

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

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NASD President's Report

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The Mona Lisa, she is an object of beauty, mystery, inspiration, study, speculation, obsession, and ridicule. Her image has been appropriated and forged. She's been stolen, hoarded, and attacked—literally, by deranged assailants who threw acid, rocks and teacups at her. About six million people view the Mona Lisa annually, each for about 10 to 15 seconds. Her estimated value exceeds \$700 million.

Prior to 1979, like many people, I had seen her image in art books, posters and prints. To me, she presented a harmonious image of someone with sparse eyebrows, a high forehead, and perhaps an enigmatic smile, but only because I read that somewhere. She seemed admirable but not inspiring; she didn't touch me. In 1979 I went to the Louvre and got in line to see her. To the best of my knowledge this must have been after a recent attack on the painting and before her current protective display case had been built.

She was in a temporary wooden enclosure about 7 feet tall by perhaps 4 feet wide and several feet deep. There was a small glass window through which one could see the painting. We filed slowly up to the window to see her. The closer we got to the enclosure the more we could a sulfurous odor became apparent. We were told the enclosure provided an environment that helped preserve the painting, but not one's sense of smell. Needless to say, most observers stood in front of the viewing window less than 10 seconds.

From within a pressing crowd of onlookers, I saw her, deep in her protective cave, surrounded by that smelly fog. And I was stunned. There was so much more to the Mona Lisa than all the writing about her, all the reproductions of her, all the documentaries, so much more than her mega-million dollar worth. In spite of all the obstacles encountered, the protective shield—the box, the crowd, the smell, even my preconceptions—when she was in the flesh, she hit me in the heart. She took my breath away—and gave it back. I was so very grateful for that numinous moment.

I told this story to a gifted art history teacher. He told me that before his students enter museum galleries, he sends them to the museum gift shops. He gives an assignment to find

and buy a postcard of a painting that they like. Then he sets them off on a hunt to engage with the actual art in the galleries. He reported that students were startled by the differences between the actual art and the reproductions: size, color, texture, but also their immediate experience with the artwork. They clearly realized that the actual artwork was so much bigger, more real and impactful than its reproduction. The luminosity of the real vs. the approximation of the reproduced was readily apparent to them.

At this juncture I could digress into a consideration of the value of the real over the reproduced, the actual over an abstraction of it. What is a real experience—the live performance or the video-mediated one, the live music concert or the recorded one? Is there a growing perception that the live and the mediated experience are one and the same?

Does a review of work, a press release about it, or its chronicle in a dossier represent an adequate substitute for the real experience of art in any form? For that matter is a text message or a Skype call the same as a face to face/body to body message? What is lost or what is gained in this exchange of the “real” for these approximations?

While these questions are beyond the scope of my talk, there is a related bit of turf on which we as dance educators operate.

More and more frequently we are called on by administrators or boards to translate what we do into language and contexts that consider its value in terms of ledger sheets tracking impact, expenditure and revenue generation. We produce reports and representations of what we do that have little to do with what is at its heart—dancing, choreographing, and teaching and guiding emerging artists along that path. We do this to fulfill an assessment imperative, to facilitate comparisons and serve the goals of others, not to represent who we are on our own terms.

We are called on to represent the work we do in a different language from the primary language we speak—the language of the body and movement. But as dance executives we learn and speak a language associated with administrative duties in order to communicate the needs and goals of our programs and the accomplishments of our faculty, students and alumni. Perhaps all of us have had those moments when we recognize we are speaking the language of “Administrative-ese”.

We say things like: “Student learning outcomes are at the forefront of our work. We establish them within the context of our mission goals and objectives. They are assessed

regularly to determine efficacy and progress and to create a foundation for a transformational learning environment. We do this with a careful eye on the productivity and credit hour generation of our courses, to maintain the appropriate balance between revenue in and expenditures necessary to offer these courses.”

There’s nothing wrong with the ideas expressed in these statements. They are not novel nor are they deeply informative. But after 20 years as a dance executive, I recognize with some shock that I have moments of near fluency in this language—on occasion it falls trippingly from my tongue—even as I rebel against its privileged role. Perhaps this is what happens to those of us who have what my husband referred to—in a moment of crossword puzzle induced malapropism—as “long-est-gevity.”

