

Overworked and Underpaid: A Study on Current Pay Practices in the Concert Dance Industry

by

Chiara Bosco

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Sponsor: Dawn Gibson-Brehon

Second Reader: Maria Guralnik

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## **Abstract**

Is minimum wage truly the minimum? Are there American workers expected to perform labor for less than the government regulated minimum hourly rate? And for some, does that minimum hourly rate truly compensate enough for the labor performed? For many concert dancers, working for below minimum wage is standard, and in many instances, expected, especially when starting out one's career. And for dancers with established careers, wages may be the government minimum, but that minimum is not enough for them to survive, let alone thrive. The research that follows examines the chronic issue of low compensation for dance artists employed in the United States non-profit concert dance industry alongside individual and industry impacts of this issue. Through literature review, synthesis and analysis of industry reports, and interviews with current dance students, professionals, and union leaders, the following topics will be addressed: current factors contributing to low compensation in non-profit dance; the impact of low compensation on dancers in the non-profit dance sector; reasoning for dancers accepting low compensation; and, the viability of unions as a solution to this issue.

## **Concert Dance in the United States**

The term concert dance is loose, representing a sector of the arts industry that funders, presenters, and dancers have long struggled to define. Princeton WordNet defines concert dance as “a theatrical representation of a story that is performed to music by trained dancers” (“Concert Dance”). Concert dance does not need to follow a story, and many works that would fit this definition would not qualify as concert dance. Authors of academic research on this topic generally do not provide context for their definitions of concert dance and rely on the reader's

own experience to know what the term means. Even the National Endowment for the Arts has no strict definition for what a concert dance company is. When establishing guidelines for which entities could receive dance funding, “the National Endowment for the Arts did not establish a formal definition of what constitutes a dance company, relying instead on its applicant pool to define the shifting edges of the art form’s institutional boundaries,” and shifts these boundaries each year to reflect the funding goals of the organization. The Endowment’s only requirement was for the dance entities requesting support to be non-profit” (Sonntag 1-2).

For the purposes of this research, concert dance is work presented in the traditional western performance style: on a stage for an audience, with the purpose to showcase choreography or the talents of trained dancers. The most defining characteristic of concert dance companies for this research is being structured as a non-profit entity. This is important as it ensures the dance companies exist with the purpose to further their mission, which is some iteration of performing, creating and teaching dance, and serving their community, rather than being profit oriented. Examples of how a non-profit dance company may serve the community include community outreach programs providing low-cost dance education, preserving the legacy of a choreographer for the dance community to continue to view and restage, and providing opportunities to up and coming dance artists to develop and perform work.

There is no required dance style to be a concert dance company. Examples of concert dance companies include famous classical ballet companies such as New York City Ballet, contemporary Indian dance company Ananya Dance Theater, tap dance performance ensemble Caleb Teicher & Company, contemporary dance company Gallim, and Ronald K. Brown/Evidence Dance Company which fuses contemporary dance forms with traditional African dance. Individual choreographers, meaning those creating dance works not solely with a

singular dance company, discussed are not yet associated with non-profit entities, however, plan on creating non-profit entities in the future for their dance work, and as such will be treated in the concert dance vein. In this paper, the term concert dance and non-profit dance will be used interchangeably to reflect the terminology concert dance most used by industry workers, and the more appropriate term non-profit dance.

Concert dance in the United States is a relatively young art form. The oldest continuous dance company in the United States, the Martha Graham Dance Company, is only 96 years old (“The Dancers”). For comparison, the oldest museum in the United States, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, is 178 years old (“About the Wadsworth”) and the oldest opera company, the Metropolitan Opera, is 139 years old (“Our Story”). Concert dance has a small audience share; in 2017 only 6% of American adults attended a dance performance other than ballet, and only 3% attended a ballet performance. These audience members on average attended a dance performance 2.1 times in 2017 and are more likely to live in urban than rural settings (“U.S. Patterns of Arts Participation”). The low percentage of Americans attending dance performances as well as the competitive nature of grants makes it difficult for concert dance to have ample funding.

