

TAKING THE NEXT STEP: DANCE ADVOCACY IN GREECE

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Abstract

At the beginning of June 2015, Athens was the site of an international dance studies conference entitled “Cut and Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity”. This event drew dancers, choreographers and scholars from around the world and was jointly produced by the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance in collaboration with the Hellenic Centre of the International Theatre Institute. This essay reflects on that event, recounts its backstory, and proposes a series of future “next steps” that might help build a platform for dance advocacy in Greece.

Keywords

Arts advocacy, austerity, economics, Greece, activism, contemporary dance

There is a small poster for “Cut and Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity” hanging in my office. On my desk is the program with one side in English and the other side in Greek, a folder with various versions of the conference budget, assorted lists of panels, dance classes, and performances. There are published conference proceedings, business cards, and thank-you notes as well. Excel sheets of registrants and conference proposals, the Call for Papers, and the link for the [athensdancing2015](http://athensdancing2015.com) website (which now has photos documenting those three days in June 2015) still fill the desktop on my computer. These tangible pieces of paper, conference details, and registration numbers are easier to grasp than the more intangible memory of gathering with colleagues new and old last summer to support a dance community in crisis.

The archival materials surround me, proof that something happened, and yet I am wrestling with how to write the story of that intense event – trying to trace its reverberations across the distance of oceans and another busy school year. Breathing deeply and calling on the gods to give me patience, I sort through a slew of emails documenting the organizational labor. I listen to the various transcriptions of interviews with scholars and dancers profiling different approaches to dance advocacy from across the globe. I am trying to make sense of it all with an eye towards continuing the work that has begun.

Although I can articulate my experience in proposing, organizing, and producing this international dance studies conference on dance advocacy, it seems decidedly awkward to suggest the possible next steps for Greek dancers and dance scholars. How can I assess the broader impact of this event in Greece when I live in America? And yet that is precisely what I will attempt to do over the next pages, albeit with a sense of caution. Still I forge on: because I care deeply about the state of dance in Greece; because we have come this far in the conversation, it seems a shame to give it up now; because sometimes an outside perspective is useful, especially in a small community; because we have to keep trying to connect, network and advocate on behalf of an art form that takes movement (both aesthetic and political) as its soul.

Flashback to spring 2010. An ash cloud from Iceland has seriously disrupted air travel and I am late arriving in Athens for the “Dancing Bodies: Practices and Politics”, an international dance studies conference hosted by the Association of Greek Choreographers and the Department of Theatre Studies, University of the Peloponnese. I get picked up at the airport and am whisked away to the shiny new Megaron building, where the conference is taking place. I present a talk, “Finding Hope in a Fall”, and teach a class on Contact Improvisation to over fifty eager dancers in the opera ballet studio, where the marley floor has so much rosin that I rip my dance pants (and the skin off my knee) trying to slide across it. Yet, despite the blood, I am hooked by everybody’s enthusiasm. I meet various people with whom I have had correspondence, including the first of multiple Marias. It is utterly inexplicable, but somehow I feel completely at home in this chaotic Mediterranean city. The next two days pass in a blur of jet lag and, before I know it, I am back in the Midwest. Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, I have a hunch that I will be back – that my work in Greece has just begun.

Fast forward to spring 2012. I have returned to Greece for seven weeks of intensive teaching – my own dancing version of “doctors without borders”. In exchange for housing and food, I volunteered my services as a dancer and a thinker. I offered to teach groups of people ranging from amateur theater enthusiasts to dance professionals, in situations as diverse as a small private ballet studio, a university department, pre-professional schools, and a YMCA. Although it is a mere two calendar years later, much has transpired in Greece. The atmosphere is chaotic; the austerity measures enacted by the Greek government in response to European Union bailout demands were met by a political reactivity that had on several occasions turned violent. Walking across town to where I am teaching a workshop, I pass by burned-out buildings and homeless folks, public demonstrations and police lines, tourists and high-class shoppers carrying large designer bags.

As I mentioned in the last piece I wrote for *Choros International Dance Journal* (Spring 2013), I arrived in Athens committed to supporting the Greek dancers who were working under crisis conditions. I wanted to see if the intentional somatic and improvisational training I had begun to craft would help Greek dancers both mobilize and heal. That year I had been working

on a book about bodies surviving the anxiety and fear of things falling apart in America, which was entitled *Gravity Matters: finding ground in an unstable world*. I was curious to see if the physical practices I had developed in the US context would translate to this growing economic instability and sense of groundlessness within the Greek context. Overall, I was impressed with the resourcefulness in the face of draconian cuts in arts funding. Many of the Greek artists I encountered were continuing to work even without a regular paycheck from their government. Of course, as an American dancer, I had already survived the austerity measures imposed by the culture wars of the 1990s that had pretty much gutted the National Endowment for the Arts' support for individual artists. Not, of course, that we had much funding for dance to begin with in the United States.

