

Forward In A Sea Change

Margaret Jenkins

There's a reference in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to a sea change - where a person's body is transformed, or maybe replaced is a better word, with various items from the sea, a radical and apparently mystical change.

The ways in which we support our work, and the ways we reach out to audiences to inhabit and witness our efforts, have been altered. To some degree the nature of this shift is indeed mystical, or perhaps mercurial, but regardless, we are called upon to adapt dynamically, to meet the varying times with changed behavior while not altering the substance of what we do.

I am dedicated to deepening my relationship to my existing audience, but determined to reach those who have not come, have had no previous reason to come.



As we experience this profound transformation in how we are funded and who comes to see the work, we are called upon to look in on the city and re-imagine, re-engage and redefine how best to be seen and heard.

“The signal has gone out.

We have been called to this grove outside the ancient gates.

We've brought our necessities.

This much is understood.

There has been a wobble, a great wobbling, the signs of which are many. Did someone mention the fire beneath the ground, the burning of the palace, the collapse of the wall, the unaccountable failures of memory, the fragmentation of tongues, disruption of migratory patterns?

This much is certain.

We are called from our scattered provinces to look in at the city through its various gates,

to better know the state of things and to ask the questions,

What are the stories?

What is to be done?

Michael Palmer from the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company “The Gates (Far Away Near)” 1993

The times are telling us to observe our altered environment and ask what is to be done, to adapt in a dynamic way to fit the changed circumstances. We, as artists, have always been children of The Depression; we, as artists, know the only way to keep our balance is to keep moving; we, as

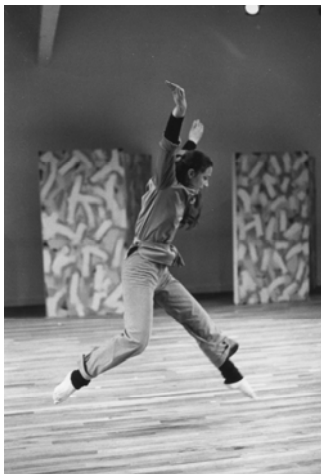
artists, have always had to find a way to reinvent the structures, and often the forms, that allow us to continue.

Those of us who have been at work for decades see that, unlike other dips in the economy or forms of recession, this time it is different. Things will not return to what they were regardless of what the market does or how dividends rebound. This recent shift has given many the opportunity and the permission to re-evaluate their priorities and vastly alter how or if they fund the arts.

We've been presented with a moment where we must think differently about how to continue, about the audiences we have and the audiences we want, and to reconsider both the old and new methods to create and maintain the connections. We have to alter the paradigm for keeping on. It has never been easy; if you want easy, you retire.

For me, identifying major gifts from individuals, opening up our studios and our process to frequent witnesses, and using available social networks for all they're worth, has been key to this rethinking and reshaping.

Telling the story to new listeners is essential to changing the ecology of dance. Many individuals with disposable income who care about art in our culture, about art and artists, have not had the opportunity or encouragement to see alternative work - we thought they would just find us. It is our responsibility to find them to tell our story, to ignite their interest in the unfamiliar.



Here are some of the ways we are deepening our relationships to our audiences, expanding to similar audiences, and diversifying to different kinds of audiences.

Providing New Access. For us, what was once so private, or what might have even felt exclusive, is now fully revealed, communicating a message of greater availability and accessibility of art. Opening up our studios to our ongoing process, allowing those who are interested to drop in, gives the message that we are thinking differently about art of and for the people - so “come join us and be part of the dialogue toward the development of the work” is a new and welcomed invitation.

Inventing New Programs. I created Choreographers in Mentorship Exchange (CHIME) to answer some of the needs of working choreographers, diminish a sense of isolation, create a dialogue, enhance audience awareness—a kind of partnership between audience and artist. This has become another kind of networking. CHIME became one way of keeping the doors constantly swinging, artists coming in and out of the studio, in and out of conversation with one another and their audience—another way to bring support to the field.

Spreading The Word In New Ways. All performances of the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company (MJDC) and Leaders at the Lab (our guest artist speaker series) are announced on Facebook or clips of the MJDC are posted on YouTube. And we also stay in touch with our committed audience of many, many years through email blasts.

We aim to attract new audiences through Facebook and have used other social networking sites, too. We keep people posted daily. The exciting thing about these tools is that they do not ask us to alter what we do, but only how we make it accessible. As Marcus Selby says: technology does not disturb the purity of the craft.

The people we keep posted daily are the ones who are already interested, our “FB Friends” and “Fans.” We also find that we further populate that base through these networks with the broader reach of “Friends of Friends” – it’s the new word of mouth.

Use of these new social networks over time, for us, has meant a shift away from paid advertisements in newspapers announcing our seasons to announcements online through these networks. It has also meant fewer or smaller mailings in general. Newsletters so quickly lose their newsworthiness along the timeline from their generation to their arrival in a mailbox – with online social networks, news can really be news, and impact can be near-immediate.

Though this assessment isn’t scientific, we have found that our staff has been able to shift time from other means of reaching audiences in the past to these new avenues, which are less costly to pursue and give us an immediate sort of control about who we’re speaking to, what we’re saying. We haven’t just added another layer of work toward achieving the same goals as we did in the past. It’s different work, with some new aims. It interests me, too, that the tech-savvy culture of the young might find their way to my work through these networks.

As I consider this sea change in our economy and reflect about what is current and new about these recently adopted ways of reaching and sustaining both our new and committed audiences, I think it’s important to remember that:

- Artists have lived in recession all the time despite the brief dance boom bubble.
- Most dancers have always worked three jobs to do the dance job. (I’ve had a company for 36 years and only for three years during the dance boom did the company have a contract longer than 6 months.)
- There was a time when there was no alternative to working for years without deadlines until the work was ready. Since it was assumed that one would work at however many jobs one needed to rehearse the work one loved, there was nothing to lose and no pining for another way of working that hadn’t yet been experienced.
- The climate and expectations have changed, and they should have.
- Optimism is our metaphoric food; although we need the kind that truly nourishes our bodies, we need this spirit to keep our minds focused and at work.

Though the financial landscape shifts and changes, artists need to reckon with the time and circumstances in which they work, because art isn’t made for free and artists need to eat and live. One new way we reckon with this changed environment is to use less-expensive web-based

means of reaching people and getting the word out not just about our next show but about the value of art in our lives. Finding creative ways of sharing this information seems part and parcel of being an artist in this century and of the community.

This is a time to reassess, re-imagine, re-focus and realign. For those of us who have been through these sea changes in the past, both prosperity and adversity can be opportunities: to court chance, to experiment and to find new movement, new ways of continuing around and past the borders of caution. We must stay at it—hold on tight, but not so tight that there is no room for something miraculous or unexpected to enter the scene.

If the arts are of necessity to our culture, and if necessity does drive invention, and if inventions extend the boundaries of human knowledge or experience, who is seeing and supporting the work? We must all be constant participants in answering this question.