

THE STRUGGLES OF INDEPENDENT DANCE ARTISTS: A TO MOVEMENT FOR C

OPEN CALLS FOR DANCERS to audition for high profile entertainment jobs in Toronto are usually followed up by a stream of Facebook posts from prominent dancers, encouraging their peers to not settle for getting underpaid. In other words, most work opportunities for dancers that are advertised on a mass scale provoke massive criticism.

In the experience of some of Canada's top independent dance artists, finding "commercial" work has become a story of exploitation and greed that trickles down to the bottom of the food chain: the dancers. Take Thomas Colford's breaking point, waiting outside in February of this year in hail for hours on end to audition for a music video by two prominent pop stars. He finally came to the realization that, "I'm worth more than this"

and walked away from the chance to earn \$200 (and a slice of pizza) for a 16-hour video shoot that went overnight. Thinking about his worth, he preferred to volunteer his time organizing a local event to educate aspiring professional dancers on their rights, available resources, and how to negotiate their rates of pay.

Know your minimums & negotiate up!

Equity's minimum standards protect our members. Minimum rates in the policy set the lowest fee a producer can offer an artist for rehearsal, per performance, for choreography, and for judging. An artist is always free to negotiate up, but minimum fees stop producers from low balling artists below acceptable standards.

Equity's dance outreach consultant, Jon Reid, brought together some of Canada's top independent artists to discuss their struggles as professional dancers and explore how membership in Equity could support real change.

Many of the professional dancers in Toronto have actually come from other cities across Canada to find work doing what they love. Some of the dancers featured in this article hail from Vancouver, Montreal, or, in the case of Colford, Cape Breton. What they often find on arrival is that work is hard to come by, and the structures of the commercial world are generally exploitive and competitive, with professional artists challenged to find fair rates of pay and adequate conditions to work in. As Colford advocates, part of this is the dancers' responsibility. They have to "frame the argument" to those hiring, to let them know the worth of the performer.

Most dancers are sympathetic to the event planners and producers that work as the "middle management" between themselves



Caroline Torti

Co-Artistic Director, Choreographer - Collective Elite, Booked Workshop - Co-Founder
Credits: So You Think You Can Dance, Hellcats, Danny Fernandes, Kreesha Turner, George, Shawn Desman

As a huge fan of all dance forms, I watched dance experience a resurgence in popularity, thanks in part to the television shows that have brought a variety of styles into our living rooms. An increase in work opportunities led the independent dance community to engage in discussions about bringing professional business practices (enforceable contracts, reasonable rates, etc.) to forms of dance practice like hip-hop, krumping, and background dancing. It was at just such a discussion that I first met Jon Reid (now our dance outreach consultant) and began to think of how Equity could provide much needed protections to independent dance artists, who, like Equity members, are struggling to make a decent living.

Resulting from in-depth outreach to this community, Equity created the new, easy to administer, OPEN dance policy to cover a wide variety of different dance styles and engagement forms.

In recognition of the needs of this unique community, Equity's Council has generously reduced Equity's regular \$1,000 initiation fee to \$10 for a 12-month outreach period, affording dancers whose work falls under the OPEN policy access to the benefits of membership.

Over the next year we hope to meet with the many independent dancers and bring them into Equity's membership – providing them with the representation, protections and benefits they need to have a safe and fulfilling career. We will also encourage engagers and presenters to work with Equity when they engage these new members.

— Arden R. Ryshpan, Executive Director

Campaign Launches Summer 2017

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HANGE

BY MARY FOGARTY



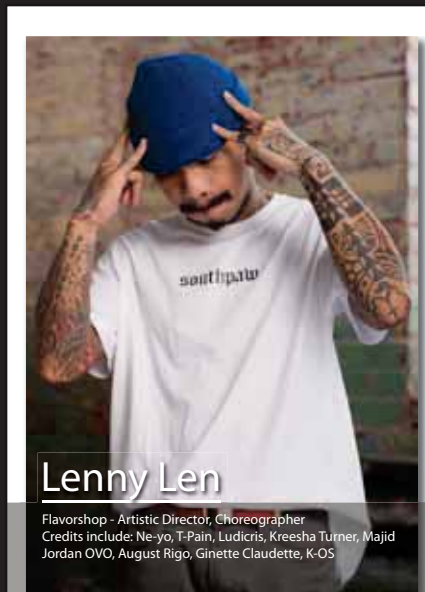
Jasmyn Fyffe

Choreographer, Performer
Dora Mayvor Moore Dance Award, Nominee Young Centre Dance Award
Credits: Nelly Furtado, Red Sky, Artists in Motion, KasheDance



Addy Chan

Nickelodeon 'Make It Pop' - Choreographer
Booked Workshop - Co-Founder
Credits: Flo Rida, Tyler Medeiros, Kardinal Official, Kelly Clarkson, Trish



Lenny Len

Flavorshop - Artistic Director, Choreographer
Credits include: Ne-yo, T-Pain, Ludicris, Kreesha Turner, Majid Jordan OVO, August Rigo, Ginette Claudette, K-OS

and the corporate clients. Of course there is no formal middle management, as dancers are not “employees” of the corporations, nor are the event planners, thus ensuring no benefit packages or sick days. This sort of structure found in the corporate, entertainment world ensures a system of planners competing against each other for clients through offering more for less, and to meet that bottom line, the artists at the bottom of the hierarchy are usually the first to get burned i.e. the dancers.

