history of supporting work by choreographer Bebe Miller; during the 1980s, she received four NEA Choreographers Fellowships. Over the years, the Bebe Miller Company has received grants to create new repertoire, while presenters nationwide have received support to bring the choreographer's work to new audiences. In 2007, the NEA joined five dance presenters in supporting the commission of Miller's latest endeavor, *Necessary Beauty*. Although the piece premiered Oct. 1, 2008 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, during the two-year development, arts centers in Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, and Montana all helped bring *Necessary Beauty* to fruition.

Necessary Beauty is a 90-minute, multimedia dance piece about the unexpected, artful moments of daily life. Five dancers of varying ages and body types join Miller onstage, but the offstage action is just as important. The creative team included a dramaturge, playwright, video artist, digital artist, and composer/musician Albert Mathias, who played a live score. "I really have to stress the whole teamwork of [producing this piece]," Miller said. "It is a different way of making work than I think many choreographers do. It's a strategy. I've spent a lot of time with the collaborators, and that whole total picture is my work."

Her strategy works. Writing in the *Columbus Dispatch*, Barbara Zuck deemed *Necessary Beauty* the most flawlessly constructed of the five Miller pieces Ohio State has presented since Miller joined the university faculty. The choreographer traded her New York apartment for a house in Columbus nine years ago, when her alma mater offered her a full-time job. She has a house, a garden, and an enviable working environment at Ohio State that encourages collaboration. Video and digital artists created their *Necessary Beauty* footage at the university's Advanced Computing Center for Arts and



PHOTO BY JULIETA CERVANTES

Six women of all ages dance in Bebe Miller's *Necessary Beauty*: Yen-Fang Yu, Bebe Miller, Cynthia Oliver, and Kathleen Hermesdorf, standing; and Kristina Isabelle and Angie Hauser, sitting.

Design. Charles Helm, director of performing arts, was particularly pleased to see Miller make use of the center. At a major university like Ohio State, it's important that artists "join forces with academic partners" to fulfill the university's research mission, Helm said.

Two other campuses also played key roles in developing *Necessary Beauty*. In July of 2007, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois hosted Miller's company for a creative residency, and a few weeks later, she gave a "performance in progress" at the Bates (College) Dance Festival in Lewiston, Maine. After the Ohio State premiere, *Necessary Beauty* toured to New York, the Krannert Center, and the Myrna Loy Center in Helena, Montana. Reviewing *Necessary Beauty* in the *New York Times*, Roslyn Suclas noted that Miller "effected one of those magical theatrical transformations when what has felt random is unexpectedly filled with allusive mystery."

From the Top of the World

New Art New Mexico's Global DanceFest 2009

For nearly ten years, New Art New Mexico (NANM)—in partnership with VSA arts of New Mexico—has been bringing international dance companies to Albuquerque as part of the annual Global DanceFest. In the past two years, however, they have refined the festival even more, focusing on one region. In 2008, the festival centered on the African tradition of dance, bringing companies from countries such as Zimbabwe and Tunisia as well as U.S. companies that present African styles of dance.

In 2009, the festival went north. Latitudes North, as the festival was known, focused on the dance culture of Scandinavia. “Our goal with the last two festivals,” said Marjorie Neset, artistic director of New Art New Mexico, “was to really explore the regions selected a little

more deeply, to put the dance ‘in context.’” To achieve this, NANM provides maps, related gallery exhibits, and post-performance discussions so that audiences understand better the environments in which the artists create their works.

The artists chosen for the 2009 festival reflect not just Scandinavia, but the multicultural world in which we live. The choreographer/dancer Hooman Sharifi, for example, is a Norwegian who was born in Iran. Berg & Graf are from Israel, but have worked in Denmark for the past few years, even receiving support from the Danish government. Jo Strømgren, based in Bergen, Norway, uses a multimedia approach to examine Greenlandic culture, using Greenlandic dancers and a language only spoken by Inuits in Greenland in the performance. Rounding out the festival are the relatively new Norwegian choreographer Alan Lucien Øyen and his company Winter Guests, Swedish choreographer Gunilla Heilborn's blend of dance and performance art, and Denmark's Granhøj Dans, performing the works of artistic director and choreographer Palle Granhøj.

