

September 24, 2007

BALLET NOUVEAU COLORADO "LAUNCHES 21ST CENTURY CHOREOGRAPHY COMPETITION"

Ballet Nouveau Colorado (BNC) launched the 21st Century Choreography Competition at the beginning of September.



This competition consists of contemporary ballet choreographers submitting a sample of their work to YouTube - here's the [BNC channel](#) - viewers then have an opportunity to vote for their favorite works, 3 finalists are selected to create their work for BNC during residencies next year with the company, a behind-the-scenes making of a dance video and blog are produced, and performances take place of the 3 works with panelists of guest judges selecting their favorites.

In essence, Ballet Nouveau Colorado is embracing popular formats from reality-based TV shows, popular TV dance programs and web-based participatory contests.

The Denver Post has an article about this new competition, "[Ballet Nouveau will let viewers vote](#)" [via [ArtsJournal](#)] in which John Wenzel writes that this competition is a

...YouTube-driven, "American Idol"-style contest that has the potential to make modern dance relevant to vast new audiences...it's about making dance appealing to the Web 2.0 generation.

Wenzel quotes Dawn Fay, the BNC's new associate artistic director:

We definitely think of this as a national program, because it's on YouTube and the entire population can log in...You can vote and have some real input. Why not become as intrigued by dance as you are by Paris Hilton videos?

And Executive Director Lissy Garrison is quoted as well:

We want to change the way the world feels about ballet and keep it alive in the 21st century.

On Second Thought...

I've written extensively about the emerging participatory culture of the Internet, the benefits of giving viewers an opportunity to cast their votes and have a real voice, and other such praise for the wonders of empowering the masses.

Well, on second thought, I went somewhat overboard in my enthusiasm for the collaborative, interactive, level-the-playing-field possibilities of the digital realm.

Realistically, how on earth can I play a worthwhile role in helping select which choreographers have the best work? Bring originality and talent to their creations? And I've seen contemporary ballet.

But now we have a competition from BNC where the goal is to reach new audiences for contemporary ballet and all of a sudden these new fans with no knowledge of concert dance are going to start voting for their favorite choreographers? They're going to start playing an important role in the curatorial process? This does not make sense.

On top of that, the quality of the videos [uploaded to YouTube](#) - there are 3 currently - aren't very good. Why not at least use a service like [Blip.tv](#) where you can upload higher quality videos that you can actually enjoy watching?

But most important, if the goal is to spread the wonders of ballet to new audiences, isn't some education needed? Shouldn't the BNC website provide some context and insight about the nature of contemporary ballet? How should one react to it? How should new viewers think about performances? Music? Dancers? and Structure? The idea here seems to be to make ballet relevant to "web 2.0" audiences by using the tools of the trade (e.g., voting, posting videos, MySpace pages) instead of asking some fundamental questions about the art itself and how new audiences might experience it.

I'm not writing-off such a participatory program. But I don't believe that you can just embrace the YouTube/reality-TV formats and instantly bring great art to wider audiences. It just doesn't work that way.

Posted by Doug Fox on September 24, 2007 8:13 AM

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4 Comments

Matt said:

Doug, Great questions. It's interesting, the education question. I've deleted my comments twice now and I feel that I will have to comment in length on the Dance Exchange blog. In general, I believe that to survive is to adapt, and adaptation takes time and doesn't always work in its first iteration. So, your questions are the next step.

Added: September 24, 2007 11:30 AM | [Permalink](#)

Boris Willis said:

I agree with Matt that things do not always work the first time. In the digital age we have the opportunity to try and fail on a national and international level. If it works good for us, if not there is the way we have always done things to go back to. I think it is great that they are doing this it gives exposure to a lot of choreographers who would otherwise not get it because of the competitive nature of things to which the general public can relate. It is an opportunity to educate if they take it. I have many educational videos on the abandonedrevolution.com site but are people really interested in them. I don't know. blip.tv rocks, so much better than youtube.

Added: September 24, 2007 2:35 PM | [Permalink](#)

Doug Fox said:

Thanks for comments, Matt and Boris.

I would like to amend my post a bit - First, I agree with Boris. It is great that BNC has introduced their program.

Second, I was clearly, I hope, criticizing myself for my overly rosy embrace of the wonders of participatory culture in my past blog posts. I think after reflecting on these trends and seeing different experimentations and implementations over the past two years, we all have a better idea of what might and might not work. But we constantly have to experiment and adapt as Matt writes.

Added: September 24, 2007 3:04 PM | [Permalink](#)

Matt said:

“Doug, "rosy embrace" coming in loud and clear. However, (and this is one of the wonders of the cloud) you're already educating. Just by posing the questions, you're challenging what you thought. So lets say I wanted to start a contest with the video we just posted. "YEEEESSS!!!! Online community engagement!!!!; From your questions I would know to ask people to be "educated" before casting votes. I would make sure there were links to pertinent (what I believe is pertinent) information linked to the contest and maybe enlist a series of checkpoints along

that information so that I know that people that vote have taken the time to invest in their own opinion. Maybe this is the wrong way to go about it, but it is another idea to investigate.

This information could be performers bios, an explanation of how the project came to be. Information on the lineage of that particular dance type. And even, what I find that a lot of audiences are missing is general audience edict.

Well, now, I'm thinking you don't have such a rosy view after all. And maybe a rosy view isn't a bad thing. The field could use a rosy view! As long as people are asking questions. Really enjoying this post. Keep 'em coming!

Boris,

It seems that the competition that is so inherent in dance maybe the cause for the publics view, (or the lack there of) of dance. I've seen great online, supportive, critical, enquiring, robust, educating communities. There are thousands. I'm wondering why this hasn't caught on in the studios yet? I think as dancers a little team work would go a long way as we find ourselves in the infancy of prolonging and updating our art form. I agree with you, if they want it the education is there. However, I know I'm not always ready to be educated when its handed to me. What's a guy to do? Great to read the comment.

Added: September 25, 2007 8:23 AM | [Permalink](#)

<http://greatdance.com/danceblog/archives/performance/001704.php>