

# Tracing roots

Some historical highlights of community dance in the United States (1960s-present)  
by **Mary Fitzgerald** of Arizona State University

**As an artist working to develop and engage communities through dance over the past twelve years, I have been interested in studying the history that informs my practice.** The following text traces some of the roots of that heritage, and includes excerpts from a more comprehensive article about community dance aesthetics that I published in the 2009 *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, which also has the complete list of sources referenced in this essay. My focus for *Animated* looks primarily at professional practice over the past forty years,

highlighting individual artists and models that have contributed to the rich breadth of community dance that exists in the United States. I also briefly describe the emergence of universities as leaders in community dance training, which parallels trends in higher education during the early twenty first century that provided a foundation for creative dance to grow in this country.

Since the mid 1970s and 80s, community dance practices in the United States have been growing exponentially, propelling contemporary dance as a whole in



Marylee Hardenbergh's *Ascending: The Steps of Borough Hall, Brooklyn, New York*. Photo: American Dance Therapy Association

Students from ASU and Susan Bendix's dance program at the Silvestre Herrera School, Phoenix, Arizona  
Photo: Tim Trumble

'As we move forward in the 21st century, socially-based dance in the United States continues to challenge this archetype, exploring the myriad roles of dance in culture, and integrating a broad spectrum of movement practices from around the globe.'



groundbreaking directions. Although an exact definition of community dance is almost impossible to pinpoint due to its sprawling and all encompassing nature, from a historical perspective, dance always has been a community or 'socially-based' art form. As an integral part of communal rituals, celebrations, and socialising, dance has had multiple functions in culture throughout most of our history. In a presentation about community dance history at the World Dance Alliance Global Summit in 2008, dance artist and educator Satu Hummasti reminds us that in the Western European tradition, it has only been during the past eight hundred years or so that dance has bifurcated into "social dances for 'the people' and dances for the courts, or 'art world elite.'" While this artificial divide persists in much of the concert dance world today, as we move forward in the 21st century, socially based dance in the United States continues to challenge this archetype, exploring the myriad roles of dance in culture, and integrating a broad spectrum of movement practices from around the globe. It is far beyond the scope of this article for a comprehensive discussion of such a rich and diverse field, however I think that it is interesting to trace at least a small thread of the modern/postmodern lineage, focusing on the 1960s until the present.

Numerous examples of community based dance practices exist throughout United States modern dance history. In the 1930s, for instance, Workers Dance League artists choreographed dances that share some of the fundamental principles in contemporary practices such as a belief in an egalitarian creative process, the inclusion of untrained dancers, and a strong commitment to social change. During the 1940s and 50s, several luminaries in the field, including Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, challenged traditional paradigms of 'high' cultural expression in their work, and expanded modern dance aesthetics to include African and Afro Caribbean dance traditions. Dunham and Primus also pioneered community arts and education models that espoused the training of 'engaged global citizens,' a concept that resonates strongly with contemporary thinking in socially based art.

Despite these and many other exceptional examples, most historians agree that community dance coalesced into a significant art movement only within the past forty or so

years. The turbulent sociopolitical climate of the 1960s and 70s, combined with increased government support of the arts contributed to an enormous ideological shift in the art world. The Civil Rights and Peace Movements, Women's Liberation, environmental protection, etc. created an atmosphere of rebellion and unrest. Artists broke down conventions and challenged the status quo. The Judson Church choreographers, while not typically considered community artists, explored a wide range of art making approaches, such as involving untrained movers, taking dance off the proscenium stage, and addressing charged political issues about race, class, and gender that still characterises socially based dance today. In her paper Hummasti also made the interesting point that though Steve Paxton may not view himself as a community practitioner, the emphasis on democratic partnerships in Contact Improvisation also is a central tenet of community arts practice. Other significant artists associated with this era, such as Anna Halprin, who actually greatly influenced the 'Judsonites,' developed unique community practices on the West Coast that focused on therapeutic rituals for healing and peace. Later, in the mid 70s and 80s, two of the most esteemed artists in the field, Liz Lerman and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, arrived on the scene to establish contemporary dance companies that played vital roles in the growth of the community dance movement throughout the country.

The shifting ideologies of the 60s and 70s also resulted in the emergence of several public policies that contributed to the development of community based arts. For example, the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), which was established in 1965, promoted the philosophy that art and culture are resources that benefit the society as a whole. Government support was awarded to artists who combined 'artistic excellence with the broadest public accessibility.' In addition to the NEA, programmes such as the Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) in New York, and the federal government's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) were founded during the 1970s that furthered this community based, public access model. For example, the CAPS programme awarded funding to artists who offered public lectures and workshops about their work. Much like the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, CETA



Students from ASU and Susan Bendix's dance program at the Silvestre Herrera School, Phoenix, Arizona. Photo: Tim Trumble

provided employment for artists in an effort to rebuild local communities during the recession. More and more, the interest in public accessibility and community based efforts grew, dramatically influencing new trends in the art world overall.

With the economic downturn in the 1980s, arts funding became increasingly limited, yet community dance continued to flourish. This trend can be attributed partially to the culture wars of the mid 1990s, which maintained that government-supported art should be 'non-inflammatory and beneficial to the community.' The controversy surrounding the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andre Serrano, for instance, played an enormous part in the organisation's amendment of grant requirements, which restricted funding to art that took into account a sense of 'decency' and respect for the American public's diverse belief systems. The NEA's change in position and the overall decrease in government support caused many contemporary dance companies, even those that had not been community based, to begin developing 'outreach' programmes to offset their operating expenses. Thus although sometimes inspired by fiscal necessity rather than ideological passion, the establishment of this new company structure actually served to broaden the practices of community dance.