The month-long festival brings international acts that Albuquerque audiences probably would not be able to see otherwise, and the NEA's support is crucial to its success. “The money is, of course, incredibly important—New Art New Mexico is so small that the \$10,000 which we receive is actually quite a large part of the budget,” added Neset. “And I know you hear this all of the time, but there's the stamp of approval that Endowment funding implies.”

The NEA always emphasizes partnerships in the projects it supports, and NANM's partnership with VSA arts of New Mexico is vital. VSA arts provides the venue for the festival, North Fourth Art Center, at no charge and covers much of the artists' lodging costs. VSA arts also helps the festival reach the underserved communities in the city through the many services the organization already provides. Approximately 1,200 people attended the performances, exhibits, and other activities.



PHOTO BY RICHARD MALCOLM

Kristiina Viiala in Gunilla Heilborn's *Potatislandet*, one of the featured performances of New Art New Mexico's Global DanceFest 2009.

Bodies in Motion

AXIS Dance Company Features Physically Integrated Dance

Since its founding 22 years ago in Oakland, California, AXIS Dance Company has been committed to creating work that features both disabled and able-bodied dancers. When company member Judith Smith became artistic director in 1997, AXIS changed direction, seeking to expand its outreach programs and repertory. By commissioning work from major choreographers and launching the company's successful community education programs, AXIS has given new meaning to the phrase "accessible dance."

Whenever Smith talks about the company's work, she uses the phrase, "physically integrated dance." "It's been really hard to figure out what to call this form of dance," she said. "We are not a wheelchair dance company. We are not a disabled dance company. We are a contemporary dance company that does physically integrated work, and by that I mean we have dancers with and without physical disabilities."

The dual emphasis on collaborative performance and a commitment to outreach has not only sustained AXIS, but created a demand for its physically inclusive work. On one recent March day, the company divided and conquered California's Bay Area. Two dancers headed south to perform school assemblies, while Smith and another dancer gave a demonstration at a nearby independent living center. Later that evening, the company reconvened in Oakland to rehearse an upcoming work with David Dorfman, one of the nation's leading modern dance choreographers.

"We tend to stay pretty busy," Smith said. "Our education program is unparalleled compared to what other physically

integrated dance companies are doing, and there aren't many contemporary companies of our size that do the amount of education work that we do."

AXIS has been receiving NEA support since 1993. During FY 2008, the company received grants for both its artistic and educational programs. Recruiting donors hasn't been easy, but Smith said there was a definite correlation between receiving grants from the NEA and other foundations and the company's increased commitment to artistic excellence. "When we started getting funding on the national level is when we started commissioning work, and that's when people started to take a look at what we were doing," Smith said. "Our artistic product just got so much better so quickly."

Four of AXIS's seven regular dancers rely on wheelchairs to get around in daily life and perform onstage. Another dancer walks gracefully by balancing on two prosthetic feet. Two more dancers are not disabled. The



Sonsheree Giles spins on Rodney Bell's wheels in an award-winning dance piece by Joe Goode.

PHOTO BY BRIAN RDZAK-MARTIN

challenge for visiting choreographers who work with AXIS is to find new ways for all these dancers to interact, and to view mobility aids not as obstacles, but as vehicles for an expanded movement vocabulary. For example, in the opening movement of *the beauty that was mine, through the middle, without stopping*, choreographer Joe Goode has able-bodied dancer Sonsherée Giles tip Rodney Bell's wheelchair to the floor, then crawl to him, seductively. She climbs atop one wheel, and spins, while he rotates the chair in the opposite direction. It's a fascinating sequence of beautiful movement.