### Dance Employment

Just as the term concert dance is used as a catch-all in the industry, so is the term concert dancer. At the most basic definition, concert dancers are dancers who perform dance works in a concert dance setting. Traditionally, these dancers have a background of training in classical western styles, but in today’s dance industry concert dancers are becoming more adept at non-classical and non-western styles of dance as well as interpreting the personal voices of today’s choreographers as a higher variety of styles are choreographed for and presented in concert

dance settings (Assche et al. 140). For example, 30 years ago dancers at the Martha Graham Dance Company were expected to know only the Graham Technique, but new works the company has commissioned for their dancers to perform by Maxine Doyle, Bobbi Jene Smith, and Andrea Miller require experience in Gaga and works by Pam Tanowitz and Doug Varone require knowledge of post-modern movement (“Repertory”).

In the United States of America, there are an estimated 7,370 individuals employed as the loosely defined term dancer as of May 2020. Of these 7,370 dancers, 3,080 are employed by performing arts companies (United States, Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics). With an estimated 3,080 performers – less than 0.001% of the nation’s population - concert dance is one of the nation’s smallest industries. Not only is it among the smallest, in 2020, data from the Occupational Information Network ranked being a dancer as the most physically demanding job in the United States (Schrock). Dancers require years of competitive training and compete for spots in top training programs to be able to join the 0.001% of Americans in this demanding, challenging industry.

These dancers are engaged by performing arts companies through two main employment opportunities: company and freelance work. Like with the term concert dance, there is no clear definition of these two terms. Within company work, a dancer is engaged by a dance company for an extended period. These contracts vary in length, and very few dance companies provide employment 52 weeks of the year. San Francisco Ballet is considered to be full time company work, yet dancers are only contracted for 42 weeks per year (Gross). When employed as a company dancer, many dancers receive benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings (“Gibney Company Auditions”), and it is important to acknowledge that many dance companies who contract dancers for less than 52 weeks per year will provide benefits to their dancers year

round, even when not working. A hallmark of company work is that a dancer can expect steady work from this company. For example, when a dancer is contracted to work for 42 weeks a year at San Francisco Ballet, it is given that the dancer will be a part of multiple performances during the contracted season. Dancers engaged in company work are often contracted by a dance organization for multiple years, and while this length of engagement is not guaranteed, it is standard for companies to keep quality, professional dancers for longer than a year.

As the industry has adapted, the company model of employment is being used less and less as freelance dance becomes the norm. In the human resources industry, the term “freelancer” refers to an individual who works as an independent contractor. The New York State Department of Labor defines an independent contractor as “free from supervision, direction, and control in the performance of their duties.” It is important to note that in New York State, the tax forms used for payment, either a W-2 or 1099 form, do not denote an independent contractor. Rather, the relationship between the hiring party and worker is what creates an employee-employer relationship (“Independent Contractors”). Dancers hired as independent artists, paid using 1099 forms, are considered employees due to their relationship with their hiring entity. Because their hiring entity can “choose when, where, and how [the dancers] perform their services,” “set the hours of work,” and “require prior permission for absences” (“Independent Contractors”), a freelance dancer legally has an employee-employer relationship with their hiring dance entity. Although the term freelancer from a human resources standpoint is not the most applicable term, it is the term used by current dancers in the industry. To stay consistent with the terminology used by dancers, this paper will use the term freelance dancers to refer to dancers who are engaged as independent artists for project based work by dance entities including companies and choreographers.

The length of the projects freelance dancers engage in can vary, as well as the time commitment needed. A freelance dance job might involve rehearsing for four hours a week for ten weeks before a performance or rehearsing intensely for two weeks before a performance. Unlike company work, freelance dance work does not ensure of the potential of further work with the dance entity. While some project-based dance entities will engage the same freelance dancers multiple times, there is no guarantee for how much work the entity will have, how many dancers it will use for each project, or if they will use the same dancers again. It is also important to note that these entities often do not provide the same benefits and resources as company work.

