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# Rallying for Change

The past, present and future of the status of the independent dance artist in Canada

BY MOLLY JOHNSON



Patricia Fraser / Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann, courtesy of Dance Collection Danse  
Thomas L. Colford / Photo by Alvin Collantes



Understanding the status of the independent dance artist in Canada today begins with understanding the status of artists more broadly. In 1980, UNESCO put forth a Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist to all member states. This document made two primary recommendations: the first, that the important role artists play in every human society should be acknowledged, and the second, that government legislation and programs should encourage creative expression and ensure equitable treatment for artists by responding to the atypical manner in which they work. Following the UNESCO Recommendation, Canada began a series of consultations on the subject, which resulted in the Status of the Artist Act, enacted in 1992.

The Act was written with the best of intentions: it officially recognized the importance of artists to Canadian society and paved the way for collective bargaining, meaning that artists would have the ability to negotiate standard and enforceable contracts and provisions as a collective body thus taking the onus off of the individual. It was an important step forward, because according to census data and studies on the cultural labour force, while artists are highly educated, their earnings are low compared to other professionals, and most do not have access to the social benefits generally enjoyed by other Canadian workers. But for such a significant piece of legislation, we don't hear a lot about it. "Our country has said, 'Yes, it is important that we have this,'" says Lesley Bramhill of the Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists, Ontario Chapter (CADA-ON).



**This page:** Carolyn Woods, Julia Sasso, Scott Buffett, Philip Drube, Marie-Josée Chartier, Bruce Mitchell and Cathy Kyle Fenton in Bill James's *Atlas Moves Watching* / Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann, courtesy of Dance Collection Danse  
**Opposite page:** Thomas L. Colford / Photo by E. S. Cheah

“[But] as far as I know, there’s never been a dancer who’s benefited from the Status of the Artist Act.” Bramhill explains why: “Only federal arts organizations, such as the National Arts Centre, fall under its jurisdiction, and as an artist you need to be represented by a federally certified association (like the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association) to go to the bargaining table.” But even if you meet these criteria, it’s still not straightforward. The most recent case of artists employing the Act was that of visual artists attempting to set minimum fees with the National Gallery of Canada. They finally ratified an agreement in 2015 – after a ten-year legal battle and a trip to the Supreme Court. Though the landmark case set a precedent for the legality of the Act, as it stands at the moment, it is still unlikely to benefit the majority of dance artists working in Canada. On a provincial scale, the picture is also quite bleak. Though Ontario and Saskatchewan have both enacted acts on the status of the artist, and other provinces have made moves to do the same, none but Québec (see sidebar) provide adequate provisions to address the particular needs of the independent artist.

There is, however, a notable link between the Status of the Artist and the dance field. The Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists was founded in 1986 as a direct result of the UNESCO Recommendation and the ensuing Canadian consultations. Founding member Patricia Fraser gives Joysanne Sidimus the

credit for getting Fraser and fellow founders Marie-Josée Chartier and Maxine Heppner together in one room. Sidimus, a ballet dancer who also founded the Dancer Transition Resource Centre, was working on the Status of the Artist legislation and recognized that there was no group that spoke for dancers. “Joysanne was very instrumental in persuading us that we needed some kind of national voice. I think she literally just picked up the phone and said, ‘You need to be at this meeting.’ She kind of declared us all charter members of this new organization and then left. And we looked at each other and said, ‘Okay, now what do we do?’”

What they did was become a voice for dance on a national level. This was representation that the independent dance community was in particular need of, working as they did without the employment protections of a company job or the ability to join Actors’ Equity (not open to independent artists or producers at that time). Looking at the specific needs of the field, the trio wrote policy, hammering out structures and standards where none had existed before – including using the term “dance artist” as a way to represent to the government the diverse roles found within the field. Inch by inch, they built a list of minimum pay rates and conditions and began distributing info sheets to their fellow artists and to the councils to be included with grant applications. “The biggest part of our work was really to educate dance artists,” recounts Chartier, “about working conditions,



budgets, breaks, speaking up if it was too cold in the room. It seems obvious now, but it was baby steps at the time.” Says Fraser: “[We did it] because it was important, we had support, we had an impetus, we wanted to help ourselves and other people and it was time – it was past time. And I think it helped individuals and the field to grow up a little bit,” she says contemplatively. “Because that ‘I’ll do it for love’ or ‘If I don’t do it someone else will take the job’ ... it’s very infantilizing. We just remain children in the hierarchy. We always talk about dance being the poor sister of the arts and it’s kind of true. It’s partly bred in the bone.” Together Chartier, Fraser and Heppner rallied for a voice for dance artists, and in doing so altered the landscape for those who followed. Chartier feels a sense of pride when she considers what they accomplished. “The first time I sat on a granting jury and realized our work had had some concrete results, I was almost moved to tears. It is not over though,” she acknowledges. “The education has to be ongoing with every new generation of dancers.”

