

Hatchery Project [version 1.0] / Reflections on my experience - Jennifer Calienes

At the onset of this project (2010), I was the founding director of the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC). To advance the mission and vision of MANCC, I knew that the only way forward was to work in partnership with others in the field. *Forward* for me meant something larger than the effort of any singular organization. It was networked and opportunistic and stemmed from a desire for another foundational resource in our field — a resource that focused solely on the development of new work and advancement of the form. At its core.

Core

Education, engagement and formal presentation are crucial means towards advancing this ephemeral art form and had been a primary focus of our field priorities (convening topics and funding initiatives) for a long while. Now, imagine how those efforts might be impacted if we could strengthen [the dialog around] a level of activity [and opportunities] for dance makers in the U.S. that valued, and sought to, explore the importance of the creative process in dance. As Eiko said to me early on at MANCC, ‘yes two weeks of development time is crucial, but after that I will need two more weeks, followed by two more weeks’. No singular institution could make the type of difference our field needs and our artists (and ultimately audiences) deserve.

Need

At MANCC, I felt isolated, but the isolation wasn’t just geographic. While major presenters talked a good game about their support of dance makers, I knew what we were doing was different. At our core, our fee structures, priorities, approach and intent were different. Yes, related and intertwined with efforts of presenters and educators, but ultimately, different. Our work happened well in advance of the curtains opening to a curious audience, and in advance of or alongside the decision-making process of a presenter considering how an artist or work might intersect with their own curatorial vision.

As I sought out site-based colleagues with a desire to better support art-makers who chose movement-based forms as their primary mode of exploration and communication, I felt we (developmental spaces for dance artists) were on the fringe, at best, and excluded, at worst, from Dance/USA and Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Fortunately, MANCC quickly found a home in the Alliance of Artists Communities, but performing artists, ensemble-based practitioners and dance makers were, of yet, still considered outliers.

Rants, experience and motivation

Culture wars

Carlisle Project / National Dance Project

Artists / Managers / Fire in belly

Dance Theater Workshop partnerships

2009 MANCC Forum

Hatchery Project [version 1.0]

Sam Miller had explicitly told me over breakfast one morning not to start a collective. Our 2007 MANCC research [that formed the basis of our three-year partnership with DTW] also hinted at this, but I remained curious. Following our 2009 MANCC National Forum, Sara Coffey, my newly found friend and founder of Vermont Performance Lab asked me to consider being a part of an emerging residency collective which included Craig Peterson, whose work I had long admired and who was now at Philly's Live Arts Brewery (LAB) and Brian Rogers, co-founder of the Chocolate Factory and, at the time, an artist and dance advocate who I'd hadn't yet encountered.

I had as many questions as I had reservations: Were we becoming producers? How could we do this without being exclusionary, knowing another club wouldn't fly? What would be our relationship to the presentation of the work? Did this need to be dance specific? Who would coordinate? Could we — and did we all need to — contribute equally? Was there a way to link support in a way that served all: the artist; the development site; the presenters; the audiences; and could we also make this efficient? Not only economically but in practice (coordination and communication) for the artists?

Even without all the answers, I knew I needed the learning community this opportunity would provide. I also knew the artists would be better served by having a multiplicity of development experiences.

After meeting with Brian, Craig and Sara, it was impossible to say no to the magnetic pull of this like-minded group of committed practitioners who were ready, willing and able to dive deep — together. The invitation by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation following our presentation at the pre-conference platform — provided to us, ironically, by Dance/USA and APAP — catapulted our conversations forward.

We wanted to test our assumptions as to who this opportunity would best serve: an emerging artist with a fire burning inside, or a well-seasoned artist who had experienced what we understood to be luxurious development residency conditions. We needed to work with artists we knew we could help and artists who would help us. I define help in this instance as support that champions and challenges everyone involved. The range of artists and artistry (Luciana Achugar, Beth Gill, Annie-B Parson and Reggie Wilson) made sense, and while all were from New York, their common location provided a reasonable testing ground and ripe environment for our experiment.

Beyond the obvious time, space and resources for artists with the connective tissue to help maximize impact, we outlined four additional goals for the three-year experiment around Engagement, Documentation, Learning Community and Reflection.