One reason for the rise in the freelance dance model becoming more popular is it gives the dancers more choice. In repertory companies, which bring in multiple choreographers to create work, dancers have no control over which artists are brought in to work with them and which they will have the opportunity to work with. Within the freelance model, dancers are able to work with more choreographers than in a company, and have the choice of which choreographers to audition for to work with (Echerer). However, it is important to note that in both the company work and freelance models, dancers can be engaged with multiple dance entities unless they have signed an exclusivity contract with a dance organization. In the event of an exclusivity contract, it is possible for dancers to negotiate releases to engage in other work as well. A second reason for the rise in freelance models is it is a better financial option for some dance companies to take. Not all dance companies, are able to afford hiring dancers in a full-time capacity. Many are able to afford dancers on a project by project basis, leading the companies to choose to hire using the freelance dance model (Passarelli).



## **Chronic Low Compensation in Non-Profit Dance**

In both company work and freelance work, dancers are underpaid. In 2020, Dance National Artist's Collective, a grass roots organization whose purpose is to create better labor conditions in the non-profit dance field through collectivizing dancers, created a survey to understand what wages professional dancers were receiving. Inspired by baristas in Philadelphia and other contemporary labor movements, the goal of the survey was to create a resource where concert dancers could compare compensation with that of other dancers to see if they were making comparable wages. This study revealed that many dancers have been paid below minimum wage, especially by early career choreographers. One dancer reported being paid a flat fee per piece they were in, starting at \$50 for a piece under ten minutes. While the dancer reported that when the company finally was able to incorporate, obtain 501(c)3 status, and have contributed income, rehearsal pay became hourly rates and the performance compensation was increased, this dancer was still underpaid for labor. Sadly, this dancer is not alone. Other dancers reported being paid only for performances, expected to rehearse for free, often without a contract ("Real Dancer Wages"). This means that dance artists are performing labor for multiple hours for free, a practice not only expected but accepted in the industry.

Even when dancers are paid at minimum wage for their work, it is hard to make enough to afford quality of life. Many New York City companies pay between \$15 and \$25 per hour for their dancers, and hours worked by dancers varies company to company ("Real Dancer Wages"). Dance/NYC, a non-profit that advocates for and provides resources to dancers in New York City, reported the average total income of New York City dancers was \$35,093 in 2019, and dropped to \$26,432 in 2020 according to their survey of dancers' wages and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. The number is based on self-reported data from 152 respondents from

the New York Metro Area, with the highest concentration of respondents living within the city (Dance/NYC). For context, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports there are 1,360 workers classified as dancers in the New York City Metropolitan area, however not all these dancers perform in the non-profit sector (“May 2020 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates”). When reporting the data, respondents included total income, including from revenue streams that are not directly related to dance, including income earned from working “survival jobs” (Dance/NYC). This is not a living wage. For 2019, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development qualified a yearly income under \$37,350 for a single individual in the New York Metro Area as very low income (“FY 2019 Income Limits Summary”). According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator for New York County, New York, typical expenses for a single adult with no children call for a required pre-tax income to be \$45,285 to afford a living, an amount large enough to sustain oneself on, but not enough to afford everyday luxuries such as going out to eat, vacations, financial saving and planning for the future, or purchasing capital assets (Nadeau). Because the average dancer makes below this wage, the average New York City dancer is unable to afford a lifestyle that meets all psychological and social needs or even safe for their future.

