

Youth forums at daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit 2012

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The daCi/WDA 2012 Summit included three 45-minute youth forums in order to engage the youth delegation in conversations with each other about issues in dance that were important to them. These three sessions were co-facilitated by Marc Richard (York University, Canada), Carmelina Martin (Pulse Ontario Youth Dance Conference, Canada), Ruth Osborne (Quantum Leap, Australia), and Alice Lee Holland (Steps Youth Dance Company, Australia). We were ecstatic with the turnout and the enthusiasm to share thoughts. There were approximately 100 international youth in each of the sessions. Each session began with a particular focus question.



Image 1: The third youth forum. Photo by Marc Richard.

The first forum asked, “How has dance changed or transformed your life?” The students were asked to place themselves on a human bar graph related to when they started dancing. It was very interesting that the majority of the youth (3 boys and approximately 97 girls) started dancing before they were 6 years old. The students were asked to find someone from a different country to discuss their stories of change or transformation. The youth reported that dance made them more social, more comfortable in their bodies; it made them know who they were. It allowed them to express themselves, to meet new people, to be creative, to be physical; it gave them a family, and helped them deal with stress.

Our second forum asked, “The choice of dance as a career is not widely supported by schools and families and many aspiring dancers feel the need to have a fall-back career – does this place too much pressure on young dancers?” Responses to this question included the idea that dance has helped them develop time management: “The more you do, the more you get done.” It also animated the notion that dance is not viewed as an intelligent career, and some teachers see it as a waste of intelligence. Even among the arts, in comparison to music, drama, and visual arts, dance is not considered intellectual. In many countries, there are very few college or university programs for dance. There seemed to be an overall consensus that many elementary and secondary schools do not treat dance as a serious subject, and even in post-secondary schools, it is seen as a “slack subject.” In response to these allegations, one youth stated, “There’s not one kind of smart!” Another youth wondered, “How could we better promote dance as an intellectual pursuit?” One participant offered that they started to consider it as a career because “it makes me so happy.” They also recognized the tensions embedded in the wide variety of studio experiences and the overall preconception that dance must involve competitions and winning trophies: “Somehow if you don’t do [dance] competitions it’s less serious,” “When I told my friends I was going to Taiwan they assumed it was for a competition,” and “When we come back after a season [of touring with our company] my friends always ask me if I won.”

Our final forum asked, “What are the different challenges facing girls and boys in dance? Why are most dance students girls, yet most choreographers and company leaders men? How can we continue to support girls as we continue to grow support for boys?”



Image 2: A small group at the third forum. Photo by Marc Richard.

As students shared their experiences, we heard that there are pre-conceived notions about dance for both boys and girls. One 16-year-old girl said people assume when she says she is a dancer that she’s either a ballerina or a commercial dancer (the general public doesn’t understand contemporary dance). A 17-year-old boy who started dancing at the age of 12 said, “People assume it’s ballet and feminine ... they also assume I’m gay.” One girl expressed her concern about the “sexualization and objectification” of girls in dance, and another spoke about the pressure to “look a certain way.” One girl admitted that she

“enjoys contemporary dance because it tends to use bodies in androgynous ways.” One boy spoke about the pressure to be “really masculine on stage – I had to do a dance without a shirt at age 12 and I was really uncomfortable with that.”



Image 3: Members of the all-boys group at the third youth forum. Photo by Marc Richard.

The youth admitted that there is often tension between the boys and girls in dance classes. They admitted there is more competition for the female dancers because of sheer numbers, and the boys are often chosen based on potential rather than their current level of technique because many boys start late. One boy recognized when girls say to him “You got in because you’re a boy,” that it devalues the work that he has had to do in order to catch up on his technique. In a small group discussion with only the boys, all agreed that they wished they had had the opportunity to dance earlier, that they felt they missed out on opportunities because of the societal pressures put upon them that “boys do not dance.” One boy said, “One of my biggest regrets was not seizing the opportunity when I wanted to.” Another boy admitted, “It took me a long time to be comfortable saying it – that I was a dancer.” All recognized that in workshops and classes, the boys get more attention and get noticed because of their gender. One boy spoke about the pressure put upon him to be a role model in order to attract other boys to dance.

One group of girls was brainstorming about how to make it more acceptable for boys to dance – they need exposure. One group from Finland relayed that in their country, there are some studios where there are strictly boys’ groups. They develop really great friendships with the girls and there is a real comfort – it helps them get through the worst teenage years. If the boys have a good experience when they are young, they tend to stay and grow up in dance. One girl’s group asked, “Why is there a problem with being feminine?” Why are the boys not allowed to show their feminine side?

These forums provoked rich discussions among the youth about topics that were intensely meaningful to them. As facilitators, we were actively engaged in the art of listening and recognized these forums as a rich crucible of ideas for further research.

Keywords: young people, experiences, gender, identity, career

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