Time, Space and Resources

Through the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the institutional indirect and direct support from the

Chocolate Factory, MANCC and Florida State University, Philadelphia Live Arts and the Vermont Performance Lab, we provided **over 10,000 hours of paid development time** (cash fees and per diem) for choreographers, dancers, and collaborators (including dramaturges, sound, lighting, set, costume, and media designers). This paid time was to work on the development of the craft and on new work that — though related and interconnected — was not based on transactional service payments for teaching or performing. **All housing and travel expenses were paid for all residencies outside of the artists' hometowns** (Philadelphia, PA; Guilford, VT; Tallahassee, FL; North Adams, MA; and Freeport, ME) and there were **no expenses incurred by artists to rent facilities or equipment**, utilize theaters, studios, costume shops, media labs, recording studios, grange halls and the like.

What started as an idea to provide four interconnected residencies to four artists (12 opportunities) yielded over **33 unique residencies and blocks of rehearsal time for participating artists**. The range of activity spanned the full spectrum of development: from early planning visits and private studio time to full production residencies and even a reflective post-premiere residency in Maine.

While grossly under-budgeted in relationship to the overall project expense projections, the personnel support the project leveraged was significant. Beyond the direct support aforementioned to the artists and their artistic and administrative collaborators, the project involved partner leadership (advocacy, producorial support, grant review, fiscal agency), residency coordinators (logistical support and engagement), technical and production crews, documentation specialists, writers, scholars, historians, leadership from partner institutions in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, and over 1000 new and invested audience members who actively participated in the creative process with these artists.

Engagement

While the majority of the residency time (~ 85%) was private in nature, the other activity focused on experimenting with ways in which to engage an audience (in best cases as defined by the artist) with the work in progress in ways that were mutually beneficial to both artist and audience. This part of the project warranted the most careful negotiation, communication and trust. Timing and approach had to be carefully considered when navigating this terrain, and ego, insecurities and ulterior motives (real and perceived), complicated this opportunistic method to building advocates, curiosity and support from others alongside the personal nature of creation.

NOTE: Exploring when and where to put work-in-progress in front of others in mediated and unmediated ways remains worthy of further conversation and study.

Documentation

Documentation was a priority of the project as a whole as well as for many residency partners and artists. Photos, video and text served as reflective and promotional instruments that were both supported and challenged by the full group of artists and host partners, as well as the involvement of Claudia La Rocco.

Written documentation — poetry, peer review, articles, a field survey, reflective statements on the initiative by artists not directly supported by the initiative, annual reports to the Mellon Foundation, partner and artist letters, emails, rants and musings — could fill a book, but that was not the intent. The project website attempted to gather and showcase highlights from the writing as well as from the thousands of photos and hundreds of hours of footage, but is perhaps too broad to truly comprehend in a singular online setting at this point in time.

For me, documentation highlights include:

- Online videos produced by Fist & Heel, Beth Gill, MANCC and VPL that promoted the artists and institutions, raised awareness and dollars, and provided context and insight as to the artist's working processes and works themselves
- Small libraries of photographs in MANCC archives which have become a resource for artists and presenters alike to use in their own promotional efforts
- Annual reflections by Claudia La Rocco on our three years of work, as well her own POV at the close of the project
- Essays by Victoria Marks, Ain Gordon, Jenifer Krasinski and Kenneth Collins on the Hatchery Project as they experienced it at the Alliance of Artists Communities Hatchery convening (described in detail further below)
- Survey of ideal residency experiences for dance makers compiled by Claudia La Rocco which, upon first glance, reflects the many desires, methodologies and contradictions of approaches and needs when viewed across personalities, career experiences and timing.
- Peer essays by Tere O'Connor on Big Dance Theater, Jennifer Krasinski on Luciana Achugar and Claudia La Rocco on Beth Gill as well as Susan Manning's articles on Reggie Wilson, Fist & Heel and *Moses(es)* in TDR/The Drama Review, which were made possible by her time in the studio with Reggie through the Hatchery Project

A NOTE ON THE WEBSITE: Even before launch, we knew the massive amount of activity warranted a focused curatorial point of view or dramaturgical intervention to help focus the take-aways for any interested viewer; however, given the various perspectives of all involved, the task of agreeing on a singular POV felt impossible to tackle at the close of phase one.

Learning Community

For me, one of the most important aspects of the project was the creation of an invested learning community that, intentionally, expanded only incrementally. From early conversations with artists about how to best align an arc of Hatchery resources, to the incorporation of new partners like Mass MoCA (when an artist was in a pinch), to a day-long convening of practitioners to interrogate our experiment and expand perspective mid-stream, the community aspect provided a trusted resource and think tank.