Dancers are versatile artists, and generally have portfolio careers. Some divide their time between choreography and performance, or find work as teachers, videographers and producers. Equity member Caroline Torti represents the portfolio career within one gig. She says she does the “casting, coordinating dancers’ schedules and other admin work, editing the music, editing the video, paying dancers” alongside choreographing the work, and educating the corporate organizers on the work involved in preparing a show. Similarly, she has recently negotiated a pay increase for judging dance competitions, an area where there is no standardization of rates.

There are upsides to working as a professional dancer. Certainly, those who have been in the game for as long as some of the people I interviewed have found success in this structure. One of the upsides includes – and there is some irony present here – working for other independent artists! Turns out that when independent choreographers

Do you see your dance practice reflected in these pages? Interested in joining Equity? We have specialized joining requirements designed specifically for independent dancers.

Visit danceequity.com to access the Dance Membership Access Application.

get local, provincial or national funding to create art, they are usually the first to pay other artists (dancers) what they are worth for their time, overtime, and performances. For example, Jasmyn Fyffe has had good experiences performing for other choreographers locally, and when she hires dancers she is the first to include considerations of sick days in her contracts.

Lack of consideration in contracts for illnesses is one of the areas Fyffe spent time critiquing in our interview. She also spoke about how dancers are overworked in a lot of commercial gigs, often with no room to warm-up, asked to stay late and with no support for maternity, paternity and childcare. Similarly, when dancers are asked to perform at community choreography performance events, they are not paid (even though audiences pay to attend) and are expected to provide their own costumes. In contrast, working with contemporary dancers with government funding provides one of the avenues where dancers are properly compensated for their time and efforts.

Addy Chan has had a great deal of success in the commercial sphere, and when it comes to appraising the producers, she is aware of how high up the chain the problems go. She explains,

the **OPEN** dance policy

offers flexibility, rehearsal, break & performance day limits to protect artists.

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"the producer is just a hired hand as well, it goes to the client and then the client has people to appease so it goes way beyond the actual producer. We're below them so it's not a producer thing. So that's why it's tough to provide a solution... it comes down to greed and discussing greed."

This is the system that has emerged for independent artists working in commercial spheres, and reflects current attitudes of neoliberalism. A well-known street dancer from L.A. explained to me in an interview that he was getting paid well up until 9/11, and then his pay rate fell to a third of what he used to earn and has gotten lower with each passing year. This aligns with a lot of the research on creative labour that suggests that since the 1990s corporations have been restructuring to rely more and more on independent contractors, rather than employees, as a way to be less accountable for taxes, pay rates, benefits and taking on the responsibilities of being the employer.

This system has resulted in what Filipino born, American-raised and Toronto-based street dancer, Lenny Len, suggests is a system of loopholes. One of his biggest challenges is being squeezed for more, even through the networks he has built. In our interview he stated, "People have been recognizing there is a standard rate for myself... now they are trying to find loopholes. Now one person will refer my name to another person and let them know the pay rate. But the pay rate and scales don't specify what comes with that."

Equity has Dance Reps! Ask how they can help with contracting, riders and ensuring respectful professional working conditions.

So what he finds is that people ask him to do more and more for the same rate of pay for which he would do a one-off performance. They "ask for things that I don't even think I can physically do." Similarly, event planners will often include working with him in their budget. When they find

another event planner also has included him, they ask him to do more for less, or ask for less, so they can lowball their competitors to get the gig. In other words, everyone is competing, and the contracts don't exist until after an event planner has got the gig with the client, so they can't be negotiated until then.

Equity contracts help build RRSP contributions. Independent dancers rarely have access to this support.

On the flip side of this, teaching in dance studios involves being undercut by new dancers who also want experience teaching classes. For Lenny Len, there is a morality code in hip-hop culture that is being challenged by the studio system, where those without qualifications (in the street sense of legitimacy and earning your name/reputa-

tion) are starting to teach. This appears to be a question of both artistry and the bottom line. Younger dancers want to earn money, build their brand, and often are teaching classes and taking gigs for less. This in turn, affects the whole industry and the constant undermining of dancers' worth.

Addy Chan adds that she just got married and is now thinking about kids, so aging into a new set of life goals provides new challenges. Her identified struggles for our interview were "chasing after work" and "no work to chase after" as this intersects with getting older. The problem is that there is a lack of regulation unless it's a union job, and the base rates for hiring dancers aren't rising. Having worked, and aging within an industry that doesn't pay the kind of wages that would be needed to raise a family, means that dance artists find themselves more often than not at the crossroads where increasing experience as performers – the kind of experience event planners want when they need a job done well – is not matched by rates of pay. Meanwhile, younger dancers and performers are entering the field, willing to do more for less to prove their emerging worth.