### **A Better Dance Work Week**

Olivia Passarelli is a freelance dancer and a choreographer creating her own dance company in New York City. Since graduating in 2020 with a BFA in Dance Performance, she has consistently been working for choreographers, both established and up and coming, in and around New York City. Many dance jobs Passarelli has taken do not pay well, if at all, and in order to afford living in New York City, she has a “survival job” working as a receptionist at a

dance studio, and has worked jobs in retail and nannyng before. For Passarelli, it is hard both mentally and physically. When working in retail, standing on her feet all day added physical strain on the body that added to injuries that were already present, making it harder for Passarelli to dance. In her current job, sitting at a desk all day causes similar strain. Passarelli notes that the time spent in her survival jobs after dancing is time that she should be spending using to recovery her body, and when she ends her day, she does not have enough time to properly take care of her body. As with dancers employed in full time dance positions, a survival job is difficult for Passarelli to schedule because her dance schedule is not standard, and she has had to give up dance opportunities in order to keep her job and afford living in New York City. Like many freelance dancers, Passarelli has not taken a day off for weeks – any time taken off from work is needed to go to dance auditions, performances, and rehearsals.

Passarelli is not the only dancer who has noted that working high hours depletes quality of life. A study from Dance Artist's National Collective to gauge concert dancers' views industry practices shows that dancers consider a full day of work to be no more than six hours and a full work week to be no more than 30 hours of dancing ("Wage Survey Statistics"). While this is different than the standard 40-hour work week, a shorter work week is needed to ensure the longevity of a dancer's career. A 1992 study concluded that although injuries are hard to study within dance due to the multiple factors that affect them, ballet dancers who dance for over five hours a day are at a greater risk for stress fractures than those who dance less than five hours per day (Kadal et al, 448). Lauren McIntyre, an athletic trainer at the Harkness Center for Dance Injuries, a premiere center for dance medicine in New York City, expounded on the data presented in the above study. Although the study only focused on ballet dancers, McIntyre claims it is applicable to all styles of dance, and should serve as a warning to dancers suffering

other injuries. If a dance company wants to employ dancers using the typical 8 hours a day, 5 days per week model, dancing can only make up 5 hours of the day. “Those other three hours have to be something other than dancing” (McIntyre).

Dance companies with heavy schedules for their dancers should keep this study in mind when determining how to pay and schedule their dancers. If dancers are overworked, there is a greater chance that they will be injured, and the company will have to replace them. Many full time dance companies want to have a consistent cast and spend less time onboarding new dancers (Braun). When dancers are getting injured, a dance company must replace them, and spend time teaching a new dancer the work that the injured dancer already know, which costs the company both time and money. Because of this, a dance company should not schedule their dancers for more than 5 hours per day to keep costs low in the long run – there is a lower change their dancers will be injured and the company will need to pay for extra rehearsals to teach a new

Dancers accept under compensation and no payment due to the need to establish professional experience within the field. Many dance opportunities that provide full time employment or pay living wages require auditionees to have a certain amount of professional experience before applying. In a recent audition listing for freelance work, choreographer Faye Driscoll required that dancers have at least five years of professional dance or performance experience for work with pay starting at \$18 an hour for work on and off throughout 2022 (“Faye Driscoll Auditions”). In an audition notice for full and part time work, the Carolyn Dorfman Dance company asked applicants to have at least three years professional experience for work with an unspecified pay rate but guaranteed a contract of at least 20 weeks (“Audition Notice”). Other companies, such as New York City Ballet, do not even hold auditions, but rather pull from their own selective training programs (“Careers at NYCB”). In these instances, experience

dancing in college or training programs do not count, even when dancers worked with professional choreographers. Therefore, in order to audition for work with guaranteed stability, dancers in the non-profit industry must first work for choreographers that do not provide the same stability.

Olivia Passarelli is one of those dancers who is unable to audition for the higher paying, more stable dance jobs. Currently, she is in dance rehearsals for emerging choreographers on average of 10 to 15 hours a week, however she is only paid for an average of 5 per week. Like Passarelli, many dancers have to establish themselves by working with up-and-coming choreographers, and newer choreographers cannot always afford to pay their dancers for rehearsals, so they feel forced to dance for free. If these choreographers were able to pay her better, Passarelli would be willing to take more dance jobs. Like many other freelance dancers in her position, Passarelli has considered quitting dance multiple times due to the stress she is currently under. Having dance jobs that paid her high enough to work only 30 hours a week dancing would remedy the issues that she and the average young freelance dancer face in New York City.

