

Legal Name

Regents University of California Los Angeles

Project Title

To host choreographer Deborah Hay at Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA to imagine and explore new approaches to building demand for contemporary dance

DDCF Grant Number

2013230

Project Progress and Successes

During the winter of late 2014, and again in 2015, CAP UCLA developed an extensive residency with Deborah Hay as an embedded collaborator to examine, brainstorm, and respond to initiatives for how CAP UCLA could developing insights, identify strategies, and plan out new approaches for building demand for contemporary dance in Los Angeles.

The Center had identified a few hypothesis and lines of inquiry, which included:

1. There are a large and diverse number of dance practitioners, choreographers, and educators in Los Angeles, but they do not make up a large percentage of the audience for CAP UCLA's contemporary concert dance presentations. Are their barriers to entry and if so, what are they? If the dance community itself is an infrequent audience member to its art form when publicly presented -- why?

2. Dance literacy fuels appetite and demand for audiences, and literacy itself is connected to access and repeated exposure to the art form. In Los Angeles, concert dance presentations on the main stages are intermittent, aesthetically diverse and spread across a sprawling and traffic-laden city. There are few dance presenting organizations, and those that have the largest 'footprint' -- such as the Music Center -- emphasize ballet, and large-scale modern companies rather than small to mid-sized contemporary choreographers. There are micro-scaled not for profit dance service organizations, independent companies, commercial practitioners, and several university dance programs throughout Los Angeles that are active and known, but operating without any overarching coordination of shared interests/imperatives. Would increase exposure to contemporary dance at CAP UCLA (presented or publicly aggregated discourses), generate deeper literacy and engagement, and if so would demand/appetite increase?

3. There is a highly engaged visual arts community throughout Los Angeles, with impressive public attendance. Museum and gallery exhibitions also include intermittent projects with choreographers, which appear to engage both the visual arts and contemporary performance community. Would the language and approaches of the visual art exhibition practices be applicable to stronger contextualization of contemporary dance presenting in the CAP UCLA programming? If so, would partnerships between the Center and LA art museums be able to build demand for dance in new ways? If survey and retrospective models in dance presenting were undertaken, would the platform serve to elevate interest, literacy and demand?

We worked with the choreographer Deborah Hay to help us think through these questions, and to conjoin her choreographic background and particular interests with our ongoing analysis. As she engaged with the dance community, Hay's focus centered around the descriptive language of dance - the frequently used terms and vocabulary trends in dance

itself, whether that be from a dancer/choreographer, to an organization/academic institution and/or marketing and development oriented vernacular. Are we responding correctly to the community in our curatorial choices? Are we describing something well? Are we able to sell it effectively? Are we in need of an entirely different 'branding' for the form. What are the hierarchies in how dance is described/attended: post-modern, culturally specific, interactive, social versus concert, and so on.

Deborah was interested in speaking with people in dance, in the arts broadly, in education circles, to lay people and in the dance philanthropy side of LA to ascertain if the marketing vernacular and design approaches to dance itself were tired and no longer impactful to stimulating increased demand; if dance artists themselves had examined their own articulation of their practices (to what result), and if there was adequate awareness of where dance was taking place in Los Angeles, along with capturing people's thoughts on the participation ecology for contemporary dance overall.

As such, we deployed two simultaneous tracks:

1. Deborah's creative and unique approaches to explore more diverse uses of language for dance through conducting over 40 interviews with a core sample of individuals -- both within and external to dance practices.
2. CAP UCLA's presentation and engagement efforts focused upon building relationships with the broader dance community by proactively building partnerships and cooperation with leading dance/arts service organizations, governmental/cultural agencies, the other dance presenters and academic departments involved in the study and practice of dance itself.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

There were a few challenges and different outcomes that potentially had impact on the project:

