

## **Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists – Ontario Chapter**

### ***Outreach to independent dance artists practicing in African-based and urban dance forms***

Between April and December, 2013, CADA-ON engaged in outreach to independent dance artists practicing in African-based and urban dance forms. This initiative was supported by the Ontario Arts Council, and by a partnership with the Collective Of Black Artists (COBA) and Gadfly. Among CADA-ON's objectives were the following: to better understand the practice of artists in African-based and urban dance forms; to develop a model for further outreach to artists in culturally diverse forms; and to provide a broader frame of reference for the development of CADA-ON's programs and services. Ultimately, CADA-ON's goal is to represent a more diverse spectrum of artists within the broader dance community.

CADA-ON engaged me as consultant for this process. My name is Soraya Peerbaye, and I have now been working in dance, and specifically in policy development and program management, for nearly 15 years. My entry point into the field was through the Canada Council for the Arts, where I acted as Equity Coordinator in the inaugural year of the Capacity Building Program for Culturally Diverse Arts Organizations. I also acted as an advisor and consultant to the Department of Canadian Heritage's National Arts Training Contribution Program. Both roles gave me a deep understanding of the infrastructure and economy of dance in traditions beyond the Euro-American stage model. This understanding has become an ethical foundation for me in my work, which I continued as the dance program officer at the Toronto Arts Council from 2004 to 2012.

I worked with the support of CADA-ON's administrative director, Chrystine Chambers, and then Amelia Ehrhardt when Chrystine began her maternity leave; as well as members of CADA-ON's board of directors and our partnering organizations. We established two focus groups, and met in August and September 2013. As many of the artists contacted were unable to participate because of scheduling conflicts, both consultations were modestly attended; nonetheless the conversation was rich and productive. The Toronto Urban Dance Symposium in October was used as a forum for further discussion. Artists were clearly compelled by the subject of the status of the artist, and wanted to share their experience and their perspectives as artists and advocates.

Our point of departure was the recognition that CADA-ON's literature was built primarily around Euro-American stage dance, and the infrastructure that exists to support it, particularly in contemporary dance: training institutions, repertoire companies, and a well-developed network in the broader dance community to provide employment, professional development and collaborative opportunities. We also acknowledged the race and class issues inherent in those structures. This affirmed the perspective of the artists we consulted, and allowed the conversation to be forthright and constructive.

An internal document has been created with a comprehensive summary of the process and discussions. CADA-ON and the consultant also wanted to create a document to share with the community, to let you know what we heard, to clearly describe the programs and services we currently offer, and to tell you what next steps we will be taking.

We thank all participants for the generous contribution of their time and insights.

## What did we hear?

### ***The need for a culture of appreciation for diverse paths of training***

Artists in both focus groups described a wide range of training experiences; from community-based training in African-based dance; relationships with senior dance artists from the African or Caribbean diaspora; and street-based training in urban dance. Training might take place not only in a studio, but also a school gymnasium, a church basement, a garage or a hall. Urban dance practitioners noted the form's emphasis on originality; as a result, dancers may not have long-term relationships with one teacher or school, but successive short-term relationships as they develop their own individual style. Company-affiliated schools like COBA and Ballet Creole were of course essential. In general, though, the studio-based model of early training in ballet and Graham-based modern dance, or institutional post-secondary training, is less relevant in these forms.

### ***The need to simplify the definition of the “professional” dancer***

CADA-ON follows the Canadian Artist Code's definition of a professional artist. Artists noted that the definition is long and complex, and requires a careful reading of all the clauses to see if one meets the right combination to meet the criteria.

The Canada Council for the Arts offers a simpler definition, which summarizes the same elements:

“A professional artist is an artist who:

- has specialized training in the artistic field (not necessarily in academic institutions)
- is recognized as a professional by his or her peers (artists working in the same artistic tradition)
- is committed to devoting more time to artistic activity, if financially possible; and
- has a history of public presentation or publication.”

The artists we spoke to fully embraced the term professional to describe themselves.

Professionalism is the way *“I claimed my space in the culture.”*

### ***The need for a more adaptable literature***

Artists recommended that CADA-ON develop a more informal language for its literature that can reach a broader readership.

Artists also pointed out that many people or organizations hiring dancers don't fit the model assumed by the PSD – e.g., a company or a performing arts presenter. Artists recommended developing standards that consider a wider range of contexts: including schools, youth organizations and other community groups; private and corporate events; film, television and advertising; and the commercial music industry. “I need flexibility,” was one thing that artists told us, with the assurance that the PSD didn't need to respond to all scenarios, but needed to be adaptable.

Likewise, artists recommended that CADA-ON consider a wider audience for its literature – not only dance artists but the people and organizations that employ them. Noting, for instance, the way commercial artists or corporations sometimes ask urban dancers to perform without pay but in exchange for “exposure” or even a T-shirt, artists recommended that CADA-ON develop strategies to reach representatives for these entities and raise the awareness of standards in dance.

Other recommendations included:

- Presenting a wider range of images in the literature, to see one’s practice reflected; not simply in terms of race but also in terms of aesthetic, for example folk, traditional and street aesthetics.
- Develop a more direct process for registration, such as on-site registration at community events, and on-site submission of receipts and forms for the Training Subsidy Program at workshops and master classes.
- Consider professional development workshops on understanding self-employment, sole proprietorship, and non-profit organizations; how to establish and lead a company, a studio etc.; as well as informal networking contexts to exchange information, skills development.
- Connect to community-based initiatives to define fair fees and working conditions in different dance communities, e.g., Jon Drops Reid’s *The Movement*.
- Articulate CADA-ON’s position more clearly as a communicator and an advocate for the dancer’s worth.

### **What can CADA do for you right now?**

CADA-ON provides the following programs and services:

1. **Professional Standards in Dance:** This booklet, also available on CADA-ON’s website, is a best practices guide to promote and support professional standards and conditions of work in dance. The PSD provides recommendations for minimum standards regarding hours of work, fee standards and working conditions, and describes rights and responsibilities in work agreements. They are guidelines only, and a starting point for negotiations.
2. **Training Subsidy Program:** Through this program, members of CADA-ON can be reimbursed up to \$325 for the cost of training and physical conditioning. This includes the cost of dance technique classes, workshops, master classes and intensives, and even fitness club memberships, yoga and Pilates classes, etc.
3. **National Health Insurance Program:** Through a joint membership program with the Canadian Dance Assembly, members can also apply for health, drug, dental and life insurance. Home, auto and lifestyle insurance is also available.
4. **Professional discounts:** CADA-ON members receive professional discounts on studios, classes, single tickets and subscription packages with DanceWorks, ViaRail tickets and more.

CADA-ON will review the recommendations received through this process, and will investigate the possibilities of strategies and funding opportunities for their implementation. The high degree of engagement with this consultancy process encouraged CADA-ON that, with deeper understanding of diverse communities and ecologies, it can be a valuable contributor to the lives of independent dance artists in these forms. It is our belief that, in an ever-diversifying community, where dance is presented in ever-diversifying contexts, CADA-ON has the opportunity to be a hub where the community begins to know each other better, and to break down barriers.