### **Precarious Labor and Dance**

This cycle of feeling forced to take low compensating work in order to work at all is due to the precarious conditions of the profession. Precarious labor can be defined as “paid work performed in economically and juridical insecure conditions: no long-term contracts and career perspectives, low wages, bad work circumstances, no or only minimal social benefits, etc.” (Assche et al. 130). United States concert dance in the twenty-first century fits this definition in many ways. First, there has been a shift away from the company model with stable work for

dancers to short term work with the benefit of more flexibility to scheduling but the cost of insecure wages within concert dance (Assche 237), meeting the requirements of no long-term contracts, and because many of these projects do not lead to further employment, the requirement of low career perspectives is met. As seen above, the average New York City dancer is considered very low income by the federal United States government, proving low wages. When a dancer is engaged using the freelance model, there is a low chance that they are given health insurance, retirement saving plans, or other benefits, which means that all these costs must come directly out of pocket with no employer contribution (Passarelli). However, as a freelancer dancer there are certain statutory benefits that must be provided. These include sick leave, which is accrued by all employees in New York City, and paid family leave (“New York City). While this is an important benefit given, it is not always respected. Many dancers have missed rehearsals and performances due to illness and have not been compensated for the work they missed (Passarelli), even though they have a legal right to sick leave, even as a part time employee, in New York.

Precarious labor becomes a cycle. For workers to survive, they must continue to work. And because these workers are desperate for jobs, they will take any available labor with wages to them, even if they are not ideal. Added to the need to earn money, dancers are hungry to dance. They will take lower paying dance jobs with high time commitments over a survival job with less hours and higher pay to use their training and satisfy their desire to perform (Passarelli). Many of the concert dance jobs dancers take currently pay both poorly and illegally. In the survey by Dance Artist’s National Collective, 75% reported they had not been paid for freelance dance jobs, and 94% of responders reported they have been paid off the books (“Wage Survey Statistics”). Not only does paying off the record provide tax issues for the party paying

off the record, the party being paid suffers consequences as well. First, it is important to note that this payment situation is illegal. For the party being paid off the books, paying taxes becomes harder because they must use their own records to prove income, rather than having official pay documents as evidence. Further, payment under the table can make dancers ineligible for unemployment benefits and other statutory benefits such as paid family leave (Dolyna). In the event of another pandemic or event causing the arts sector to shut down, this leaves dancers economically vulnerable and without a way to get support. It also leaves dancers strapped for cash should they find themselves out of dance work and unable to find employment or income from other areas. Although being paid under the table provides drawbacks, dancers feel pressure to take it in order to survive.

For all dancers, the ability to collect workers compensation is important. Dancers need to be able to collect workers compensation if they are injured while engaged in a dance job. Not only does it make it impossible to work other dance jobs when injured, it also makes it hard to work survival jobs where a dancer may be required to stand all day. The only way to come back quickly and ensure that a dancer does not reinjure themselves is to take the full time needed to recovery off from all physical work (Passarelli). For dancers engaged as employees, the dance organization engaging them is required to have workers compensation insurance (New York State). Workers who are paid under the table do not have the same legal protections for workers' compensation as those paid legally. In these instances, there is a possibility the dance entity paying under the table could claim that the dancers engaged by them needed to have their own workers compensation (Dolyna), which would be a large financial burden should the dancer being paid under the table get injured. However, the entity engaging a dancer must always have

workers compensation insurance for the dancers because the dancers are under the direct control of the entity engaging them (New York State).

It is important to note that the historic underfunding of the form trickles down – dancers are paid what the dance companies can afford to pay them. However, in order to solve this precarious labor crisis, dance companies and choreographers need to understand that if they cannot afford to pay a dancer a living wage, they cannot afford that dancer at all. For many companies and choreographers, this may mean hiring less dancers than preferred. However, this is important to keep dancers in the field long term. As Passarelli noted, early career dancers who are consistently under compensated for their work are more likely to leave the field.