The beauty that was mine... was partially funded through an NEA Access to Artistic Excellence grant—awarded to AXIS in consortium with Joe Goode Performance Group—to fund a joint performance that also featured Dandelion Dancetheater and Compania Y from Madrid, Spain. A second grant supported the company's education and outreach programs, including Dance Access/KIDS!, a month-long class open to disabled and nondisabled children that, according to the company's Web site, “focuses on positive body awareness, natural creativity, team work, motor coordination, personal expression, discipline, and self control.” By all accounts, 2008 was a fantastic year for the company. In November, AXIS marked its 20th anniversary with a concert that Rachel Howard, the *San Francisco Chronicle's* dance critic, put on her top 10 list for 2008, along with Merce Cunningham Dance Company and the Kirov Ballet. That much lauded anniversary performance included *To Color Me Different*, an outstanding *pas de deux* created for Giles and Bell by choreographer Alex Ketley. “This is not a duet about being disabled,” Howard wrote. “It's about the perils of attraction and trust.”

Forward momentum should continue to propel AXIS through 2009 and beyond. In March, the company won two Isadora Duncan Awards from the Bay Area Dance Coalition. Bell and Giles took home the award for out-



PHOTO BY TRIB LAPRADE

AXIS Dance Company performs *Waypoint* by Margaret Jenkins, featuring Margaret Cromwell, Bonnie Lewkowicz, Sonsherée Giles, and Sean McMahon.

standing ensemble performance for *To Color Me Different*, and Joe Goode received a choreography award for *the beauty that was mine...* Major 2009 performances on AXIS's calendar include *A Perfect Day*, a celebration of the choreographer, author, and theater director Remy Charlip. Aided by Joanna Haigood and her aerial company ZACCHO Dance Theatre, AXIS has adapted several of Charlip's *Airmail Dances* for a physically integrated dance ensemble.

In 2010, AXIS will present a new Dorfman collaboration in Washington, DC, when VSA arts, the service organization for disabled artists, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts host the 2010 International VSA arts Festival. Smith considers performing in the VSA arts festival an honor; however, she's also gratified anytime AXIS is programmed on a season featuring other contemporary dance companies. “Presenters who book us tend to be really progressive and forward thinking, and looking to reach different communities,” Smith said. “There are a lot of presenters who haven't presented us who would really benefit... We don't want to be ghettoized as a wheelchair dance company.”

Widening the Circle

Dance/USA's Leadership in the Dance Field

Founded in 1982, Dance/USA helps the nation's dance artists, administrators, and audiences thrive through ongoing leadership projects in a host of arenas, including advocacy, research, and professional development. Here's an excerpt from a recent interview with Executive Director Andrea Snyder.

NEA: What's the mission of Dance/USA?

ANDREA SNYDER: We believe that dance is essential to a healthy society, and it can demonstrate the infinite possibilities for human expression and potential, as well as facilitate communication within and across cultures.... By providing services and national leadership, we're able to enhance the infrastructure for dance's creation, presentation, education, and dissemination.

NEA: How important is NEA support to Dance/USA programming?

SNYDER: Well our funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, which we greatly appreciate and use strategically, is designed to help mostly our professional development and research activities. It helps secure speakers, workshops, and activities around our annual conference and our winter forums, both of which bring in a fair number of [dance professionals] together under the same roof to deal with issues of importance.

NEA: In an interview, former Dance/USA Director Bonnie Brooks said, "Each era has meant a widening of the circle, and a maturing of the organization." What does "widening the circle" mean to you?



Dance/USA Executive Director Andrea Snyder.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DANCE/USA

SNYDER: We have made a concerted effort to broaden the universe to include all of the various components of the professional dance field, including agents, artists, managers, individual artists, smaller institutional companies, and institutions, and presenters as well as a more diverse population of styles. [We are] forever growing the appreciation for what a service organization can do for the dance field.... Our board is now quite diverse, with representation from every part of the membership pool. We make a concerted effort to

look at geography, function, gender, cultural diversity, style, and those [individuals] that are associated with companies but may not necessarily be administrative.

