

## Well-Placed Questions: Reflections from the MoBBallet Dance Writers Convening

*By Ashayla Byrd*

*Is dance journalism dead?* This seems like a pretty harrowing question for someone who has only just entered the field and found their niche in this particular corner of the larger dance ecosystem. *What is the role of the writer when experiencing a piece of dance work? To critique, celebrate, both, or neither?* There goes another set of heavy hitters. *What makes a dance writer relevant?* Plenty of things, I think. How much time do you have?

With an eclectic assortment of about 12 perfect, writing strangers, founder and curator of the *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet (MoBBallet)* Theresa Ruth Howard challenged me to interrogate what—at that time—felt like everything I knew about being a dance writer. Granted, as a newbie, my perspective felt somewhat limited. After reading through the syllabus she prepared, I knew that questions like these would enter our discussions. To hear them asked aloud gave them a new life, a new gravity that charged the space. Calibrated and eager to excavate new truths about the practice and spirit of impactful, field-advancing dance writing, the strangers and I decided to get our hands dirty.

At the *Pathways to Performance/MoBBallet Dance Writers Convening*, held at The REACH at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, dance writers from across the country gathered to examine their roles and responsibilities in the constantly-evolving dance field. This is all framed by the United States' recent acknowledgment of racial injustice and the widespread depletion of dance writer positions at publications on the national scale. With writers hailing from California, Washington, Pennsylvania, New York, and the District of Columbia and a diverse assortment of bodies in the space, Howard encouraged us all to embrace the discomfort that would arise as we developed new rules of engagement for thoughtful, effective dance journalism.

When asked why we write, commonalities surfaced: necessity, passion, communion with audiences, bridge-building, conversation, and experiential learning. One writer shared that his own questions about dance and its possibilities propelled his desire to write. A chorus of

reflective *hmm*'s and affirmative nods reverberated through the room. Another shared that known Black dance writers, especially women, seemed to be few and far between at the start of her career. As a writer rooted in West African dance traditions, her journey began with a sense of fear that she might be the only one dedicated to telling the stories of Black dance artists exclusively.

I could certainly relate to the fear of being the only one, even when I knew that I certainly was not. As a Black dancer in a largely white collegiate dance setting, my need to write stemmed from the empowerment that the written word provided me. I wanted to make room for myself in a conservatory setting that often felt suffocating and revered the pantheon of Black women writers who came before me. I was not learning about their lineage in the greater dance landscape, and I yearned to be within their sphere. Writing provides a space for me to process the art that I consume, share my observations, and give voice to perspectives that may not be prioritized in the dance community.

Of course, the writer's journey is rife with limitations, some of which have become more discouraging than ever. The eurocentric, dominant 'Powers That Be' often value formalism and traditional structure in writing rather than work that pushes boundaries, challenging the status quo of dance and all that is written about the form. Replicas and derivatives of ballet "standards" like George Balanchine and modern greats like Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham have long been deemed the ultimate representations of what dance *should* be by dance journalists. Still, in 2024, written coverage of anything that diverges from this whitewashed aesthetic is often considered unruly, unrehearsed, provocative, or worthless. Qualifications on paper also seem to supersede the actual substance of a person's writing, no matter how stale or robotic that writing may be. And we have not even addressed the lack of funding of it all...

In the genesis of my writing career, the question of qualifications comes to mind. Opportunities to review work are few and far between because of my level of experience, but of course, I cannot gather more experience without being given the opportunity to write. I am also still a young, practicing dance artist and wonder how I can walk the line between offering an honest perspective about the work I am reviewing without ruining my chances of collaborating with an

artist in my area in the future. On the *opposite* end of the spectrum, some writers shared that they simply know too many people and have difficulty maintaining their objectivity when writing. They even wonder about the need for objectivity when one's perspective on a piece of art is so subjective.

