

Dancing Through Tough Times

The Great Recession has hit us all hard. Dance is no exception. From Alvin Ailey to Dance Theatre of Harlem to Bill T. Jones, a look at how America's best black dance companies are faring in a tough economy.

By: Valerie Gladstone Posted: June 26, 2010 at 7:07 AM

You can find thrilling black dance companies in every part of the country, a fantastic improvement over the situation 50 years ago when dancers of color could hardly find a professional troupe to join. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Dance Theatre of Harlem started the revolution: The first was the triumph of choreographer Alvin Ailey in 1958, and the second was the hard-earned achievement of former New York City Ballet dancer Arthur Mitchell in 1969. But fate has not treated them equally. The Ailey company ranks as one of the most popular dance troupes in the world, with a touring schedule that matches that of any pop star. The Dance Theatre of Harlem, on the other hand, nearly went out of business in 2004, a victim of substantial debts and poor management. Its once-sparkling troupe disbanded, and its stellar school, as significant as a community center and as a ballet academy, almost closed. The main company has been sorely missed.



Judged by financial success and stability, they stand poles apart, but they both must now deal with a recession that is changing how this country supports the arts. They also both gained new leaders recently. The Ailey company named Robert Battle -- a dancer and choreographer who headed his own troupe, Battleworks -- as the replacement for artistic director Judith Jamison, who retires in 2011. DTH appointed Virginia Johnson, once the company's prima ballerina, and afterward editor of the ballet magazine *Pointe*, artistic director of that troupe in spring 2009. How these leaders and those of other black dance institutions deal with today's economic realities will affect our culture for decades to come.

Calling herself a born optimist, Johnson finds that the current cuts in government and private funding for dance creates an invigorating climate. "When money is tight," she says, "you have to be far more rigorous in evaluating and defending your needs. Funders want to know that their gifts are well spent. It strengthens your ability to make decisions. It makes you sharper about your goals. It's a far different world than the one in which I made my career as a dancer. I can feel a sense of nostalgia for that time, but I'm also excited to be back here, rebuilding the professional company for the 21st century. It brings out my dormant creativity."

As an example of how DTH now reevaluates its resources, she mentions Robert Garland, who has long been the resident choreographer. It turns out that he possesses computer skills equal to his choreographic artistry. "He's discovered how we can connect across the globe," she says. "We can have conversations with artists everywhere and discuss our mutual concerns. We share him with the Studio Museum, so in a sense, we're also creating a family." More light appears at the end of the tunnel with the Dance Theatre of Harlem Ensemble, which is the junior company, opening the prestigious Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Lee, Massachusetts, June 23-27.

Battle hasn't fully assumed the role of artistic director at Ailey yet, but he has had plenty of experience running Battleworks since 2001. Before his appointment, he had already seen touring for his troupe begin to dry up. "Presenters were being more cautious," he says, "and going for the touring Broadway show, like *Stomp* over a small contemporary dance company like mine. With those, they felt they would get a guaranteed audience. It made some

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of my colleagues and me begin to think of creating shows, rather than presenting our regular repertory. It's something Momix [Dance Company] has successfully done for some time."

He began looking at other ways to survive as well. "I think we have to face the fact that the old model for a small dance company isn't working anymore," he says, "and we have to redefine our model to stay relevant. To begin with, I think we should share resources. Last year, it worked very well when my company shared a program at the Joyce Theater with Larry Keigwin. It was a great financial solution for us both, since renting the theater on our own would have been prohibitive."

Over the past 50 years, two types of companies have evolved. The repertory model performs dances by many different choreographers, like Ailey, DTH, Philadanco!, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance, Dayton Contemporary Dance, Dallas Black Dance Theatre and Lula Washington Dance Theater. The other mainly presents works by its founding choreographer, such as Garth Fagan Dance, Ronald K. Brown's Evidence, Jowale Willa Jo Zollar's Urban Bush Women and Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Battle believes that single choreographer-style troupes, like his, might be a thing of the past. "I think you have to be able to appeal to a wider spectrum," he says, "like Ailey has always done."

But he worries that the decrease in funding and the need to appeal to the widest possible audience will curtail the nurturing of young creative voices of the 21st century. "There could very well be a tendency to go with the tried and true," Battle says. "Young artists need time and space to develop, to be mentored. Collaborations with other institutions might help. My company recently had a residency at New York University. Everyone in the community needs to get into this conversation and create a movement to find new ways to survive and thrive."

For these very reasons, Joan Myers Brown, who founded the electrifying Philadelphia-based Philadanco! 40 years ago, established the International Association of Blacks in Dance in 1988 and the International Conference of Black Dance Companies in 1998. "At a recent meeting," she says, "we were bemoaning the fact that the first companies to be cut from a tour schedule are usually those perceived to be black. Most series will only take one black company, and it's always the first to go. But it helps that we can discuss ways to deal with the situation."

But this year her company also won a lot of international tour dates and a great deal of attention for its 40th anniversary. "We can take advantage of year-round invitations," she says, "because the company gets 52-week contracts and we always have our dancers available." That being said, she has lost many of them to the four Broadway shows with large black casts, *The Lion King*, *Fela*, *The Color Purple* and *The Little Mermaid*, where they can make much higher salaries. As for ways that she has found to cut back administrative costs, she says laughing, "Instead of doing five jobs here, I now do 10."