"Widening the circle" has also meant a much stronger bond and collaborative relationship with our counterparts in the other performing arts disciplines of opera, orchestras, chorus, theater, presenters, chamber music ... the list goes on. Over the last eight years, we've gotten much closer to our colleagues in the other disciplines, and there's a wonderful collaborative spirit there.

NEA: Why is it important to include the agents, managers, and presenters in the national conversation?

SNYDER: The art form is rooted in the artist and those who have the creative genius and drive and spirit and passion to make the work, but they can't do that alone. The work can't be seen without the assistance of presenting community managers, agents, and artists managers, even educational institutions, and local and other service organizations who all work on behalf of moving forward the art form, and addressing the needs of the artists.

Dance: The Next Generation

NEA's American Masterpieces Dance-College Component

When Rachel Berman was a student at the State University of New York at Purchase, a few members of the Paul Taylor Dance Company visited campus to teach *Cloven Kingdom*, a 1976 work by the legendary modern dance choreographer Paul Taylor. Berman was studying ballet at the time, yet she felt an instant affinity for the unusual dance. The experience stuck with Berman, and within five years, she began her own decade-long career dancing with Taylor's company.

Since retiring from performing in 1999, Berman has often visited colleges to teach Taylor dances. None of those visits has been more fulfilling than when she traveled home to Hawaii to stage Taylor's *3 Epitaphs* for students at the University of Hawaii-Manoa (UH-M).

In March 2008, the university used a \$10,000 American Masterpieces Dance-College Component (AMDCC) grant to include *3 Epitaphs* in its 2008 Annual Dance Concert. Administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts and Dance/USA, AMDCC serves a vital role in preserving the art form's rich history, which is traditionally passed down from dancer to dancer rather than through systematic notation. UH-M is one of 61 American colleges that have received grants to support the restaging, performance, and documentation of significant dance works. Betsy Fisher, a dance professor at UH-M, chose *3 Epitaphs* for two reasons: it was a small-scale Taylor work that her students could master during the grant-funded residency, and she knew Berman was just the dancer to come teach her students.

Now a professor of dance at Mills College in California, Berman said going home to teach at UH-M was a lovely staging experience. Artist residencies are often prohibitively expensive on the islands, given the cost of hotel rooms and airfare. To stretch the project

budget, Berman borrowed *3 Epitaphs* costumes from a California company and stayed with relatives in Hawaii. In addition to covering Berman's salary and travel expenses, the NEA grant helped pay to license the dance and offset other production costs.

The oldest work in the company's active repertoire, *3 Epitaphs* was created by Taylor in 1956. *3 Epitaphs* is not a difficult work, but it is unusual. The costumes, designed by Robert Rauschenberg, require the dancers to don hoods embedded with tiny mirrors. As they move, slivers of light ricochet off the dancers' heads. As Berman taught them the steps, the UH-M students learned to like lumbering around onstage, like bayou swamp creatures dancing to the rhythms of New Orleans funeral dirges.



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII-MANOA

Dance students from the University of Hawaii-Manoa don hoods designed by Robert Rauschenberg to perform Paul Taylor's *3 Epitaphs*. The university received an American Masterpieces Dance-College Component grant to present the work at its 2008 annual dance concert.

"With that piece, it's really all about history," Berman said. "The students really embraced it, and they had a lot of fun together. It was 2008, [although] it was 1956 when the piece premiered, and yet we are still giggling in all the right parts."

Presenting a Life Philosophy

DanceBrazil Brings the Art of Capoeira to U.S. Communities

It's no surprise to see renowned companies such as American Ballet Theatre and the Joffrey Ballet on the roster of those that have received support for dance projects from the Arts Endowment. But the NEA's support of dance is not limited to those companies that promote ballet or modern dance. In fact, the NEA's grantmaking history is full of organizations that advance the traditional dance arts of China, Mexico, and Africa, among others, in the United States. Among them is DanceBrazil, which for more than 20 years has received NEA support to introduce Americans to traditional Afro-Brazilian dance styles, including *capoeira*, a martial arts-dance fusion.