Back in America that summer, I was asked to consider becoming President of the Society of Dance History Scholars (SDHS). Weighing the possibilities with the labor involved, I thought that as President I might be able to channel institutional support in order to bring an international dance studies conference to Greece. I reasoned that, if there were no longer governmental funding to travel abroad, we could at the very least bring a big dance conference to Greece. Thus began a consistent lobbying effort to get both SDHS and CORD (the Congress on Research in Dance) to sponsor a conference on dance advocacy in Athens in June 2015.

Given the media's sensationalized coverage of that turbulent period, when politicians were resigning and banks were failing, it was particularly difficult to assure certain skeptics on the board of directors that the situation was not dangerous, even if it was volatile. In the end, I was able to persuade the major stakeholders in both organizations that this event would be a significant intervention for the Greek dance community and would create the possibility not only of addressing an important and timely issue (advocacy), but it would actually be doing something practical as well. The presence of scholars and dancers from all around the world would mean something (I hoped) to the Greek dance studies community. Through my connections' connections (that is how it works in Greece), we found the Hellenic Centre of the International Theatre Institute, a Greek organization with the space and an administrative infrastructure to help us co-sponsor the event. We even applied for European Union funding. Little did I realize the amount of bureaucratic quicksand into which I was about to wade.

May 2014. I am back in Athens for 10 days of organizational meetings and visits to possible conference sites and hotels. Everyone is very nice, but there are clearly a lot of competing agendas (not to mention egos). I was presented with various hospitality presentations that included an elaborate, but closed, network of hotels, taxis, and restaurants. It all felt oddly claustrophobic and overly managed. I wanted open air spaces, not generic windowless rooms with white tablecloths and managed service. I was happy when the weekend came and I could teach a movement workshop to re-connect to the dance community and the reality of bodies in space. I left Athens feeling hopeful, enthusiastic, and yet in the back of my head I had a

sinking feeling that this was all going to be much more complicated than I had originally imagined. Little did I know what was in store for me over the next year as I scrambled to secure funding and a conference venue for this event. Fortunately, I had assistance in the form of a number of wonderful volunteers from both sides of the ocean. I could never have survived the year leading up to the conference without their help.

May 2015, exactly one year later. I arrive in Athens a week early and get to work shoring up the details of how, what, where, and when. We fill bags for registration, set up information tables, train the student volunteers. Somewhere in those first few days I find out (almost accidentally) that the conference venue is also hosting another conference on Friday (surprise!). I run my first SDHS board meeting Thursday afternoon, and then in the evening the conference begins with a reception and the plenary panel on “The State of Dance Studies in Greece”. We were off and running.

Here are some of the numerical facts concerning “Cut and Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity” collected in my final report: the conference registered over 330 participants (excluding the 40-plus volunteers); 35 countries were represented, including every continent except Antarctica; we offered 34 free dance workshops; two evenings of curated work by contemporary Greek dance companies; and we collectively donated 104 dance books to the music and dance library in the Megaron in Athens. The panels in this joint conference addressed issues surrounding dance advocacy on a local as well as a global level, and student researchers interviewed participants about dance advocacy in their home countries (including Malta, Colombia, Brazil, Denmark, India, South Africa, Canada, the United States, and Greece).

On one level, the conference was a huge success. Dance scholars from all over the world convened and networked. Dancers performed in the courtyard and in the hallways, as well as in the theaters. We were profiled on local television and had media coverage in a dozen different countries. Both during the conference and after, via email, scores of people thanked me for envisioning a conference where participants could take a dance class and then attend a scholarly panel, engaging both body and mind in their study of dance. Nonetheless, I have to wonder if anything had changed once the weekend was over.

Before I left Greece last summer, I met with the core group of dancers and scholars about possible next steps, but the dire economic situation (that was the moment when banks were limiting cash withdrawals to 60 euros a day) overshadowed any sense of potential coming out of the “Cut and Paste” conference. In the fall, my student assistant Alana Reibstein and I conducted follow-up interviews with Petros Gallias and Maria Tsouvala as part of our “Dance Advocacy in an International Context” research project. Having spent several months digesting these materials, I am now prepared to lay out some “next steps” that might help mobilize the dance community in Greece. Again, I recognize that I am an outsider and, as such, my

perspective is limited. But as I contemplate my next trip to Greece in the fall of 2016, I figure I might as well offer a few suggestions as a way of continuing the conversation about dance advocacy in Greece. My research into arts advocacy over the past year makes me aware of the rhetorical use of directives in these types of policy papers, and it is in that spirit that I propose the following next steps.

Step #1: Community and coalition building

Activate a sense of community among dancers and dance scholars by creating a national network that intentionally crosses over the current divisions between contemporary and traditional (including folk) dance; between Theater Studies and Education departments in universities; and between professional and amateur dance groups. Use established events (such as the yearly festival of the Association of Greek Choreographers or other annual events) to create more town-hall open forums where participants get to hear one another and be heard. It is true that someone has to mediate these public events so that they do not just become big bitch sessions, but it is also valuable to try and get all the stakeholders in the same room. Try to create a generous and activist culture in which folks are not fighting over pieces of the funding pie (since most of that pie is gone anyhow), but understand there is strength (political, social, economic) in numbers. Communities do not have to all hold the same aesthetic or pedagogical values in order to work together. Coalitions, in fact, have specific frameworks to preserve the autonomy and individuality of different groups while also opening up the possibility of collaborating with one another.