### **Effects of Underpayment on the Dance Field**

Underpayment and low access to resources is causing dance artists to leave the field. A Dance/NYC survey post COVID collected data on the needs and state of dancers in New York City. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, dancers who have employment outside of the industry rose from 33% in Fall 2020 to 46% in February 2021. Those thinking about long term career options outside of the dance industry rose to 49% in February 2021 from 43% in fall 2020 (Dance/NYC). Although these statistics result a combination of factors such as a decline in dance jobs during the pandemic and the rise of COVID-19 in New York City during late 2020 and early 2021, the factor of low pay cannot be ignored as a reason that dancers are leaving the field. even before the COVID pandemic, the dance industry had a hard time retaining workers into lifelong careers. A report on arts worker statistics by the National Endowment for the Arts shows that between 2012 and 2016, the median age of the entire United States work force was 42 years old. Of all arts sectors, the dance field had the youngest median age, 26, 8 years younger than the



next youngest median age (“Artists and Other Cultural Workers”). Again, factors other than wages affect this number, such as the taxation on the body, however, with better pay opportunities, there are chances that less dancers would leave the field as early and mid-career artists because better pay would afford these dancers better quality of life.

Low compensation not only affects who leaves the field, it also dictates who is most likely to stay. Evvie Allison, a dance artist and advocate based in New York City, pointed out in a Dance Magazine article that “the current lack of a minimum wage privileges dancers who can afford to work for free.” Not every dancer is able to afford to work for free, and many have to say no to opportunities because they are not able to take time off of paying jobs, which often are survival jobs, to make it to rehearsals that are not paying them. Dancers that have financial support from families are able to afford to work for free, because they do not need to work the same amount of paying jobs to afford their bills as those who do not have the same outside support. In an article for Dance Magazine, a dancer shared that when they were unable to afford rent, their parents augmented the rest of the money so that they were able to afford their apartment (“Dancer Salaries Are Often Helped By Money From Parents”). When practices such as this occur, it allows dancers who come from places of financial privilege to get ahead of dancers do not. By being able to afford to work the low paying jobs, these dancers rack up experience needed to attend auditions for stable positions and are more likely to get these positions because of it. When dancers from financial privilege make up the bulk of those who are working, the industry is less diverse.

## **Dance Unionization**

One cry that is often sounded in addressing pay equity in dance is to unionize non-profit dancers providing a means for collective bargaining. Unions currently exist for the technical theater crew, such as lighting, deck hands, and stage managers, that work dance shows which set minimum wages for crew positions (“About Us”). Dancers and dance advocates, including Dance Artist’s National Collective, argue that because the work of the dancer onstage is just as valuable as the work done offstage, there should also be a mechanism for standardizing minimum wages for performing artists in non-profit dance. Currently, there is only one union which protects dance artists. The American Guild of Musical Artists, AGMA, was founded to counter work rules that varied from company to company in opera, orchestra, and dance that often left performers ill by opening night (“History”). However, AGMA currently is unable to offer protections to all dance artists. As a requirement to join the union, one must be a working for an AGMA signatory company. There are currently only 24 dance companies, a small fraction of the total companies in the United States, as signatory companies, which is slowly growing.

Not all dancers want to unionize. Eran Bugge, now a senior dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, has been dancing for the company since 2005. She is one of six dancers out of the sixteen in the company to have been hired before Taylor’s death in 2018. Under Taylor’s direction of the company, dancers performed without contracts, using a verbal agreement that included what to expect in terms of pay, rehearsal hours, and performance and tour conditions including how many performances could be performed before a day off among other important details. According to Bugge, this verbal agreement was upheld, and when broken, dancers were given a reason for why it had to be done – usually in order to accommodate travel and ensure that all performances were able to be met (Bugge). Under AGMA guidelines, if too many

performances were determined without a day off or travel scheduled too close to a performance, a union contract would have necessitated that the Paul Taylor Dance Company pay their dancers extra. Bugge noted that these fees to the dancers may have made certain performances too expensive for the company, and she would rather be able to perform than receive the compensation for violating the agreement.

