



A Literary Journal and Resource for the Fine and Performing Arts
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Dance: Women's Place in Today's Dance World

By Francine L. Trevens; *ART TIMES* July/ August 2011

Kudos for the *New York Times* for naming a woman to the top editorial position. The first female editor of the 160-year-old paper, Jill Abramson, was named executive editor of *The New York Times* in early June — one can say the Times they are a changin'!

Often the struggle women face for equal rights gets lost in the more publicized struggles of ethnicities, religions, sexual preferences and political cults. We may have come a long way, baby, but "babes" still have a long way to go. True, we are no longer chattels of our fathers, brothers or husbands. True, we have the vote and have an array of interesting jobs. Also true, we get paid less for doing those jobs, thus remaining financially exploited in the business world.

For some reason — the old idea that the man is the bread earner and what a woman earns is just to augment a family's income has remained in place, although statistics prove how many women are solely responsible for their families financially. There are many organizations at work on this duality. NOW fights for equal pay for women, and a segment of the Dramatists Guild works for equal production for women. Who advocates for equal respect, recompense, performance opportunities and attention to women who run dance companies, or have dance companies in their name?

What does a dance company, bearing a woman's name and/or being run by a woman, face in terms of grant getting and media attention? I asked several dance companies for responses and here is the result.

Laura Pawel, feels it isn't a case of prejudice, stating, "It is more that male dance gets more attention ... because there are fewer of them and therefore they're intrinsically more interesting (ha!). It is the same in other female-dominated professions, like teaching or social work: male versions rise faster and higher than their female counterparts. Which is totally unfair, but it is a fact."



Guillermo Brown (far left), Selina Chau, Darion Smith, Sarah Bek, Gary Shaufeld showing work of Cherylyn Lavagnino. Photo by Ella Bromblin

Cherylyn Lavagnino said, "Yes in the ballet world in particular the men run the show: The Choreographic Institute clearly favors male choreographers."

Her suggestion for change? "I just feel more female choreographers should be given the opportunity to create dances for ballet companies"

Her reasoning on this was insightful, "The ballet company world is dominated by male choreographers — interesting to find this as the women have danced in the shoes and probably have more actual physical information about the work and that informs their choreographic choices."

She also noted, "As for media attention I feel it is related more to the high profile dance company some choreographers (more males are successful however) come out of — Paul Taylor, Mark Morris, Trisha Brown, etc." And there are celebrity female dance companies as well — such as Martha Graham's company. That would just make it part of the current celebrity craze throughout the entire entertainment and performance fields.

Still, male dancers and companies named for men not only get far more media attention and more funding, they also get more sympathetic responses. Worse, female perspectives are often misread by male reviewers.

Rebecca Kelly's Snow Variation from the Nutcracker Ballet, called Queen of the North Winds. Dancers: Giorgia Bovo and Sean Scantlebury Photo by Todd Bissonette

Rebecca Kelly of Rebecca Kelly Ballet gave a wry incident proving the point: "Many years ago, Rebecca Kelly Ballet performed a satiric work called "Ladies in Waiting" subtitled Short Stories on the Subject of Impatience," at Marymount Manhattan Theater. It was a Dorothy Parkeresque flavored reflection on things women wait for. It examined four situations: A promotion within a corporation – with the rising woman having an entirely different set of hoops to jump through – set to a score by Darius Milhaud; Waiting in line for the (badly designed) Women's Bathroom at the theater, while men dart in and out of theirs — set to Handel's Water Music; Waiting for an interminable pregnancy to end, inspired by the Midwife's Tale – and set to a teeth-on-edge score for a glass orchestra; and finally, Waiting for Mr. Wonderful, set in the 1950's about 3 hopeful but geeky wallflowers in glasses and prom dresses at the hop who eventually ditch the boys – set to the Everly Brothers.



“At the time, the man who reviewed this piece made the comment that Rebecca Kelly does 'nice girl' choreography. I don't think he quite got it.”

Rebecca also noted, "Our society is so filled with the names of men at the head of companies. People are used to it, and expect it, and consent to take it for granted."

And grants are exactly what these male companies are more apt to get!

In the grant world, the desire for publicity for the grant often nudges those awarding grants to go with the higher profile company. This is true in music and theater fields as well.

Alexandra Karigan, Kimberly Lyons, and Chad Levy of Amy Marshall Dance Company in Dance: Dvija. Costumes by Norma Kamali. Photo by Lois Greenfield

Amy Marshall responded about someone who books talent into a specific venue, "We did encounter a prejudice, not through an audience, but by the presenter who programs events at a theater and decides what types of performances would best fit their audience base. My Executive Director and husband, Chad Levy, called a particular female presenter asking if she would please take a look at our company for the possibility of booking a performance at her theater. Not only did she present us with the ever becoming more common 'we don't book much dance at our theater anymore,' but dumbfounded us by continuing, 'but if we do, we tend to hire male choreographers because their work is stronger.'"



"I couldn't believe that response or from whom it came. I think further exploration could be done. In my opinion, a presenter's job is to concentrate on discovering and promoting 'great art' devoid of biases about gender."

I think most of us would agree with Amy. All the company wanted was to be seen so they could be considered for a spot, but the booking person would not even consent to *see* them!

But to get a higher profile one needs more media attention. Not only is there difficulty getting bookings, but when you do get a booking, there is the additional problem of attracting the press.

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As a former theatrical press agent, and long time theater/dance writer, I know how difficult it is to get reviewers even to attend a lesser known dance company — particularly one bearing a woman's name. It becomes a catch 22, such as not being hired for a job because you have no experience — and how to get experience without getting jobs? Apprenticeship and volunteer work were the solutions to that.

But these dance companies have served their apprenticeships. They have been working at their craft for years. Most female choreographers have a long list of dances they have choreographed — but how do they get them performed by other companies? That becomes another problem in this unequal equation.

However, there are breakthroughs in all fields. These wonderful women and their unique work will persist and ultimately one hopes, triumph. And every little step forward they make is a giant step for the women dancers and choreographers following them.

You can help by attending more dance events for companies bearing women's names or featuring women choreographers. Women are accustomed to working harder to achieve their goals — but as an audience, you can make the work easier. My favorite line in “House of Blue Leaves” was ‘Be an audience.’

So, be one! Support any of the companies above, or other female dance troupes that come to your attention. The world of dance is vast — find something to your taste and keep it alive by attending performances. Blog about what you like, and tell friends. Let's help make female choreographers financially and visibly the equal to male choreographers. A glance at our accompanying dance photos proves they already are the equal artistically!

You can also follow me on my blog <http://stagesandpages-francine.blogspot.com/>

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