Capoeira can be traced as far back as the 16th century, when African slaves brought to Brazil learned to mask their martial arts practice under the cover of dance. In Brazil today, "playing capoeira" is second only in popularity to soccer. Described by capoeira mestre Jelon Vieira as "a dialogue between two people," players

combine martial arts, dance, music, and acrobatics in contests of skill and agility.

Founded in 1977 in New York City, Vieira's company, the Capoeiras of Bahia, combined Afro-Brazilian movement, contemporary dance, and capoeira in performance. The company changed its name to DanceBrazil on the suggestion of legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey, who provided early artistic and organizational support. Ailey wasn't the only one to recognize the importance of Vieira's work. Since 1984 DanceBrazil, which operates under the Capoeira Foundation, has received NEA funding for projects ranging from artist residencies to youth arts dance programs to the creation of new works.

In 2008, Vieira received an NEA National Heritage Fellowship, the nation's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. In an NEA interview, Vieira described his difficulties in introducing capoeira to U.S. audiences: "It was hard to convince people that it was a martial art, because the martial arts for Americans at that time was



PHOTO BY TOM PICH

DanceBrazil performs *Ritmos*, choreographed by NEA National Heritage Fellow Jelon Vieira.

what Bruce Lee was doing. But capoeira had music, in capoeira you didn't wear what they did in karate or kung fu—we wore t-shirts and white pants. People just didn't take it seriously.”

In order to change these preconceptions, DanceBrazil performs for more than 25,000 people each year nationwide, engaging each host community through education and outreach activities. “When we go to a city and just perform and leave I don't feel complete,” said Vieira. “But when we teach and interact with the community, then it feels like an exchange—we left something, we learned something.”

Vieira emphasizes that studying capoeira means respecting its history, a goal the company maintains by spending half of each year in Brazil. “When teaching capoeira to someone, I want to make sure that person is there to learn capoeira as a traditional art and that he or she will have an open mind to learn the art just the way it is and take it to another level without hurting the fundamentals and the tradition.... When you evolve in capoeira, you have a responsibility to your ancestors.... We can add things, but it can't change.”

In FY 2008 DanceBrazil received an NEA grant to support the creation of *Ritmos*, a work inspired by the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. “I don't know what we would do without NEA help,” said Vieira. “Their support enabled me to put my work together, put my work on the stage and communicate to the community who are my audience.”

When Vieira choreographs a new piece for DanceBrazil, he first conducts thorough research of the subject's origins in Brazil and West Africa. When creating *Ritmos*, Vieira recognized the necessity of balancing his artistic ideas with respect to the religion, which currently has as many as two million followers. “You have to make everything theatrical ... [but] I'm very respectful to the religion. I like to talk to an expert on the religion [to discuss] what can I do on the stage, what can I reveal, what can I not reveal.” Ultimately, Vieira

focused his work on the dance and rhythms that are an integral part of Candomblé.

After his initial research, Vieira collaborates with a composer, which for this piece was DanceBrazil Music Director Tote Gira, also a native of Bahia. DanceBrazil always performs to live music, and Vieira's students are schooled in the musical traditions of capoeira, its songs and its instruments. Having a composer who is immersed in the Afro-Brazilian culture was especially important to Vieira for this new work since the rhythms in Candomblé rituals are very particular and different.

After months of collaboration with not only the com-



PHOTO BY TOM PICH

DanceBrazil Founder and Artistic Director Jelon Vieira rehearses with his company.

poser but the dancers, costume designer, and lighting designer, *Ritmos* premiered in March 2008 and is now a regular part of the company's repertoire.