1. Deborah Hay needed to learn the L.A. Dance community - L.A. is a large and complex city to navigate, even for the people who live in Los Angeles. Deborah had never worked with a presenting institution before in this kind of advisorial capacity, so her ability to translate how the CAP UCLA might deploy her feedback would require additional layers of reflection and planning. In the initial stages, it was important for her to meet a complete cross section of dance ecology and to also physicalize her experience by traveling across the city to attend performance and to meet with individuals. Instead of meeting with groups of people, it was determined that the best route for her was to have one-on-one interactions, thus she was able to have deeper conversations about how CAP UCLA might be respond to the idea of building demand for dance. Her response, as an artist, was undoubtedly a creative response, and less tactical, and thus needing CAP UCLA to to decide how to utilize her creative investigation in a meaningful way, as well as, decide how to engage those that participated in her residency in our next round of planning. So, just as she has spent the time necessary to be "brought up to speed" on understanding who and what the L.A. dance community is or isn't, the residency was concluded, and it is thus left to CAP UCLA to interpret her feedback and to move our shared learning forward.
2. There is not an organized dance community that covers the totality of who practices in Los Angeles. - It was determined that at the very least, CAP UCLA could "imagine" that the process of building demand for dance for our contemporary dance program started with our own direct efforts in identifying, engaging, and enlisting the support of the dance community itself. We would do this in tandem within the same season as the Deborah Hay residency, advancing the notion of "the work begins now". Since this was new initiative for

the Center, which had limited actual contact lists and partnerships with L.A. based service and dance organizations, we immediately sought to build a dance list, literally from scratch. We also needed to create an opportunity for the dance community to come together, limit their barriers of cost and travel, engage with leadership so the effort was deemed serious, and we provided an event which though costly, was essentially meaningful and purposeful. The ultimate goal was to identify as many individuals as possible, and through good will, we were able to build a list of dancers, choreographers, educators, and related contacts to create the "dance list". This list, though time-consuming to build and was ever-changing, became the vehicle to bring together a portrait of the dance community that we envisioned, and the one that rarely has a reason to broadly come together in any other way.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

1. Dancers and movement artists will attend if approached individually. "You are Invited..." works far better than advertisements and announcing the dates and times of a dance presentations. To do so, CAP UCLA coordinated the lists and databases of service organizations, presenting organizations and academic departments. In reaching these artists directly, attendance improved by 39%. In the process we created new connections with vital members of the local dance community and raised awareness for our commitment toward the form in the very busy market that is Los Angeles.

2. The frequently used language to describe dance in both development and marketing strategies, by both artists and institutions -- lacks allure and is opaque to the average audience member. Deborah created a game and a set up prompts to elicit from her interviewees new vocabulary. She recommended that we create a web-site/app where these adjectives, phrases and poetics could be used by dancers and promoters across the spectrum.

3. Because of the feedback we were receiving, CAP UCLA then deeply considered the language used in Marketing and Promotional materials, and devised a more inviting, transparent message about all of the dance we present as a whole. By focusing on the visceral and emotional impact of dance without technical terminology or jargon, we've opened up a window to entice more people to attend and engage. The phrase "The Body is beautiful - get used to it" was used in marketing materials (outdoor, print and digital) as a way to encapsulate an attitude about dance - instead of focusing on a list of choreographer's names and works that may not be "household names". The campaign resonated well with existing audience members, but we believe also made our dance presentations more inviting to the average student on campus and the average arts-patron who may feel that dance can be too erudite or sophisticated for them to understand.

4. The distances traveled by highly spread out dance artists in order to attend live performances was less of an obstacle than we had thought, as long as they felt compelled to see the artist that was being presented. However, ticket prices, parking charges, and competing priorities were clearly cited obstacles. In response, we created several specialized opportunities to directly invite dance makers to attend the CAP UCLA dance presentations within our season. In addition, we created networking opportunities for the dance community prior and following each performance with support from colleague not for profits. Demand increased as the price barriers dropped.

5. Deborah discovered something significant and very surprising about the active nature of

dance itself. That social dance experiences generate high level engagement across form, culture groups and bring professional and non-professional movers into shared experience. The "shared and participatory experience" of dance has substantial demand, and is not currently incorporated into concert "high art" presentations, which is worthy of robust consideration and creative ideation.

Summation:

Based upon our findings in the work we undertook with Deborah Hay, we are convinced that CAP UCLA is playing a vital role in building increased demand for the art form of Dance in Los Angeles. There was value placed on the opportunity for cross section of dance community to meet with a master artist like Deborah Hay. The dance community is hungry for opportunities to connect socially with their peers and to find support for their own artistry. Increased demand however, is not synonymous with economic sustainability. While literacy, value and attendance has increased (impressively), the philanthropic and financial ballast for continuing to pursue these successful findings: frequent exposure, reduced ticket prices, frameworks for social, educational, and participatory engagement and dynamic application of new vocabulary -- remains elusive, and would require capitalization over successive years before literacy and appetite would convert into an economy of sustained patronage.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

<http://dancemapla.com/>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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