There is another language in academia—the language of data and spreadsheets—“Data-speak.” Perhaps a dialect of “Administrative-ese,” “Data-speak” facilitates quantitative comparison. It offers the illusion of common elements between matters to allow the comparison of apples to oranges or peanuts to bear-cubs. One can just count how many there are of each item to make a comparison. This appears to give comfort and provide community to those who do not feel ready to engage in qualitative assessment or discussion. *Data-speak* has a foothold that is strong and secure. It cannot be avoided, nor should it be. To do so would be at our peril. But it is not within my powers to represent it effectively here as I am not a native speaker and have limited aspirations toward fluency in the dialect.

Nevertheless, we are required to represent our field to those who live so far outside it that they have little or no access to it. And we are obliged to find ways to bridge the gap for them. You may find yourself between a dean or other leader on the one hand who is so fluent in data-speak thinking processes that there is no way the actual art can carry as much cache, drive or value as the information assembled to represent it. On the other hand you could find yourself working with individuals who cannot entertain there is any merit in representing our work in a form that allows access to those outside the field, but alters its fundamental nature.

But I have come to recognize that the language of Administrative-ese is like the wooden box and sulfurous cloud surrounding the Mona Lisa. It is a kind of barrier that protects what is truly of value: the immediate bodily experience of moving—seeing and sensing motion—its often messy, unruly expression of self, and its capacity to truly transform individuals, environment and occasion, to capture the ephemeral, to create art.

Administrative-ese and Data-speak are neither evocative nor poetic but they provide a means to participate in current discourse regarding what has value. Even so, these languages epitomize the distance between what we do for our programs and what we do in them.

We bridge this distance regularly, one foot grounded in the immediate experience of dance, the other in the disembodied territory of academia. As the academy swings deeper into its identity as big business enterprise, the distance between our two footholds widens and we find ourselves perilously close to the limits of our range of motion—at the edge of flexibility, in a “split” if you will between these two points. On the upside, dance leaders have the capacity to provide a bridge or connection between them. On the down side we are challenged to become ever more nimble, flexible, fluent and adaptable.

Some of us may traverse the distance with great facility and effectively link these two very different worlds. Others may experience a momentary disorientation over the chasm below, a nagging suspicion that something of value has been left behind. And some are struck with the blinding recognition of the distance traveled too far from the reason the journey was taken. With luck, fortitude and the support of others we breathe, re-center, find our bearings and move on.

This is the ever-present issue we face. How do we navigate the distance we experience between representing what we do to others and the reason we do the work we do. We find our voice—one that allows us to balance the languages we are obliged to learn with the native language that reflects the values we hold dear.

NASD does this through the standards its members create. NASD affirms the value and necessity of self governed and volunteer-based accreditation. This is the difference between what Sam Hope called “assessment-ism” and accreditation. Assessment-ism occurs on someone else’s turf for the purpose of making comparisons and meeting a political agenda. On the other hand, arts accreditation is a process regulated by the membership who set standards, and participate as volunteers in reviews that address issues of quality and effectiveness in performance and classrooms.

NASD strengthens our voice, in numbers, yes, but also because it allows us to articulate what we believe is important and provides the foothold from which to represent our values, on our terms, to multiple and diverse audiences. It is vigilant on our behalf, reviewing and considering consequences, intended or otherwise, of governmental policies. It extends our reach and impact through alliances with other specialized accreditation agencies. It gives

our voice resonance and reach and in so doing it creates an invaluable network of support for Dance and the arts.

NASD provides dance with a protective barrier and articulate voice that translates and represents issues of quality, value, and salience. Lest you think the comparison I make here is between NASD and a malodorous fog, I should remind you that the Mona Lisa currently resides behind a transparent protective shield—unscented—and elegant in its simplicity and function—nothing like what I encountered in 1979. The Mona Lisa’s current housing balances the dual need to provide protection and afford access. What protects the art allows it to connect to the public. As it protects, it insures the potential for the viewer to experience the immediate shot to the heart, the breathless moment that art can bring us.

NASD provides a protective field surrounding the art of what we do and affords a form of access for the number crunchers and bean counters. That access frees us to do engage in the art of dance.

Gladys Bailin choreographed a solo with text in which she said, “Dance is communication...but in case of an emergency, use the telephone.”

NASD is the telephone. Use it.