As Vieira continues to create works for audiences nationwide, he is mindful not only of introducing traditional Afro-Brazilian dance styles to new eyes, but also to what he himself has gained from his many years of playing and teaching capoeira: “Capoeira for me is very much a life philosophy. Capoeira taught me respect for life at a very early age. Capoeira gave me discipline. Capoeira gave me a good sense of being respectful, being responsible, and disciplined. And the spirituality I very much believe comes from the music that makes you feel capoeira. I believe I was meant to learn capoeira, that it was my mission in life to do capoeira, teach capoeira, and pass on capoeira to others.”

Write-up

NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Dance

The NEA's support for dance criticism is only a few years younger than the Arts Endowment's support for the art form itself. In 1970, the American Dance Festival (ADF) used an NEA grant to establish a summer critics institute that would run concurrently with the festival, then held in Connecticut and now sited at Duke University in North Carolina. In 2005, the institute was revived under the auspices of the Arts Endowment as the NEA Arts Journalism Institute for Dance. In many ways, little about the institute has changed. The principal goal remains to immerse journalists in the world of dance so they not only learn fundamentals but review world-class performances under the tutelage of master critics.

in theater: that is, the nonverbal message that critics have to elucidate," Reinhart said. "The more that the critics know about dance, the better it's going to be for the dance world."

Dance historian Suzanne Carbonneau directs the present-day NEA institute, one of four the NEA has established to offer professional training for cultural journalists. Since 2004, nearly 300 journalists have attended the theater, music, and dance institutes. This summer, the NEA will add a visual arts institute, hosted by American University. Fellows chosen to attend the three-week dance institute take in master classes, seminars, and panel discussions. Every major choreographer

who visits ADF holds an informal press conference with the journalists. In evenings, it's off to performances, then back to the Duke dormitories to write reviews. "There is so little downtime," Carbonneau said. "We go seven days a week, morning to night."

In 2009, the critics will see nearly a dozen companies perform, including Pilobolus, Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and Shen Wei Dance Arts. And as has been required since the institute's early years, they will take movement

classes led by professional dance teachers.

Margaret Fuhrer attended the institute in 2008 as a freelance writer affiliated with *Dance Magazine*. A few months later, she was hired by *Dance Spirit* magazine. Fuhrer believes attending the NEA institute helped her land a rare full-time job writing about dance. "The opportunity to be fully engaged in the dance world for three weeks was a rare and invaluable treat," she said. "Criticism shouldn't be a passive activity, but it too often is; it was refreshing to not just watch but to truly *live* dance at ADF."



PHOTO BY ADF/SARA D. DAVIS

Choreographer Doug Varone speaks to critics at the 2008 NEA Arts Journalism Institute for Dance.

Charles Reinhart, who was instrumental in developing and coordinating both the NEA's Dance Touring Program and the dance component of the NEA's Artist-in-Schools program, has directed ADF since 1968. Shortly after he was appointed festival director, dance historian Selma Jeanne Cohen approached Reinhart with the idea for an extended critics seminar. Reinhart immediately approved the idea.

"With dance, you have a problem that you don't have

In the News

The National Council on the Arts Meets in DC

Arts leaders from across the country joined NEA staff at the agency's Washington, DC headquarters on Friday, March 27, for the concluding session of the 166th meeting of the National Council on the Arts, the Arts Endowment's advisory board. With NEA Acting Chairman Patrice Walker Powell presiding, the public session followed two days during which council members received updates on Arts Endowment activities and reviewed applications proposed for funding.

The council unanimously approved the first round of NEA grants supported by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Nearly \$20 million was allocated to the state arts agencies and regional arts organizations to support projects focusing on the preservation of jobs in the arts. Chairman Powell noted, "This is an incredible opportunity to serve the cultural workforce."

The council also voted to approve more than 1,000 direct grants in the categories of Access to Artistic Excellence, Learning in the Arts, Partnership Agreements, and Leadership Initiatives, which includes programs such as American Masterpieces; the Arts Education Partnership; international partnerships; and NEA honorary awards in jazz, opera, and the folk arts. Powell reported that the grants represented an investment of approximately \$84 million in the nation's arts sector.