The current models of community based dance practice in the United States are wide-ranging and constantly evolving. While some community dance artists facilitate projects that include community members only, others

engage directly with a community to inspire the creation of exclusively professional repertory. Choreographers such as Blondell Cummings and Bill T. Jones often engage communities through participatory workshops, panel discussions, and rituals as part of their creative process. Although community participants may not perform in her work, Cummings believes that the exploration and sharing of ideas is in itself 'a communal act.' On the other end of the spectrum are models that engage participants in all aspects of the work. Choreographer Pat Graney's renowned *Keeping the Faith* is a beautiful example of such a model. Like countless other prison programmes across the country, it uses the vehicles of movement, visual art, and creative writing to foster the development of important 'outside life skills.' These residencies culminate in performance events for fellow inmates, prison staff, as well as members of the public.

Other artists whose unique practices I find inspiring include Marylee Hardenburgh, who founded Global Site Performance in 1985. Hardenburgh choreographs large scale outdoor works that aim to draw attention to the unique characteristics of an environment. Rather than working with an established group of dancers, she collaborates with community members and artists from the local area to ensure that at all aspects of the performance are site specific in nature. Formerly employed with the CETA programme in the 1970s, Martha Bowers, director of Dance Etcetera, also is an established community practitioner who creates elaborate site performances that focus on the

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themes of history and place. One of her most notable projects involves a 15 year commitment to the revitalisation of her local community – Red Hook, Brooklyn. In addition to producing the Red Hook Festival, Bowers (and many other artists, such as Aviva Davidson’s Hip Hop Generation Next and Dancing in the Streets programmes), has played a key role as a community organiser in that area, using the arts as a powerful catalyst for urban renewal and trans-cultural exchange.

These are just a few of the hundreds of examples of socially-based dance that have been developing in recent years. The predominant model in the United States, however, still consists of a company whose mission involves the creation of professional contemporary dance repertory, as well as collaborative performance projects and educational programmes with diverse community members. As I stated earlier, this company structure evolved partially as a result of policy changes in funding organisations such as the NEA during the 80s and 90s, and partially as a continuation of the modern/postmodern dance troupe tradition. The Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, established in 1975, is probably the most renowned pioneer of this model. Other highly recognised companies include Urban Bush Women, David Dorfman Dance, PearsonWidrig Dance Theatre, Stuart Pimsler Dance Theatre, Zaccho Dance Theatre, and AXIS. These companies have created collaborative projects with communities across the nation and abroad that centre on themes ranging from family, to spirituality, to healing, to history, to human rights.

In addition to creating several seminal works, choreographers such as Liz Lerman and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, have developed specific methodologies for working in community contexts. The Dance Exchange’s online Toolbox, for example, has codified many of Lerman’s approaches, which they generously share as a free resource to the public. Though perhaps not codified, Zollar and Lerman also have contributed to a method of dialogic democracy in the arts, which very simply stated, allows for the public to respectfully share dissenting points of view without the goal of reaching consensus. Whether they have established recognised techniques or not, I think that all of the above mentioned artists have developed innovative practices in community based art during the past four decades using dance as a powerful instrument for social transformation, and moved the field as a whole beyond the confines of the concert dance tradition. As dance writer and scholar Ann Daly points out, “Community based dance is emerging as a paradigm for the twenty first century.”

In the world of higher education, this paradigm shift has become increasingly evident. Within the past ten years or so, the revitalisation of community service and civic engagement initiatives on college campuses, combined with new trends in the art world overall has expanded the focus of academic departments. Throughout the country, degree programmes have been featuring community arts

and community cultural development. The Community Arts Network, an extensive online resource, lists over forty eight academic programmes in the United States. While the majority of these emphasise a fairly broad focus, such as arts and community, arts and service learning, arts and social justice, arts and youth etc., several universities provide training specifically in dance and community contexts. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro offers a concentration in community dance as part of the BFA degree in dance. At Florida State University, students can earn a certificate in Arts and Community with an emphasis in dance. The University of San Francisco has designed a fascinating curriculum in Performing Arts and Social Justice with a concentration in dance. Arizona State University, which has a long history of developing innovative strategies in community dance, has recently incorporated socially-based creative practice into the core curriculum.

The development of these campus programmes reflects both a larger cultural trend toward ‘the fully engaged citizen and university,’ and I believe a profound change in our thinking about the field. As funding sources dry up again, the traditional two tiered company model (professional repertory/community works) has begun to reshape itself. Many of the long-term project-based models (such as Red Hook) that have a trans-cultural focus, and establish themselves in particular communities, offer us opportunities to take our practices in new directions.

Within academia, some similar shifts have been occurring. Several dance programmes are moving away from traditional performance/choreography curriculums towards a wider focus on creativity and trans disciplinary studies. While many professionals have concerns that this broad focus may mean sacrificing some of the depth and rigor of the art form, on the other hand, I think that the expansion more closely reflects the multidimensionality of the field. It seems that our charge now is to continue improving the quality of community arts training across the country. Questions about best practices and professional development have been coming to the fore, as well as discussions about the establishment of a national organisation. Of course there is much more to be done, but during the past forty years, socially based dance in the United States has made significant strides. The inspiring and tireless efforts of the artists that I have discussed (and countless others) give us a solid foundation to build upon. To put it in community arts leader Maryo Gard Ewells words, our unwavering “search for a society that is meaningful and inclusive” remains strong.

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