The AAC convening, in particular, was significant for many reasons. First, as practitioners dabbling in the creation of new work who also actively sought ways to engage with, inform or provide opportunities to learn from work in progress, we were modeling behavior we expected from partner artists. To open up an experiment mid-way through meant exposing some of our underbelly. Trying to co-organize and co-facilitate a field-wide gathering was, by far, one of the most tense series of interactions within the group, especially in the midst of Craig's transition to Gibney, Carla's transition into MANCC and of Brian and Sheila's personal challenges. Despite it all, we pulled it off, but it took a toll for sure, especially when trust broke down between the partners, which led to the eventual splintering of the group.

The AAC moment, however, allowed us to expand this community and explore the following topics in a room full of peers, collaborators and colleagues: Conditions for Collective Advancement, Engaged Research vs. Community Engagement, and Building Visibility and Value for Residencies in Dance.

NOTE: I'm grateful to Caitlin Strokosch and her team at AAC, not only for their support of the convening, but for prioritizing support for performing artists in their strategic planning process that followed.

Reflection

After mapping what I felt was a thoughtful transition timed to provide a new Director with support and 18 months of activity prior to what we anticipated would be a major grant renewal from our friends at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I stepped down as Director of MANCC in spring, 2014. Most of the plan worked well, but my transition, alongside my founding colleagues in the Hatchery (three of the four institutions with all significantly different circumstances), proved to be a variable the Hatchery Project wasn't prepared to handle.

As a 'unit' that sought a certain level of efficiency and economy, we chose to do several things that proved challenging at one point or another:

- deciding not to hire a project manager
- asking one of the four partners to serve as fiscal agent for the grant, and the only site with two very distinct representatives on every call
- thinking creatively about the link between evaluation and documentation by engaging a former critic to consider both

While we hoped there would be equal investment and participation in this \$650,000 experiment, three+ years eventually proved us wrong. While the entire concept was built on the idea that our differences were complimentary, the partners, our documenter and our artists needed some level of consistency that was impossible with the 'group' in charge. After all, Project Management is not the strong suit of everyone, and in full transparency, as I shifted out of MANCC entirely in January 2015, the Hatchery hired me to be a part-time Project Manager to finish the last six months of the current grant term.

The four organizational hosts of the Hatchery (ultimately five as Craig transitioned to RED Arts and six if we include his transition to Gibney) were also wildly different in organizational structure, geography and institutional makeup. From a husband-and-wife team to a major state

university, we were forced to spend hours and hours trying to come up with a unified budget and fiscal processes that worked for everyone. This provided both a great learning opportunity (I know personally this coincided with MANCC's revamped artist contract, insurance requirements and fiscal restructuring) and a huge source of tension throughout the duration of the project. With money came the need — whether intentional or not — for power and control. And, when abused even slightly, it became a struggle that was harmful to the cause.

Our decision to engage Claudia La Rocco was strategic and timely — for her, for us and for the field. She was already leaving the New York Times, so we understood this wouldn't prove to be a conflict, but would provide a new platform for all of us to engage deeply with an imbedded writer, someone who was informed and opinionated (or so we perceived). A poetic journalist? Who wouldn't want someone like that on the team? But several of the artists still viewed Claudia as a critic, which brought about a bit of tension and sense of confusion as to her role. We failed to agree on the approach (and how and where criticism, journalism, evaluation and documentation intersected strategically amidst a new initiative). We also lacked the leadership necessary in our ensemble-oriented structure to guide her work forward in any efficient or conclusive manner. Ultimately, we managed to document and evaluate our work, but I'm not so sure it was done cohesively, but more so as an organic extension of a myriad of opinions, priorities and considerations.

Closing

We supported artists really well. I would argue that by having valued the process and encouraged the risky inventors' wheel to slow in order to strengthen, great work was made whose developmental process was more fully subsidized, that toured, that had a presence beyond the stage and, yes, even won awards. Artists and administrators grew personally and professionally. Audiences and investors were brought into the equation, broadening the pool (and potential pool) of support.

I believe more strongly than before that it is possible to build work and audiences simultaneously, but communication, trust, and nuance are key, and all of these take time.

The time we committed to engaging with one another through the Hatchery Project was both commendable and exhausting, but I know we are all better for having had this opportunity. The need for our field to work in partnership with one another (artists, institutional leadership and funders) to activate and leverage resources that will better support dance and theater makers mandates we continue experimenting. The benefits far outweigh the risks inherent in working in isolation of one another. The field is too small, and the need too great.