Now in its thirtieth year, CADA remains an organization devoted to education and advocacy. The organization has two chapters – one in Ontario and one in British Columbia – and its members span the country. It is not an enforcing body; rather, it places the importance on providing the dance artist with the tools they need to successfully advocate for themselves. While most members would agree that CADA does good work, there



## Québec: A World Leader on the Status of the Artist

In 1987, while the federal government was conducting community consultations, and the Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists was finding its feet, Québec became the first jurisdiction globally to implement special legislation on the Status of the Artist. By introducing the broadest range of measures that address explicitly the particular circumstances of individual artists (including collective bargaining, limited income averaging and workers’ compensation), it has become the world leader with respect to improving the socio-economic situation of its artists and implementation of the provisions of the UNESCO Recommendation. Dance artists have representation through both Regroupement québécois de la danse (RQD), founded in 1984 as a common voice for Québec dance artists, and the Union des Artistes (UDA), a performing arts union for actors, singers, on-air presenters and dancers. Though there remains room for growth, consultations around the legislation are active, and improvements continue to be made.



Kate Franklin in *Gotta Go Church* by Valerie Calam/Company Vice Versa / Photo by Jeremy Mimmagh

have been questions about whether it is realistic to expect self-advocacy. Fraser explains: “There’s a lengthy history that doesn’t give dancers the underpinnings to stand up for ourselves: the way that we train, the way that we teach, the way that we stand in front of a mirror and criticize ourselves. We have incredible self-discipline and so, more often than not, just suck it up.” Thomas L. Colford, an emerging dance artist and the organizer of the recent *Interpose* symposium in Toronto, goes further: “I think it’s something humans have trouble with. Any time you’re asking for something, you’re vulnerable to rejection – that can be terrifying,” he says. “And dancers are often told that what they do is not a real job, and they absorb that. Even if that’s not what they believe, it becomes a voice in the back of their heads saying, ‘I’m doing what I love; who am I to ask for more money?’”

It can be difficult to think of oneself as a business when your work is your passion and your product is based in the ephemeral. But CADA’s Bramhill insists that’s exactly what dance artists need to do. “We’re all cultural entrepreneurs,” she says. “And as a dancer, you have a responsibility to say, ‘These are my rates,’ as

any other worker in any other job would do.” Bramhill maintains that “The more dancers that step up and speak up, the more that all of us as a whole can make the industry better.” She has a point, as Colford helped prove in recent months. He organized *Interpose* not so much for himself but to help other commercial dance artists gain access to information he felt wasn’t readily available to them. His desire to empower others and help raise the industry standard made him the face of the dancers’ rights seminar, a position some would find challenging. “I felt nervous about it,” he admits. “It’s a big statement to make, to put yourself out in front of that. One person actually tried to warn me not to do it, saying ‘People are going to stop hiring you; they’ll think you’re a troublemaker, etc.’ But all I was trying to say was ‘Treat people honestly and professionally.’”

The issue of treatment is as important as that of pay. “Creating respectful work environments is not only about money,” says Vancouver-based dance artist Kate Franklin. “It’s about respecting each other’s time, respecting each other’s contributions and being clear about expectations.” Dancers in particular bear the

brunt of small erosions to their work environment: rehearsals not ending when they should, breaks being forgotten, not enough warm-up time being given. Small grievances can add up, taking a toll on artists who are forced to either grin and bear it or to police their employment situation themselves. There are significant issues as well: increasingly collaborative creative processes that undervalue or fail to credit dancers' contributions, and widespread job insecurity, often worse for women in what is sometimes a gendered pecking order. With a constant barrage of stressors to navigate, a dancers' self-worth is easily diminished, and along with it their ability to fight. "I have had someone close to me tell me casually that I wouldn't understand what it was like to have a stressful job," says Franklin. "I am an underemployed contemporary dance artist. I am in what might be called survival mode much of the time. Advocating for myself sometimes feels too exhausting."

Intentionally or not, some continue to take advantage of the difficulties dancers face in negotiating fair contracts, or in their reluctance to make complaints about inadequate treatment. "If you've danced for more than five years, you've definitely gotten screwed at least once, if not more," says seasoned bboy and arts administrator Jon Drops Reid. "And usually life goes on. But when someone doesn't pay you the two hundred dollars you need for rent, or that you were counting on to get you to the next gig you have lined up, that's an incredible weight on the back of the independent artist. There's no room for chasing after people to get paid."

