

The Artists' Residency: Planting Creative Seeds

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By Christopher K. Morgan

Those of us in the business of making and producing professional dance are well aware of the challenges inherent to the field (most of which stem from limited resources). These challenges force nearly every dance maker (including this writer) to work in a multitude of roles: executive director, grant writer, marketing director, company manager, accountant, educator ... all while attempting to maintain creative vision and focus. These challenges also force dance makers into demanding schedules, where rehearsal hours can be equated with dollars spent on studio rental fees and dancers' wages, where creativity must fit into specifically scheduled studio times, and where it can be difficult to find opportunities to process work, dialogue about it with one's peers, or even find the time to invite an outside eye into rehearsal. And while necessity is often the mother of invention, this juggling act can wear down the creative spirit that all this hard work is meant to support.

Enter the artist residency — a venue that offers artists creative, generative time away from their normal place of work; a space in which the creation can follow inspiration, rather than an imposed schedule. The opportunity to change one's environment, have dedicated creative time, and invest in process is, in my view, becoming increasingly critical in our field of multitasking artist/administrators. And for any dance artist, regardless of how much or little they multitask, there is inherent value in an isolated and focused creative retreat, that can grow and deepen the work. They seem to be a rare luxury in the dance field, yet, such retreats are a centuries old tradition in the writing and visual arts community. I am happy to see the field of dance increasingly embrace this model in recent years.



As the director of The Dance Omi International Dance Collective based in Ghent, N.Y., since 2006, as well as a choreographer myself, I have a unique vantage point from which to assess the multilayered effects of an artist residency. Year after year, I have witnessed first hand how a residency enriches the work of my colleagues, as well as my own. Inspiration, rejuvenation, artistic and cultural exchange, new artistic tools, ideas and perspectives are just a few of the treasures an artist might leave a residency with.

Each summer at Dance Omi I have the privilege of witnessing a group of ten dance makers undergo a creative renewal while in residence. I annually enjoy watching the residents as it takes them the first three or four days to acclimate to the lack of time pressure. Contrary to the normal rigors of our over-scheduled lives, the notion that their time while in residence can ebb and flow with their inspiration and needs takes some adjustment. One of the core values of Dance Omi is that the residents do not actually have to produce finished works, but are free to explore in a truly

open ended manner. In an increasingly product-driven market, this shift in working also takes some time to adjust to. But I find it invaluable to recognize that truly free explorations ultimately feed the creative process in ways that cannot often be directly measured or seen, adding richness and depth to work that can be felt by artist and audience alike. **Truly free explorations ultimately feed the creative process in ways that cannot often be directly measured or seen, adding richness and depth to work that can be felt by artist and audience alike.** Add to these elements the fact that the artists are isolated in a beautiful rural environment, and it is a big adjustment to make at first. But once the adjustment is made, playful, exuberant artistry emerges.

At Dance Omi, the residents work on jointly conceived collaborative projects. With their various cultural, stylistic, and aesthetic differences, their process is often one of negotiation. It becomes a delicate balancing act where each artist must assert his or her artistic vision, while balancing the needs of the group and continuing to propel the creation of the art forward. Over the years, many residents have commented to me on how this unique collaborative negotiation forces them to clarify their individual artistic voices. In the process they must deeply consider their artistic priorities, and it creates a chain reaction, honing their artistic vision for the work they will produce when they return home. Each year, I invite one alumnus to return to Dance Omi and co-facilitate the residency as a guest mentor. The 2012 guest mentor, Shandoah Goldman of Brooklyn, has repeatedly remarked that, since she was a resident of Dance Omi in 2009, her



work was effected by her time in residence. Not only was she influenced by the artistry of her fellow residents, but she also noticed how the collaborative process showed up in the way she managed her recent project, *23 Skidoo* (a site-specific performance in New York City involving more than 40 performers in front of the Flatiron Building).

As I reflect back on the artists I have met over the years at Omi, I realize how remarkable the arc has been. I recall Lynn

Neuman, a resident from 2006, who is the artistic director of Artichoke Dance Company, another Brooklyn group. While at Dance Omi, Lynn revealed to her colleagues that she was considering retiring from the stage. But her residency reinvigorated her so much that I have had the pleasure of witnessing her continue to perform throughout the years since. In fact, in a recent email I learned that Lynn is developing a new solo for herself. This kind of artistic rejuvenation is not an isolated incident. The opportunity to recharge one's creative batteries can allow artists to return to their work with a zest that can be difficult to achieve when mired down by the repetitive tasks of maintaining the business of dance.

With the unique collaboration of international residents at Dance Omi, I have also witnessed lasting artistic partnerships form between artists who would not have met each other had it not been for their residency. In 2008 a quartet of women hailing from Latvia, Hungary, France, and Singapore began to collaborate during Dance Omi. The following year they collectively applied for a creative residency in Prague, and again the next year for a residency in France. The four premiered a collective piece in Singapore and Hong Kong, and continue to explore how they can work together.

An artist residency can also offer an artist a new experience or a change in perspective. I think of 2008 resident Manisha Gulyani of India, remarking in her exit interview, “Before Dance Omi it was as if I lived in house where the window presented a beautiful view of the world outside, but after attending, the door to that world has been opened.” While this example is layered with her first trip to the United States, as well as engaging in styles of dance she had not yet practiced, it was all made possible by her willingness to invest in her artistic growth at an artist residency.

One of Omi’s core values is to create an atmosphere of abundance for our residents. I recall hearing this word in my interview for the job over seven years ago, and being astounded by it. As an artist who has often lived with scarcity, the idea of providing an atmosphere of abundance was unbelievable. And yet it is a word and philosophy that has deeply affected all my work as an artist, educator, and facilitator since that interview.

During my first summer directing Dance Omi back in 2006, one of the ongoing conversations that developed amongst the residents was about what was needed to create a work. I mounted a large piece of paper on a studio wall where the artists could contribute their thoughts on the topic. A list took shape with words like space, time, focused energy, attentiveness, rest, calm, and quiet. Then, surprisingly, the word stress appeared. As soon as the word “stress” was noticed, we began to discuss this addition to the list. We wondered as a group who added this word? Was it someone who worked well under pressure? What ensued was a most interesting dialogue in which we shared that many of us were inspired to make works because of difficult, challenging, or stressful situations. But once the inspiration took place, we then required space, time, quiet, and attentive focus to create the work. Exactly the resources provided by an artist residency.



Like so many aspects of art making, it’s difficult to quantify or track the far reaching and long lasting results of an artist residency. When I first began directing Dance Omi, managing director Ruth Adams said, “The real residency takes place once the artists leave, and the seeds that are planted while they are here, begin to grow in their work at home.”

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All photos by Ross Willows