

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

Annual Meeting 2015

NASD President's Report

Madeleine Scott

A few of those in attendance may be old enough to remember a low-tech hand held device called the "View-Master." Resembling a pair of white plastic binoculars, it held a round cardboard disk with an array of photo images along its circumference. A mechanical lever rotated the images and shed light on the still photos. At the time it was a magical technology that gave the user the power to advance a predetermined sequence of photo images. When teaching technique I used the View-Master as an image to encourage students not to preference certain moments in a dance sequence as if they were a part of a View-Master slide show. I hoped to guide their attention to the transitional moments between the "glamor shots" of flashy shows at the edges of extreme flexibility. It would be an understatement to say that technology today has outpaced the View-Master as metaphor.

We know it can take a while to learn and embody the awareness that transitions are where the juiciness of dancing exists. Changes in direction, rhythm, or intention, the all-powerful plié, the movements between moments, we know these are the where true dancing is, and where danger lurks. A miscalculated landing, lack of support at a critical juncture, and we miss the moment or are vulnerable to injury.

Even so, we encourage students to refine photo-worthy moments too. Stretching limbs, shaping the arms, supporting the spine, assembling and coordinating body parts brings the crisp whole-body picture, the "money shot" moment, into focus. The intention is to encourage a commitment to be fully present in and physically focused in each moment—to find and fulfill the moments before and after the "money shot." We encourage students to find the arc of a movement phrase, and to fulfill the full-body integration and commitment that it requires. We know that those who focus too narrowly on the single captured moment may not be able to support moving through it, and not progress beyond linking a series of movement tricks. But this is not dancing.

We train dancers to move between the still points, to perceive, recognize and enlist the physical support needed to navigate transitions. We train them to move with coordinated purpose. We know from body-level experience that all change requires deep core-level organization, and coordinated participation to succeed or it will succumb to disorder and chaos. It requires clear two-way communication from the ground up as well as the top down. The foot must send messages to the head providing instantaneous and continuous status reports. The head must send clear articulate motor signals through connecting limbs to the foot.

The View-Master has been obsolete for some time, and digital technology has re-constituted ideas about still photography. A few days ago iPhone introduced its latest smart phone with an enhanced high quality camera. Naturally, the iPhone camera captures high definition photos. But its recent iteration can capture the moment before the shot was taken as well as the moment following it, linking these into a sequence or mini-phrase of movement. The iPhone snapshot presents a continuum of motion. It seems like an obvious development, integrating still photography with videography, but capturing a moment between moments in time—revealing transitions as an inherent to the process of change, seems radically magical to someone once entranced by the View-Master.

There is something a bit tricky about this feature too. It's rather like opening the curtain as parts assemble hurriedly from the wings, in the chaos before the focused moment, and leaving the curtain open afterwards as the parts disassemble and retreat from the moment. To me this sounds a bit like the dance executive at work. How many dance administrators become adept at collecting hurried thoughts and focusing energy to pull themselves up and into a public moment only to dissolve shortly after. Nevertheless, as a teaching image for movement the iPhone snapshot is spot on, because, in truth, there are no still points in time or space. Motion is the real deal. All is transition. All is change.

Much has changed in the decades since the View-Master or still photography worked as metaphor for students. Technology has secured its place as the primary real estate developer on a change landscape. It provides extraordinary advantages, but it also advances the troubling notion that it can solve problems, reduce expenses, and increase productivity. It buttresses the promise of big data to answer all questions, to crunch the numbers, to measure, assess, and compare everything.

Other changes come with their own pressures. The costs of collegiate education and professional training outpace the capacity to generate revenue. Marketing and branding have become increasingly important, enhancing the profile and pockets of the consultant while increasing demands on dwindling budgets. Students join collegiate ranks presenting different preparation for and expectations of what collegiate work means. Tenure track, and perhaps full time, positions at universities seem to be a bit scarce. Service demands on faculty have increased as other staffing has diminished. Time and energetic resources are often strained by the onslaught of requirements we must fulfill. The bright line between government control and educational autonomy has blurred and eroded. The repercussions of that erosion challenge the definition and perceptions attending the value of what we do. We are obliged to consider basic questions we never thought would arise: what is a credit hour; what is gainful employment; and most critically, who are the most appropriate, informed voices in the education accreditation arena?

My intention is not to carry on unduly about such challenges because change is pervasive. Resistance is futile and unproductive. When she was 25, Queen Elizabeth II, now the longest reigning monarch in history, said, "Change is constant." Heraclitus said it a few centuries

before her. There is nothing new here. While it might be convenient to think that there is a savior or leader out there amongst the throng of candidates for office who could turn things around by decree, or hairdo, we must acknowledge with relief that it isn't so. The complexity of the moment is challenging and unavoidable but not intractable.

Chief Justice Stephen Breyer said, "The best way to grapple with [challenges] is to participate." Navigating challenge is best supported through participation in organizations with a vision, a clear purpose, an engaged membership and the will to persevere through the intractable problems to seek appropriate resolutions. This is the National Association of Schools of Dance.

NASD represents our commitment to and passion for the fundamentals: that dance as an art form has value and purpose in and of itself; that practitioners in the field by virtue of their dedication to excellence, are experts with commitment; and that an informed and engaged perspective is necessary for effective self assessment.

As a self-governing body, NASD gives voice and credibility to these principles. It articulates them on a broad scale, extending support from the local and personal through to the halls of the academy to the halls of federal government. It requires support at the organizational level to coordinate multiple moving parts. This is what NASD offers, deep core-level organization to provide support through the changes we face—radical or otherwise.

This year NASD embarks on a multi-year project to review the NASD *Handbook*. We will review graduate programs, operational standards, undergraduate programs, non-degree granting programs, and *Handbook* appendices. We begin with a hearing on the graduate standards at this meeting. The *Handbook* and its standards represent the membership and its participation. They have changed over time, as has the field. We will go through a series of hearings on the standards and operations. Your participation and contributions are critical to the review process because this is where the metaphorical foot of the organization provides information to the whole. NASD standards are a snapshot of the field, capturing the history that informs the moment and opens our way to the future.

It has been my pleasure to serve and participate in the work of NASD. It has contributed much to a rich life as an artist in an academic world. It has been encouraging to see new leadership come forward and watch membership grow. I encourage us all to find ways to extend the opportunities that attending NASD and participating in its work can provide to the future leaders of dance programs and continue to elevate the regard for dance in the academy.

Stay engaged, stay well, stay strong, and keep moving.