After Taylor's death, the Paul Taylor Dance Company considered unionizing. Through their process, the company dancers realized that their current working conditions were close to the AGMA standards, and in certain cases better. Other standards, such as mandatory breaks on the hour for dancers, were not appealing to the company, as it would break the company culture that the dancers appreciated. In the end, the Paul Taylor Dance Company dancers decided not to unionize because they did not have enough to gain from joining AGMA, and would be paying the organization to fight for conditions that were already being provided. Dancers felt they did not need to join other companies to be able to collectively bargain, but rather could join forces as just the dancers in the company to bargain with management should they want to change conditions (Bugge).

Griff Braun, a former dancer and the current National Organizing Director of AGMA, countered Bugge's sentiment in an interview that it was not worth joining AGMA to collectively bargain with other companies because of what hers already provided. Braun asserted that unionizing is a strong way to ensure that management continues to treat dancers fairly. "The union effect of encouraging non-union employers to provide decent working conditions is a good thing, but it is not a substitute for actually having a say in what happens in your workplace" (Braun). While Bugge's current company management is positive, a change in company leadership could lead to a complete overhaul of company culture. In this situation, which Bugge

had brought up as a hypothetical down the line, Braun says it is better to unionize now as a pre-emptive measure. While this example uses the Paul Taylor Dance Company, Braun noted that it is a situation dancers in many companies are in. Unionizing is the only way to ensure that dancers have a say in the workplace, and ensure that this voice must be listened to (Braun). By doing this, dancers can ensure that there is never a period of mistreatment from company management by holding the company to union standards. Whereas Bugge feels that AGMA is not strong due to its small size, Braun put forward that the only way to make AGMA stronger is for more companies to join. Should her company join, the union would be stronger by having more members. Eventually, if all dance companies joined, AGMA would have more power in the non-profit dance industry.

### **Unionizing Freelance Dancers**

In 2018, Braun went on record saying that AGMA was looking into expanding the union to include freelance dancers (Whittenburg). The efforts moved from AGMA to Dance Artists National Collective, which is currently working on creating equity within the dance field while creating a formal union, which is a slow process (Braun). So, why have movements to unionize outside of AGMA fallen short for freelance dancers? One reason is current United States law does not allow for unionization outside of a single employer (“Why the US PRO Act Matter for the Right to Unionize”). Dancers in a single dance company are allowed to unionize because they all share a single employer, the company they dance for. However, freelance dancers who do not share a single employer and are employed as independent contractors do not have the right under current law. Union leaders argue that should the law be changed, and that it is possible to have collective bargaining across multiple employers. On the other hand, others argue

that having multiple employers makes it too difficult to collectively bargain and do not see how a freelance dance union would succeed (Allison). Due to the conflicting views, many dancers have been deterred from trying to collectivize freelance dancers, feeling that it will get them nowhere.

Many dancers also fear that unionization would make them unemployable, that choreographers would hire non-union dancers who can be paid a lower wage to lower costs (Allison). This is a fear based in reality. Freelance actors represented by the union Actors' Equity Association, known as simply Equity, are forbidden to work outside of Equity theaters and contracts without permission of their union ("Equity's Rules & Important Tips for Members"). These make union members ineligible for many jobs they are qualified for. Many of these jobs choose to be non-union to be non-union in an effort to cut costs of production. For example, in the 1990s 90% of national tours of shows originating on Broadway used union contracts, but by the mid 2000s only 60% used union contracts. The 30% that stopped did so with the express purpose to cut production costs (Hostetter).