B-boy Lakesan "Styx" Siva of Maximum Efficiency Crew can't comprehend the fact that b-boys sometimes still have to pay to attend an event or enter a competition, and further, in doing so, give up the rights to their images that are then used to promote products (mainly energy drinks). He adds some pragmatic points that are crucial for dancers in this context, and what is provided for them: "... competitors should have snacks, water, stuff to keep them going. Remember going to an event and they don't have water, I'm [thinking] what am I supposed to drink?"

With Philadelphia's Silverback Championships as one of the first events to offer massages and food on the side for dancers, younger competitors are clearly seeing these experiences as what should be the standard not the exception. Likewise, getting paid, rather than paying to get in to an event, is another expectation. "That should be the new standard. I think everybody should be getting paid for what they do. I'm pretty sure most breakers... don't focus on saving even a little bit.

Literally anything they make off breaking goes right back into breaking. It just goes right back into competing. It's pretty much a loop." He follows by highlighting the context of his b-boy setting. "Just because there are no red curtains doesn't mean it's not a performance."



Lakesan 'Styx' Siva

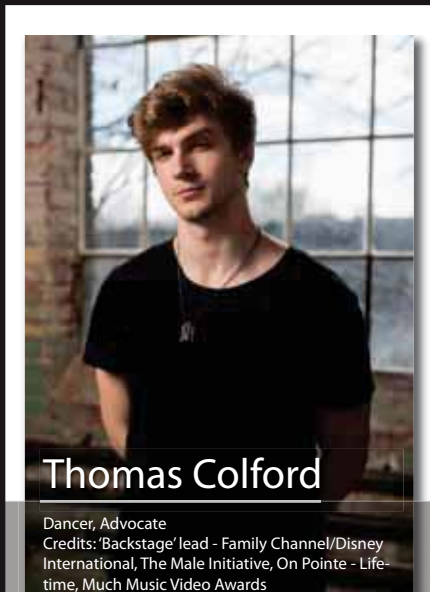
Bboy, Performer, Competitor
MEC Crew, United Rivals Crew
Freestyle Session Qualifier Miami 3on3 Champ,
Full Force Anniv 1v1 Champ Las Vegas

Equity empowers you. Want to self-engage and contract yourself? Need to hire others too? Get to know our OPEN, Collective, DOT, Festival and INDIE 2.2 policies.



Shawn O'Campo

Dancer, Competitor, Judge
Moon Runners Crew - Co-Founder
Credits: International Competitor, Judge and Performer



Thomas Colford

Dancer, Advocate
Credits: 'Backstage' lead - Family Channel/Disney International, The Male Initiative, On Pointe - Lifetime, Much Music Video Awards



Kevin Ormsby

Artistic Director - KasheDance
Program Manager - Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario (CPAMO)

The OPEN dance policy includes competition and judging contracts that provide support and security to professional artists working in the industry. From health and safety to image rights protection to insurance benefits, the OPEN offers a wide range of support to dance artists.

Shawn O'Campo of The Moon Runners adds that dance artists should be treated similarly to artists in other professions (actors, musicians) and treated respectfully. There is a difficulty in the street dance world that event organizers don't know how to treat judges. Often times he's asked to come early before events and is waiting for hours for the event to start (usually late). In this sense, "there has to be a standard and overtime pay" as sometimes he judges and it takes two hours, other times seven or eight hours. O'Campo mentioned that sometimes dancers don't even get paid, an issue echoed by Thomas Colford who says sometimes he isn't paid at all, or is paid three months later for the work he did.

Kevin Ormsby, a seasoned dance artist and advocate, points to his larger mission right now in diversifying dance practices that are respected in Canada. He works for Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Ontario, and is looking for "equitable representation of everyone beyond form in the conversation." He sees that hip-hop, contemporary commercial dance forms are not getting the same access to spaces, rehearsals, sustainability. Likewise, "black" dance, South Asian forms, etc. are not given the same access to

resources, and this is a problem in Canada. He explains, "you find too many of us working other jobs" to sustain themselves. "I envision a world where... dancers are getting paid for their practice... with signed contracts as artists." He sees all the councils as needing to play a more active role in the advocacy, and deconstructing the hierarchy within dancers including the mentorship and building of future leaders.

Inclusivity is a high priority for Equity – check out our census details at www.caea.com. The research is being used to inform the industry and better support the plurality of practice onstage and off.

Given the imbalance between the talented, hardworking people I interviewed and the conditions of their artistic practices, I wholeheartedly agree with Ormsby's statement. It's time to rethink how we support independent artists in Canada through our institutions, unions and understandings. After all, independent dance artists have access to insights about what it means to live in a new world of corporate bottom lines, online branding, and profit margins. I want to know what art will come out of those experiences, as this is the world in which we all reside. Unions, like Equity, will play a role in making this change happen. **EQ**

Mary Fogarty is an Associate Professor of Dance at York University. Her most recent co-authored anthology is Movies, Moves and Music: The Sonic World of Dance Films (with Mark Evans) and her writing also appears in The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen and The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music.



Professional Dance Artists For Respectful Working Conditions
CAMPAIGN LAUNCHES SUMMER 2017

View more dancer profiles and hear them in their own words at www.danceequity.com