

Firm Footing

In the French dance world, a different way of doing things

By Laurie Uprichard

When I was in high school, I fell madly in love with French language, culture, poetry, etc. In college, I fell just as madly in love with modern dance. When I realized, years later, that it was possible to combine these passions, I was determined to do so as frequently as I could. In the mid-80's, working at Dance Theater Workshop, I was fortunate to accompany Executive Director David White to France for three annual Montpellier Dance Festivals and the colloquia that were organized to accompany the performances. After becoming Executive Director of Danspace Project, I was a member of the artistic council of the Rencontres Chorégraphiques de Seine-Saint-Denis for five years, requiring (such hardship!) two-three trips to Paris every other year.

The French Cultural Services at the French Embassy in New York has also been very generous in supporting research travel, which has allowed me to see French choreographers' work in France and elsewhere.

In the summer of 2002, to celebrate ten years at Danspace Project, I took a three-month sabbatical sanctioned by our wonderfully enlightened board of directors. A bit more than six weeks of this time was spent in France—half in Paris, half in many other towns (including a two-week French course at a chateau outside of Roanne).

Over the past several years, there have been numerous discussions in the dance community about the difficulties of creating, producing, and presenting in the United States. The leaders in our field, including David White, Andrea Snyder of Dance/USA, Sam Miller of NEFA, and others have been discussing ways to address the lack of stability that has put



Ballet Preljocaj's *Paysage apres la bataille*

some companies out of business entirely and forced several artistic directors to take university teaching positions. Many of these discussions reference international models, including the National Dance Agencies in the U.K. and the National Choreographic Centers (CCN) in France. Though I'm certain that these models could not be imported directly to the U.S. due to differences in the size of our countries, the role of government support for culture, and our free-market philosophy, I felt that it would be useful to the conversation to have a better understanding of how other systems worked. Since I would be in France, it seemed the perfect time to do the research!

I started out in Montpellier, where Michel Chialvo who is in charge of production and touring for the CCN there, gave me a primer on the entire system. I visited the CCN in Rennes and met with artistic and administrative directors from Aix-en-Provence, Belfort, and le Havre. In addition, Claire Verlet of the Centre Nationale de la Danse (CND) and

Sophie Renaud, who is in charge of dance for the Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA)—the “export” end of government funding in France—provided invaluable information.

Nineteen Centers with Similar Missions

The French system of National Choreographic Centers (Centres Chorégraphiques Nationaux -- CCN) was modeled on the National Theater Centers, initially created under Minister of Culture André Malraux. The CCN's expanded significantly in the 1980's during Jack Lang's active tenure in that position, as the Mitterrand government worked to decentralize cultural activities from their concentration in Paris to benefit the entire country. There are currently 19 CCN's; the oldest was founded in 1972 and the newest in 1998.

Each CCN is headed by a choreographer/artistic director. The five that are directed by classical choreographers support ballet companies; these have the largest budgets (with government sup-

port of around 1.3 million Euros – approximately the equivalent in US dollars). The remainder are led by contemporary dance artists of the first and second “generations” of French dance. The lowest level of government subsidy to a CCN is approximately 350,000 Euros.

Every CCN has three missions: in French, *création*, *diffusion*, and *sensibilisation*. The first two missions are fairly straightforward: creation and distribution (or touring.) The third term has several connotations including training, education, and community outreach; it implies that the center is essentially responsible for bringing some understanding of dance to the citizens of the region in which the center is based.

With these three goals in mind, each CCN designs its own programs, which vary greatly from one to the next.

The support and governance of each center is inextricably linked to the mission of sensibilisation. Funding is received from all levels of government—federal, regional, departmental, and city—but it is the city leaders who choose the artistic director and meet annually with the CCN’s directors to review the program and budget. The Association of National Choreographic Centers’ brochure states that “they are the result of a cultural policy which seeks to involve both the State and the local communities in the exploration and expansion of culture in the country.” The priority for supporting the CCNs is second only to that of the major ballet companies -- the Paris and Lyon Opera Ballets. It is followed by “structural” support of major companies, funding of “independent” companies (which must have an administrative staff in place), and, finally, project funding -- or *aide à la création*. Compared to U.S. support, the funding is generous -- 9,000-45,000 Euros for projects; 45,000-100,000 for independent companies; and over 100,000 for major companies.

As far as I know there are no aggregate figures for support of U.S. dance companies, but I would be surprised to hear that any independent company received \$100,000 in combined federal state and

local support.