Two presentations focused on music training for youth and broadcast presentations of young performing artists. Following a performance by seven DC Youth Orchestra students of selections by Benjamin Britten and Franz Joseph Haydn, Executive Director Ava Spece

spoke on the program's transformative effect. Noting that the high school graduation rate for Washington, DC hovers around 57 percent, Spece stated that 100 percent of DC Youth Orchestra students graduate. She added, "Music has the power to bring academic success to children who might not otherwise find it."

NEA Media Arts Director Ted Libbey introduced a

presentation by *From The Top* co-producer Gerald Slavet with a primer on the agency's support for a range of broadcast and film projects. Slavet then shared incredible success stories from the program, which features young classical musicians in radio and television broadcasts. The producer credited early funding from the NEA with validating the program's mission. "We wanted to make heroes of young artists and celebrate them the way our society celebrates young athletes... We're making a show about hope, hope for the future, hope for the next generation of young leaders."

A final presentation by Clara Miller, president of the Nonprofit Finance Fund, articulated the financial challenges currently facing nonprofit cultural organizations. Among other things, Miller cited a need for arts organizations to invest in systems that can quickly respond to changing economic conditions.

The next meeting of the National Council on the Arts will take place June 24–26, during which the council will review the recommendations for Leadership Initiative grants and Translation Fellowships, as well as the second round of grants supported by Recovery Act funds.



PHOTO BY KATHY FLOWITZ-WORDEN

***From the Top's* Gerald Slavet shares success stories from the program at the public meeting of the National Council on the Arts.**



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Learning One's Body

A Talk with Choreographer Bill T. Jones

Bill T. Jones is one of the foremost choreographers in the world, having created a wide variety of multimedia dance works that explore challenging philosophical and social issues such as race, identity, and terminal illness. In 1980, 1981, and 1982, Jones received NEA Choreographers Fellowships. His company, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, continues to receive NEA funding for its highly creative work. Below is an excerpt from a recent telephone interview with Jones. A longer version of the interview is found at www.arts.gov/features/index.php?choosmonth=2009_05.

NEA: Can you tell me how you began in the dance field?

BILL T. JONES: I was 19 years old and at the State University of New York at Binghamton. I was there to run track with the idea of going into commercial theater, as I had done some theater in high school. It was there that I was then enticed by a young relative, who was also going to the university, to not go to those track practices but instead come to these really great dance classes, taught by Percival Borde.... I went and I was totally enthralled by the multicultural aspect of the room, by the "smell of the sweat" when I opened the door, by the drummers.



PHOTO BY RUSSELL JENKINS

Choreographer Bill T. Jones at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

So I was hooked, and shortly after that time, Arnie Zane, my new partner, and I went away to Amsterdam, and I got a greater sense of what it meant to be a professional dancer by taking classes there and seeing more things there. I came

back with the idea of really making a serious attempt at this. That's how it happened. And then the rest of it, I think it had to do with learning one's body and learning one's tastes, learning about one's sexuality, all those things fell into being a dancer. I didn't think at all about making a living or anything like that.

NEA: What did it mean to receive the NEA Choreographers Fellowships in the early 1980s?

JONES: There was a sense of suddenly being a part of the club—that literally, at the federal level, someone thought what we do was important enough to be funded. And on a psychological, emotional level, that was certainly a lift, and one begins to walk a bit more straight and upright and to think more seriously as an artist.... So that was what I think it meant. It also meant that we could begin to plan. We could begin to look for and attract administration [staff], which was rudimentary. We made lots of mistakes: we didn't really know how to get a board of directors. We didn't know how to get the next piece made. We were just going to do it on sweat and enthusiasm. But the NEA imprimatur was definitely important to us. And the perception in the funding world that you were somebody that should be funded was very important.