



European Dancehouse Network

What are the artists' and houses' mutual responsibilities and wishes?

This text was written and performed by Mélanie Demers on November 30, 2017 as part of the panel discussion entitled "Encounters: Connecting Institutions with Artists and Audiences", during Les Rencontres de l'Agora de la danse in Montreal.

My name is Mélanie Demers. I am the artistic director of the Montreal-based dance company, MAYDAY. I have had the privilege of working both here and abroad.

My purpose, today, is to examine the perspective of the creator's intent on meeting an audience. My point of departure is that any of the collaborations between an artist and an institution are ultimately meant to build a bridge towards an audience.

Let me start with a disclaimer. First and foremost, it is an honour to be here, and I hope I don't make any enemies by saying what I'm about to say. There will be some provocation and humour in what follows, but I ask that you take it lightly. I have had allies and support here and around the world, for which I am deeply grateful. Within the next 10 minutes, however, I am going to address the issues and challenges I face as an artist.

The thoughts presented stem from conversations with dance colleagues as well as the reading of David Balzer's provocative book, titled *How Curationism Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*. Three of the following paragraphs are loosely inspired by an ongoing correspondence with Montreal-based theater director Olivier Choinière. So, the "I" used here is collective. And what is expressed is not THE truth but a truth.

From where I stand, in fact, in the middle of my career, in the heart of Montreal, in the midst of this crowd, the only certainty I have is that I am an artist and a mother. All else is elusive.

Over the past ten years, I have compiled thoughts drawn from my experiences and efforts to forge an interesting/international career. After collecting a series of funny, beautiful, unbelievable, miserable, successful, ego-driven or ego-destroying experiences, my love and passion for dance remain intact, if bittersweet.

In fact, there is a complex power dynamic at play in the relationship between the artist, the presenter and the audience. It's the famous – or rather infamous – triangle that calls for a juggling act. If you don't believe me, talk to your secret lover about the triangle!

The geometrical figure of the triangle has long fascinated mathematicians, philosophers and artists, and the pyramid is a great metaphor for how this regime is viewed and experienced.

I use the word regime, here, as a reminder that we work under an oppressive and manipulative capitalist system that guides each of our movements and decisions.

The sometimes empowering but mostly vulnerable position in which artists find themselves is determined by the illusion of escaping the system while at the same time being unable to do so. This is what we call the market.

And we use the vocabulary of the market. We showcase, pitch, buy, sell and deal. We live in the shadow of this ascendancy. I understand that the new models set out to challenge that model, but a daunting challenge it is.

Depending on where we stand in the food chain, in fact, we tend to put different people at the top of the pyramid. We can agree to disagree, I believe, or you can challenge my premise later, but here's how I conceive the triangle.

My feeling is that the ARTIST (consciously or unconsciously) puts the PRESENTER at the top of the pyramid.

The PRESENTER puts the AUDIENCE at the top of the pyramid.

And, hopefully, the AUDIENCE puts the ARTIST at the top of the pyramid.

In my mind, therefore, this interesting way of looking up and down the pyramid reflects the dysfunction inherent in this dynamic.

In order to make it breathe and move, the dynamic needs to shift and to be challenged so that no one, in anyone else's view, remains on top or at the bottom.

There was a time when presenters defended the artist's voice, vision, spirit and quest. Over the years, the dynamic has slowly shifted, and it has now completely reversed. It's as if the onus is now on the artists to defend the venues and their values and put enough people in the seats. It is up to the artists to fit into the editorial guidelines and adapt to the presenters' curatorial vision. Bluntly put, theatres, festivals, venues and institutions view artists as employees whose chief mission is to meet the requirements of their vision before any other, including the requirements of their own art. In other words, curationism is becoming the most exciting art form.

Here in Canada, chronic funding shortages, coupled with shrinking audiences and a lack of solidarity and recognition, rather than slowing the pace of production, have instead produced a strange acceleration, where the idea is to do as much as possible with as little as possible. In order to meet quotas, quantity has become a measure of artistic success.

In the end, the question is not so much the lack of quality or professionalism in the shows, but their perfect uniformity; it's the fact that works and the artists are perfectly interchangeable. The identity of the artists and the specificity of their works are lost in favour of a widespread standardization of art. (1)

Even such labels as black sheep, enfant terrible, rebel and diva are intellectual shortcuts meant to fit a given artist into the system.

How can we develop a profound relationship between presenters and artists, therefore, if we're viewed as commodities (or feel that we are)? Knowing that we all seek after originality, integrity, freedom, empowerment, action and reflection, how can we move beyond the sparkles of the new lovers or the fatally dried up kisses of an old couple? Why do we have the feeling that we're often working at cross-purposes and not with one another?

I've acted, by turns, as an associate artist, artist in residence and company in residence; I've been part of the family and the elite, and I'm fairly certain that some have viewed me as a spent force. I've been disowned, disinherited, shut out, and probably labelled as difficult. I've been programmed as the headline act, served as special guest, and I've also been squeezed into the last available slot.

Because I am driven by a powerful desire to meet an audience, I've often accepted my share of uncomfortable, diminishing and deprecating situations. And because this desire dictates my choices and is the very measure of my success, it is easy to take advantage of it. My experiences – good, bad and comical – further reflect the vulnerability of my position.

Like that time when the presenter literally vanished just as we were about to buy plane tickets (there's even a word for it now: ghosting);

Or the time when the presenter was more interested in, shall we say, my other assets;

Or the time when I was given only a few days' notice to shorten my piece to fit it into a triple bill;

Or the time I had to sweep the floor and fix the chairs;

Or the time when we were programmed on Easter day and no one showed up;

Or the time when I was told, on the day of the premiere, that I give the best interviews, but sadly good press doesn't sell tickets;

Or the time when you realize that a simple "No" is better than any polite silence;

Or the time when I had to reshoot the trailer, change the title, produce new pictures, and recast a dancer;

Or that crucial time when I received a three-word text message saying "I trust you";

Or the time when I received the worst review ever, but was coproduced by the same presenter the very next year;

Or the time when I had a long talk about love and life and art but didn't get to be presented;

And the list goes on and on...

I am not a royalty. I don't get to choose, I get to be chosen. And hopefully, I get to be chosen by good people who, most importantly, understand power dynamics. And this is where it gets tricky.

Often, because of the so-called lack of money, audiences, solidarity and recognition, the real issues fall off the radar or are swept under the carpet or looked over.

For me, the real issues are love, support and respect. From all sides. And that doesn't cost a penny.

To show love, support and respect, these are a few things we need to be reminded of so that we can grow together.

We need to go back to defining our roles.

My favourite definition of the artist is:

A person who is an expert at trickery or deceit. So, I say, let us fail you admirably.

My favourite definition of audience is:

A general public that shows interest, support and enthusiasm. So, I say, let them be.

My favourite definition of a presenter goes back to the verb to present, and in one of its many definitions, to present means to introduce someone to society with a formal ceremony. That's easy.

My favourite definition of curator goes to the Medieval Latin curatus, "to care": and to the Old French, curateur, from curare, "to cure." To curate is to care and to cure, therefore.

So, if we return to the image of the triangle at the beginning of this presentation:

You have an enthusiastic AUDIENCE that, through the care of a PRESENTER, would show support and interest in the possible/potential failure of an ARTIST.

And this is what I call the love triangle.

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