All of the CCN’s have rehearsal studios for the use of the artistic director and his/her company. Most also have additional studios which are made available each year to two or more independent choreographers under a program known as “*Accueil Studio*” (Open or Welcoming Studio.) The artists invited receive a modest stipend and housing for the period of the residency, which can run from two weeks to six months. (Several CCN managers mentioned that U.S. choreographers would be welcome to apply for

these programs but they feared that the stipend would only cover airfare and, therefore, probably not be worthwhile.) Though few CCN’s have full-scale theaters, many have studio theaters seating 75-150 in which they present work to the public. The physical facilities are generally owned by the city which covers the basic maintenance costs.

CCN’s can augment their budgets from the touring fees of the resident company. The CCN in Aix-en-Provence reports that, at 50%, it has the largest proportion of earned income due to the

Residency programs at the CCN of Montpellier

Mathilde Monnier, Artistic Director of the Montpellier CCN, has designed an adventurous program aimed at critical issues in the dance community that she has identified over the past several years. She is seriously questioning what constitutes choreographic practice and its development. The program has four components, each of which has an application process. Stipends are offered in all with the exception of the Training Program.

- *Hors Séries* is a monthly event in which artists present experimental work to an audience. This series encourage artists to consider new and alternative ways to use a space (the studio or any other location at the Center) and to engage audiences in unexpected encounters.
- Residencies for choreographic composition and research are offered to choreographers and collaborators who wish to explore and question the relationship of artists to each other and to the world without the pressure of creating a work for presentation and touring. There are four to six residencies each year of from one to four weeks duration. Artists selected have access to the three studios and the technical and communications staff.
- Training for professional dancers involves approximately 18 French and 3 international students, aged 18-26, in a six month course that includes classes and workshops, discussions of the context of contemporary dance, and practical considerations for a dancer’s life.
- An annual choreographic residency is offered each year to a young choreographer who has not yet attracted significant attention in order to support the work of artists on a long-term basis. The choreographer receives administrative and financial assistance as well as work space. Emmanuelle Huynh is the choreographer invited for 2002.

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extensive touring schedule of Ballet Preljocaj. The budgets in Montpellier and Rillieux-la-Pape also include earned income brought in by the touring companies of Mathilde Monnier and Maguy Marin.

Artistic Directors were initially given open-ended contracts at the National Choreographic Centers but, with the extraordinary growth of contemporary dance in France (there are now 350 companies, 250 of which are supported at various levels), there is a proposal to put term limits in place. These would provide a first term of 5 years, followed by an option for two subsequent three-year terms for a total of 11 years maximum. Though this would undoubtedly open up positions to more of the second generation of French choreographers, the question of where those in the first generation might go remains unanswered and must be addressed before these new “conventions” can be signed.

It seems to be a matter of personality as to how CCN’s artistic directors accept and discharge their responsibilities. Some seem to feel the political position impinges on their creativity and be burdensome while others find it an exciting challenge. For all, there is definitely stability in having their own creative homes as well as the opportunity to design programs that will serve younger choreographers, dance students, and dance audiences.

As a complement to the National Choreographic Centers, Paris now has a National Center for Dance (Centre National de la Danse—CND) that was formed by the merger of a theater/presenter, a pedagogical institution, and a research and archival institution. The CND will serve as an information and training center and will also offer companies studio space for finalizing new works prior to their premieres.

The mission of the CND in Paris includes enlarging the audience and providing the necessary resources for artistic creation. The CND is charged with building the capacity to “accompany” the artist and the public. Its current building in the center of Paris has three studios,

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one for teaching, one for performance, and one for residencies. The CND's new building, currently under construction in Pantin (a suburb just north of the city) will have 11 studios. Three will be equipped for public performance with up to 180 seats. There are also five Choreographic Development Centers (CDC) in France (in Avignon, Choisy le Roi, Lille, Toulouse, and Uzès) that are led either by a team of one artistic and one managing director or just one managing director.

Based in a culture that considers government support of the arts as a given, these institutions provide support and resources beyond the wildest dreams of most U.S. choreographers (although the French economic situation has unfortunately prompted the promise of significant budget cuts for the Ministry of Culture next year). Michel Chialvo, Producing Director of the CCN in Montpellier, believes that U.S. cities do not understand the positive impact that such a cultural center can have on a local and regional economy. He extends an invitation to the Mayor of New York and other U.S. mayors to visit Montpellier to see for themselves the heightened visibility that can result and the positive image that benefits a city that is home to a National Choreographic Center.

Laurie Uprichard is executive director of Danspace Project, Inc., in New York. She would like to extend special thanks to Michel Chialvo, Sophie Renaud and Laurent Vinauger for their contributions to this article.

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