Parker's Denver-based company also celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. And she, too, has had to double her workload and that of her staff. But she gets satisfaction from nurturing young choreographers in her 16-year-old summer institute and speaks proudly of the theater she established 20 years ago. "I focus a lot on children," she says. "Dance is like breathing. It's connected to the earth. We have to move our bodies in this society and have a physical experience in nature. That's what I teach them, how to apply the philosophy of dance to their lives. We bring this into the schools. Art must be functional." Garth Fagan would certainly cheer her on. Having also started his company 40 years ago, he knows the ups and downs of a life in dance. But what concerns him most now is the lack of education in the arts. "If you don't build audiences," Fagan says, "it doesn't matter whether you have funding or not. Youngsters in school and at home are not being exposed to the arts. Until that changes, we'll continue to lose our public." From the beginning, he has gone into the Rochester, N.Y., community with his dancers to let them in on the magic of dance and its applicability to every aspect of life.

In fact, black company directors have always been particularly community-minded. Brooklyn-based Brown became an integral part of his neighborhood a long time ago. But recently, the recession hit him hard. He pays members of his company for a full year, but this spring it became too much to maintain their dental insurance as well, and he was considering giving them a furlough in July. "I thought to myself," he says, "what do I do? Teach more to bring in more money?" In the end, he taught more and gave them a furlough.

A saving factor in dance is that no one goes into field to make money anyway. They do it because they love it. This doesn't mean they want to starve but only that they expect to sacrifice. Certainly hard times haven't dampened Brown's creative spirit. After two years of thinking about choreographing a new piece to a Stevie Wonder song, he had finally begun working on it. Describing the piece, he sounded ecstatic. Its title? "Wonderful Place."

"My concern," says David Rousseve, who founded his company Reality in 1989, "is that our work will become marginalized, as presenters fear bringing our dances to mostly white audiences. They have tough choices, I know, but it would be a mistake to segregate dances that are meant for everyone." Like Zollar and Bebe Miller, Rousseve now spends considerable time teaching at a university; in his case, he joined UCLA's World Arts and Cultures Department in 1996, where he is currently professor of choreography and the former department chair. "At least, I can always make work on students," he says, "unlike choreographers who have to depend on maintaining a company. But still, I share the same basic concern--who is going to see my work?"

Ironically, Zollar finds that more students than ever are signing up for dance at Florida State University, where she holds the position of tenured professor. It gives her enough free time to still run her company. "You might think that the recession would have them all heading for secure fields," she says, "but it's the opposite. They seem to think, 'well, I saw my parents sacrifice their dreams for a steady job and look what it got them--lost pension benefits and no security. So I might as well do what I love.'"

She believes that dance companies like New York-based Urban Bush Women are going to have to go back to pre-funding models. She recalls her first years in New York as a young dancer and being able to see all kinds of dance thanks to now-defunct Dancemobile, which presented dance for very low prices. Always community-minded, she established an ongoing summer institute in New Orleans in 2009. It not only enriches the people of the city, she says, but it also gives her dancers a chance to interact with audiences and connect with new ones--the idea being to use movement to build a movement.

"We have been recording their stories since Katrina," she says, "and will continue with the oil spill. The arts have an opportunity amid the horrible loss to give people some release and refuge. I think one very good result of the recession is that people are looking for meaning. *Mamma Mia!* can't give it to them. That's what we provide."

Other choreographers also noted that audiences are now much more interested in meaningful dance. Reggie Wilson, who started his company, the Fist and Heel Performance Group in 1989, has always choreographed complex works related to the spiritual traditions of the African Diaspora that take time to research and produce. One such example was last year's brilliant "The Good Dance," a multi-year collaboration and cultural exchange with Congolese contemporary choreographer Andréya Ouamba and his Senegal-based company *Ier Temps*. "I think in the long run," Wilson says, "that dance will come out of this successfully. We'll have to cut back, collaborate, share and be innovative --for instance, [the performing arts institution] Dance Theater Workshop just established a partnership with Bill T. Jones."

Bebe Miller left New York for a professorship at Ohio State University several years ago, continuing like Zollar to choreograph for her own company. But her troupe is what she calls "virtual," and works together on a project by project basis. Having this security allows her to choreograph work in a more leisurely time frame, and to some degree, protects her from the vagaries of the marketplace. But she has her concerns nonetheless. "If there's less touring," she says, "how are people going to get to know work outside their small circle? We have to find ways. I've been in this for awhile, and I know funding didn't make us. Artists are not driven by economics. We all have to band together and pool our resources, if only rehearsal space. We also need to maintain a critical dialogue and that's disappearing. You have to have exposure to new blood. We're going to have to pick up the camera and learn how to make more dance videos. Films get around. Start those cameras rolling."

One dance organization is -- surprisingly -- thriving in spite of the recession. The Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center started in Brooklyn 35 years ago to facilitate artistic collaborations, such as performances, workshops, seminars and community projects for people of color, relying on volunteers to keep it going. (Both Urban Bush Women and Evidence performed there in their early days.) But while other dance organizations are struggling, THPAC'S audiences doubled in 2008, according to the executive chair Alex Smith. It has also begun an archival program to preserve historically important photographs, tapes and films. "We were sharing from the beginning," Smith says. "Dancers here often danced in more than one company. We've learned how to present in a very economical way. We did our 2005 season with \$5,000, thanks to people taking very low fees." That's not to say that the recent 60 percent cut in funding from the New York Department of Cultural Affairs, didn't hurt. "All I can say," he adds, "is that we'll find another way. That's my advice, 'always look for another way.'"

Valerie Gladstone, who writes about the arts for many publications, including The New York Times, recently co-authored a children's book with Jose Ivey, "A Young Dancer: The Life of an Ailey Student."

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