### **The Next Generation**

While unionization as a solution is a long term solution to solving compensation issues under current conditions, creating changes within the culture of dancers about to leave training programs to enter the industry is a short term solution. The unjust pay practices within the concert dance industry disproportionately affects the youngest dancers joining the industry. These dancers have years of intense training and performance experience within dance education settings, but lack the key component needed to get stable, well-paying dance engagements: professional experience. The concert dance industry has created an industry impossible to break into without being forced to gain experience through low paying professional engagements. As a

response to COVID, auditions for dance engagements often begin online, with dancers providing video reels of them dancing and their resumes for the chance to be given a spot in a live, in person audition. Due to this shift, the previous experience listed on a resume is becoming more important than before to even be considered for job opportunities (Passarelli). Dancers without experience are desperate to dance, and out of this desperation are willing to ignore illegal pay practices, poor work conditions, and low wages.

A large factor as to why young dancers will ignore these red flags is they do not know any better. During Passarelli's time in a conservatory style collegiate dance program, the entire emphasis was on how to dance, focusing only on technique, artistry, and the craft. She never received instruction on how to structure her career, what types of jobs to look for, how to find auditions, or any industry knowledge on standard business practices and expectations including compensation, conditions, etc.. (Passarelli). Holly Belshaw, a current collegiate dance student, shared a similar experience. Throughout her training, Belshaw has attended three different conservatory programs over seven years. When asked if any of these had adequately prepared her to begin working as a dancer, she responded that "none have taught me how to look for auditions and jobs, or what to look for in contracts. No one has talked about health insurance as a dancer or minimum salary we should be getting from jobs as a freelance dancer" (Belshaw).

One reason for dance training programs not sharing this information is that their faculty are often out of touch of what is required to obtain employment and work as a dancer in the current concert dance industry. Both Passarelli and Belshaw reported most of their faculty had not worked as performers for many years, and their knowledge of how to find auditions in 2022 was lacking. Professors that are currently auditioning and performing often do not stay at programs long enough for students to make strong connections with these faculty members, so

students are not able to learn from their experiences (Belshaw). When the generation of dancers entering the concert dance workforce do not have the skills or knowledge needed to navigate the industry, they are ill equipped to chart a strategy for long term financial and physical survival . For dancers to combat unfair pay practices and current industry practices of overworking performers, dance education programs must do a better job of teaching their students the business side of being a dancer.

## **Conclusion**

While concert dance may be a small industry, the close knit community of dancers need to come together to address the issues they are facing of current pay practices. At the present, professional concert dancers are often making minimum wage or providing labor for free, desperate for the opportunity to use their training to perform. Hours in the non-profit dance industry are long, and for many freelance dancers, unpredictable. As the industry moves into a post-pandemic world, it is important to rethink how it treats dancers. Full time dance companies who want to help sustain the careers of their dancers need to schedule their dancers for five hour rehearsal days, which is more sustainable on the body, and increase wages in order to ensure dancers are not resorting to survival jobs. Dance companies that engage freelance dancers need to provide more stability in the hours they are rehearsing, pay for all rehearsals and performances, and ensure that statutory benefits are honored.

It needs to be emphasized that concert dancers need to consider the longevity of their body when starting their career. Without the body, a dancer is unable to do the specific thing they have trained for years in: dancing. With better pay practices comes better care for the body: being paid more per rehearsal means having to work less jobs to afford good quality of living,

working less hours per day puts less strain on the body, and having important health insurance benefits ensures that dancers have access to care teams should they become injured. For years in the dance industry, dancers have worked their bodies into the ground and danced until they could not anymore. A better dance field would allow dancers to take care of their bodies, staying in the field longer, and to do this the industry must revise its pay practices.

Griff Braun emphasizes that change can only come if the entire concert dance community agrees to the same standards and practices. Choreographers and dance companies will always be able to find a dancer who is willing to work for free, who does not know better, who is easy to exploit. However, if the next generation of concert dancers enter into the work force better equipped to stand up for their rights, there is a chance the industry practices can shift for the better.



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