Reid's own experiences of feeling undervalued and overexposed in dance are what led him to his current role as the dance outreach consultant for Canadian Actors' Equity Association. He's of the mind that dancers deserve to work safely and soundly, and they just can't do that without actual guarantees. In terms of income and of collective bargaining strength, "The dance community is one of the most underserved communities in the arts – period," explains Reid. "And one of the most vulnerable. Most contracts don't include insurance. And so if you get hurt, you're either out of luck or you just dance through it." It makes sense, but the idea of unionizing to allow for guarantees of insurance and income continues to be met with resistance by some. "I've heard different voices in the community saying we can't afford to unionize," says Reid. "Which, as an artist, begs the question, 'Can the industry not afford to pay me appropriately? Can it not afford to make sure I'm covered when I'm doing professional work?' I would say we can't afford not to. I would say we can't keep asking artists to subsidize the costs of a production with their own health and well-being."



Independent dance artist Viv Moore in *Fierce Girls* / Photo by Dahlia Katz

This is not the first time the idea of unionizing through Equity has arisen for the dance community. There has been a courtship between the organizations since the early days of CADA. Recalls Chartier: "Maxine [Heppner] and I sat in meetings over a period of three years to negotiate with Equity to try to create a place for CADA within the administrative structure of Equity." Heppner and Chartier were ultimately unsuccessful. They felt at the time that they could not commit CADA to a partnership due to clauses for insurance and prepaid bonds upon which Equity insisted. Presently there are other factors that keep dance artists from joining the union: rates are often determined by house size, and limits on workable hours per week are set with the less physical work of actors in mind. Standard Equity contracts therefore don't account for all the ways in which dance artists work. Reid has been hard at work fighting to restructure policy and protocol to meet the needs of the field. He's clear that his position remains that of outreach and not recruitment. "My role is to make visible the issues in the



**You have a responsibility to say, 'These are my rates,' as any other worker in any other job would do**

~ Leslie Bramhill, CADA-ON



CADA-ON member and independent dance artist Jasmyrn Fyffe / Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann

community,” he asserts, “and I do feel it’s time to give dancers the support they need. I feel like we’re all scattered in our own little worlds, doing forty million projects, peering out from time to time. It’s so rare to find that seed that brings everyone together. And I think the key seed is collectively advocating for issues that matter to dance artists.”

Togetherness has been a struggle for a community that spans from coast to coast to coast. Unionizing may or may not be the way forward, but providing a united front needs to be. If as artists we do not feel recognized by society, if we do not feel creatively supported or equitably treated as measured against other working professionals, what does that say about the status of artists in Canada? It says that the conditions of the lives we are living are in need of our attention. There are ways in which our governments could better support us, and there are ways in which we might better benefit from the organizations and unions that help embolden artists in their craft. But the

wheels of bureaucracy move slowly. Today, right now, we as a community could do better by teaching young dancers that they do have a voice and it is crucial that they use it, by supporting each other when we do speak up and by not putting one another in situations we ourselves would not want to be in. Because the truth is that in dance, to treat one another with anything less than respect is shameful. In dance, we don’t inherit power; we rise up through the ranks. We know what it’s like to be in the other person’s shoes. If we wish to improve our status, it starts with us. We can’t command respect if we don’t respect each other. We can’t command respect if we sit back and stay silent. Respect is movement; respect is understanding; respect is joining forces and supporting one another in an effort to grow. ■

## Sommaire

En 1980, l’UNESCO émet une recommandation relative au statut de l’artiste qui encourage les états membres à reconnaître le rôle important des artistes dans la société, et à créer des lois et des programmes pour soutenir et encourager les artistes, étant donné leurs méthodes et processus de travail atypiques. La recommandation a des conséquences importantes pour le statut actuel des artistes de danse au Canada, même si, dans la majorité des juridictions, les objectifs de la recommandation n’ont pas été atteints. Molly Johnson enquête sur la mobilisation des danseurs quant à leurs droits comme travailleurs artistiques au cours des trois dernières décennies, y compris la fondation de la Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists, organisme qui représente les artistes de danse depuis 1986. Récemment, la nécessité d’une organisation collective accrue se manifeste, ainsi qu’une résistance aux danseurs qui exigent des conditions de pratiques adéquates. La faible rémunération et les déséquilibres hiérarchiques continuent à nuire aux danseurs, qui peinent à vivre de leur art. Johnson enjoint les danseurs à reconnaître que les changements et le respect doivent émerger, dans un premier temps, des danseurs mêmes



## Advocating for myself sometimes feels too exhausting

~ Kate Franklin, independent artist



# The Status of Artists

*The Dance Current* asked dance artists about their employment experiences:

What do they need?  
How do they view the current status of artists in Canada?