Some of Howard's overarching questions of the convening were as follows: "What are your intentions when writing? What personal criteria do you use to engage with a new dance work?" A writer shared that she relishes the creative action and opportunity to explore the tension between dance's ephemerality and the relatively static form of the written word. We all strive to capture the joy of dance, even if it requires us to explain ideas we already intimately understand.

We dove into discussions about writers as culture carriers; the insidious and intrinsic nature of institutional racism; the nuance of equality, equity, and liberation; and the individualized, active practice of anti-racism, even when it is juxtaposed against individual racist behaviors and beliefs. One writer reminded the group that white supremacy is *central* to culture as we know it, and it is only willing to make minor alterations in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as long as white supremacy maintains its centrality. Howard said it plainly: "White people are not going to give up their masterpieces until they are ready."

As a part of the curriculum, we were asked to investigate our social identities. A dance writer's identity—racial, social, cultural, professional, educational, generational, sexual, etc.—undoubtedly impacts the lens from which they process dance, and it is essential to name those pieces of their identity. With our identity comes certain levels of privilege, whether we are aware of them or not. Identity and privilege beget lens, and lens begets bias. Identity and bias are both inherently subjective, but how can that be reconciled in the practice of journalism, a practice that demands objectivity at all costs?

The dance world is riddled with racism, sexism, unrealistic body politics, heteronormativity, ableism, and classism to name a *few* of the biases that form the basis of "standards" prevalent in our field and world at large. The group's discussions reminded us that we each come to the work

of dance writing with our own implicit biases, and these ultimately lead us to make assumptions about the art that we consume.

Recently, I wrote about a dance work that felt, from my lens, like a cookie-cutter performance that I had seen many times before. It felt like the limiting, exclusionary work that I saw while I trained in dance, work that I was told I never had the facility to “properly” execute. Was the conclusion I drew about this body of work rooted in fact or my own feelings of rejection during former dance experiences? After my review was published, some readers applauded me for sharing what they felt was the “truth” about the work, but the artist shared that my review was challenging for her to read. We both agreed that not every dance work is created for every audience member or dance writer, but there was a clear tension between her choreographic intention and my experience of the work.

Now, after *all* of the inner work that comes with understanding culture, identity, lens, privilege, and bias, how can we turn outward and acknowledge the impact of a dance writer’s reflections on the artists that are presented? Our writing and coverage of an artist’s work can alter the trajectory of their careers and serves as currency for their future engagements. What happens when a dance writer’s coverage is not reflective of an artist’s intention? How can the biases and judgments of a writer advance or deter a choreographer’s progress? Such weighted topics require more voices and perspectives in the room, and Howard designed an opportunity for thoughtful exchange between dance writers, choreographers, and presenters on this subject.

During a session on the Impact of Dance Writing, the cohort was joined by Pamela Tatge, the Executive Artistic Director of Jacob’s Pillow; Jane Raleigh, the Director of Dance Programming at the Kennedy Center; Donald Byrd, Artistic Director of Spectrum Dance Theater; and Jennifer Archibald, founder and Artistic Director of the Arch Dance Company. When asked about the impact of dance writing on choreographers and presenters, Donald Byrd shared that, “As an emerging choreographer, I hoped the dance writer would tell me the insights they got from experiencing the work. I hoped that it would bolster me and keep me intellectually enthused. I’m stimulated by dance writing that is challenging and has weight...” Byrd recalled a time when a writer expressed that they wrote for their readership rather than the artist themselves. “I used to

hope [that] the writer would tell me something about the work that I didn't know." Already, there is a tension between a writer's goals, an artist's expectations, and vice versa.

Jennifer Archibald admitted her own frustrations when interfacing with journalists and the irony of being vulnerable with dance writers that may have written about her in the past. "When reporters call me, they don't speak about my process in the studio. There are things that are really missing [with] how audiences read about the work." Archibald cites a lack of understanding of the purpose of her work and the impact she aims to have on the field. There is an investment in painting a monolithic picture of all Black choreographers. Oftentimes, she wrestles against the liberation of presenting the work she truly desires to make versus creating dances that are palatable to large audiences and artistic directors, ultimately creating culturally neutral work.