Step #2: Access

Use the existing dance studios and performance venues imaginatively to bring in dancers, both professional and amateur. In her 2014 essay, "Embodying the Crisis: The Body as a Site of Resistance in Post-Bailout Greece", Ioanna Tzartzani mentions the aggregated power in the current popularity of dancing (both adult and children's classes), the social choreography of protesting bodies in the streets, as well as the increase in all kinds of physical activity. She writes: "Besides the apparent antidepressant role of exercise, at hormonal level, taking action and regaining control over one's body also appears as a (semi-)conscious reaction to the surrounding chaotic reality".¹ I recommend that people build on that energy to activate access to dance classes throughout the country. For example, universities, independent dance studios,

1 *Choros International Dance Journal*, 4 (Spring 2014), p. 43.

and the state school system could open one class a day on a sliding fee scale to anyone who wants to participate. The teachers could volunteer to offer that class for free, and I guarantee that they would get a lot (food, energy, volunteers to help with their next show) in return. Just think what it would be like to have a packed dance class everyday, not to mention a full audience for the performance. Extending access in this way would bring people into the studios and help keep professional dancers training in Greece instead of running off to PARTS in Belgium or SEAD in Austria. There should also be a pro-active effort on the part of concert venues and producers to offer cheap tickets to performances in order to ensure that the audience is filled with a range of people from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Step #3: Space

Theater space. I came of age as a dancer in a time when small arts organizations were retrofitting abandoned schools and factory buildings into dance studios with the help of a little bit of funding and a lot of volunteer labor. These spaces, such as PS 122 (a former school) and St. Marks Danspace Project (housed in a former church), not only provided cheap venues in which to showcase dance, but they also were instrumental in creating arts districts and revitalizing neighborhoods. If there were a good dance network in place in Greece (even a website with internet postings for teachers, dancers, etc.), then organizations and private studios could call on people to help produce dance events, contributing both physical labor and developing audience participation. If the only performance venues for dance are big theaters, there will necessarily be intense competition to be produced by those select venues. But if smaller places (even bars, outdoor cafes, etc.) start to produce dance events, then dance artists (including emerging artists) will be able to show works in process. As an independent choreographer in Philadelphia and New York City, I was always willing to barter time for space, whether to rehearse or to perform. Like urban green spaces and city gardens in which the participants hold a stake, this kind of exchange builds a sense of ownership and a commitment to a place.

Outdoor space. One of the greatest assets that Greece has is amazing weather much of the year. That allows for all kinds of imaginative uses of outdoor space for dancing. It would be fabulous to stage a day of dancing all over Athens, including in gardens, plazas, and the streets. One of the places I once had the good fortune to stay in had an outdoor deck (rooftop garden) which could be used to stage dancing that could also be seen by other rooftop gardens and cafes in the area. There seems to be a lot of potential in site-specific venues in Greece, which would help to create a greater visibility for dance in Greece and help sponsor audience development. (Everyone loves to watch dance outside with a glass of wine in hand.)

Step #4: Dance publications and research collections

A publication like *Choros International Dance Journal* is a fabulous asset to the Greek dance community, and its pages could be mobilized to both broaden and deepen the exchange of ideas within that community. For instance, how about doing a special focus issue around the topic of advocacy and invite a range of short editorial essays from across the field? This would create a much-needed outlet for critical exchange and increase the readership of the journal. Indeed, it might be possible to do this special edition of the journal in newsprint (very cheap) and have that “newspaper” available at many of the crucial dance events in town. I am thinking of something like *Movement Research Journal*, which periodically publishes theme issues that are stacked outside workshop venues, performances, studios, etc., where people can grab a free copy and read it while waiting for a class or the performance to begin.

If a dance community begins to take responsibility for sponsoring and contributing to the discourse about dance, it can have a real impact on the field. I realize that resources are very tight these days, but sometimes it is possible to get sponsorship for one issue that is specially targeted on advocacy and promises to reach a broad audience. I find that when dancers and choreographers take the responsibility to write about their work or the work that they see being done around them, their reflections serve to deepen the critical discourse around dance. The same is true for developing Research Collections on Dance – there has to be a sense of ownership and engagement.

Some final thoughts on resources

I realize that what I am outlining here requires considerable resources of time, energy, and some (although not as much as one might imagine) money. But many of the necessary resources are human resources that are already in place and often underutilized. The real challenge is in finding ways to organize and consolidate the labor of training dancers, making work, documenting trends, and creating community. Advocacy fertilizes all of these fields, whether we are talking about K-12 dance education, folk dance or contemporary multimedia work. Of course, this necessarily has to be a grass-roots project, not a top-down directive. Advocacy happens best in person – face to face. Like dance, it is a physical action, one that requires continual bodily effort and the perseverance to try again and again. Fortunately, as dancers we are invested in the pleasures of coming back to the studio day after day, year after year. So when I return to Greece this fall, I invite you all to put me to work in helping to imagine the next steps in advocating for dance in Greece.