From the presenter's standpoint, Pamela Tatge has noticed the significant decrease in dance coverage in the past decade. When reviews and coverage are created, "many of these folks aren't approaching this from a curious place. How can you grapple with your discomfort and turn it into curiosity?" Tatge shared that feature writing is sought after by presenters, and it can help them focus more on the social, economic, and cultural contextualization of their seasons from year to year. "Writing matters because it stands as record, and it's damaging when it's castigatory. It is a marker of time. The decrease of coverage is really damaging to international artists as they work to get funding and commissions in their home countries." Informed and thoughtful coverage of dance work is essential to the advancement of both a dance artist's career and a dance presenter's performance season.

Jane Raleigh shared that she acknowledges both the weight and expectation for many artists to have their work reviewed by an arts presenter like the Kennedy Center. "International artists have to have reviews for their visa applications to legitimize their work. We also need to have coverage for experiences that are not performances, and it's challenging to pitch coverage for residencies, lecture demonstrations, master classes, etc." Raleigh asserted that the field has also become very product-driven rather than supporting the process of dance creation as it materializes.

In light of this, it becomes crucial for writers and presenters alike to build relationships with artists outside of the final presentation of their work. Byrd asserted, “I listen to the writers who have seen my work over time...Everything that is written about [me] will then have context. [They] will have openness and willingness about what the artist is trying to say.” Archibald shared that she aims to be remembered as a choreographer who can cross many aesthetics without being pigeonholed into one style. “I want to talk about history and who people are outside of their skin color...I’m trying to make work that shows that movement can speak.”

Howard posed these questions to all of the writers in the space: “Are we trying to make the ecosystem healthier? In this context, what would be our individual approach to ensuring that this happens?” Many writers agreed that there should be more public discourse about naming the writers doing the most damage to writers in the field. One writer expressed a tension within herself after hearing about the devastation that poor dance writing can cause a dance artist while also needing to meet the demands of her publisher. “As writers, we are still putting things out into the world. There’s a vulnerability there. I struggle with the anxieties around saying the wrong thing.” I have only recently experienced what it feels like to fear the conclusions I come to about a piece of work, particularly when my observations may not shed the best light on an artist’s work.

Howard asked, “What is your intention? What are you trying to do? It’s [about] the mindfulness and intentionality behind the writing...I could take that critique if I felt like someone was really grappling with coming to a place of understanding.” Our robust, at times emotional conversation brought us back to the importance of reflecting on our values as writers and our role in advancing the field.

Since the beginning of my dance writing journey, I continue to ask myself, “What could I possibly have to say that has not been said already? What do I have to offer?” It is a fairly limiting perspective to have; the fear can be debilitating. Despite the fear, I know that the field needs writers. Perhaps they are not fearless, but they should be courageous. Courageous, thoughtful, curious, and vulnerable. My peers in this convening demonstrated this and more,

modeling what it truly means to approach the work of writing from a place of humility and openness.

As I reflect back on my experience of the Pathways to Performance/MoBBallet Dance Writers Convening, a number of lingering reflections from Theresa Ruth Howard and my peers resound. From the onset of this gathering, Howard reminded us of the fact that a well-placed question is often more valuable than a decisive statement when it comes to one's journalistic practice. At the convening's close, I made a few vows to myself. Ask more thoughtful questions. Embrace discomfort with curiosity. Consider the nuance and intention of the art I consume. Acknowledge my blindspots. Do no harm. And of course, I had follow-up questions to the ones asked before: *Is journalism dead, or is it being reborn? What is my role when consuming art, and what are my intentions? Should I strive for relevancy or community?* The answers may never come, but at least I can keep searching.

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