## Anisa Tejpar

**Dance is the only art form where success does not equal money.** If you are a world-renowned cellist, or visual artist, actor, you are paid handsomely to perform and work. Dance is the only one where you can be at the top of your game and still unable to pay rent or own your own house. I do a lot of TV work and fashion work. There are times that three or four days on set will pay me the same as an entire dance process with performances. I need that supplemental work to have dance as a part of my life. Otherwise, I probably would have left the game a long time ago.

## Tyler Gledhill

It would be great if everyone could afford to follow industry standards, but it comes down to needing to do whatever you need to do to get by. Working for a sad honorarium is better than standing by your principles by sitting at home and making nothing. We can't help but perpetuate the cycle sometimes. **It seems that directors and choreographers who are planning these projects could put an end to this.** If they don't have enough money, they probably shouldn't be putting on a show and asking their collaborators to work for less. I have so much respect for those who don't receive their grants but decide to bust their asses working catering shifts just so they can pay their dancers enough.

## Shakeil Rollock

Emotional and mental support is key to keep me motivated. I've been lucky to have the opportunities I've been given, but at times doing a lot can take its toll. I have had a few situations where verbal agreements have changed without my consent and, since I was already locked into the project, it was hard to make things work. I ended up finishing the project but learned **it's sometimes not wise to jump the gun without sorting out logistics first.** I've learned that as an emerging artist you need to speak up when things are not clear. There's no such thing as being too specific.

## Nova Bhattacharya

There are many unique issues and challenges in different cultural communities, and yet the base issue is remarkably similar. Paying dancers well strengthens the art form. It fills me with great pride and pleasure to pay dancers well, above minimum rates, for warm-up/training time, and teachers for prep time. And yet, I know that I am not paying myself adequately for the work that I do to run my own company. **I regularly push funding bodies to acknowledge artists as specialists in the field and pay them as much for their brain time as one is expected to pay consultants.** I am in a place of privilege right now; my partner's income carries the bulk of our living expenses. It covers up for the fact that my own income from my well-established mid-career position is under the Stats Canada low income cut-off line.

## Justine A. Chambers

Historically there has been more public funding available for those who become a not-for-profit organization. This places the work of the independent choreographer in a diminished position in relation to those who work through the bureaucratic process of incorporating. **Somehow, the independent choreographer is rendered less legitimate.** This assumes that independents are not in need of the same support/development of infrastructure as those who become 'organizations.' The assumption that becoming an organization is the 'next logical step' for an upwardly mobile choreographer is an imposition upon the values/desires and possibly even ethics of this person. The idea that becoming an organization is a sign of success is problematic – leaving this 'success' to be determined by someone other than the artists themselves.

## Viv Moore

I've been working the past year through my agent, who has negotiated every detail according to union rates for TV stuff. So payment to me at that level has felt like I've been taken care of and guided. I guess it feels easy when the negotiations are one person removed, but **invariably when I'm doing the negotiating, I undervalue myself.** It feels solid for me to have a starting point, whereas when I was emerging, there wasn't really a lot in place. For emerging artists now, they at least have a starting place. I know there are still those out there who want many hours for very little. For a young soul who really wants the job, it's a hard thing to do to stick to your guns.

## Michael Caldwell

What do artists need? I can't answer this question with any kind of authority or clarity .... I do know that artists must continue to make their art and talk about it. I really believe that this is the best advocacy ... **people need to know that we exist, that we are engaging with societal issues and concerns and that we work professionally.** To find common ground brings people into commune and advances the idea that we are all part of a community.

## Kate Franklin

As a young female dancer, it is hard to emerge from your professional training and early career with your self-esteem intact. Unlike men in our profession, I was not told that I was special or different. **My training told me that I was replaceable and I should be happy with whatever job I could get.** Asking for better conditions was not part of the way I was taught to think. The only way we could get what we wanted (we were told) was to work harder. I struggled very hard, and I still struggle, and that's what I was told was going to happen. And fair enough. The fact that I could go to ballet school and have a career as a dancer is because I come from a family with a certain amount of financial means. I took a risk because I could. But I have always had to support my dance career with other jobs. Always. Babysitting, bagging and tagging bodysuits, cleaning a woodwinds repair shop, ushering, telemarketing, dog-walking and now, thankfully, teaching yoga and Pilates. I still babysit and work at the dancewear factory too. I have always felt a bit like a second-rate artist because of this. I hate that I feel that way. I remember finding out as a young dancer that one of my older dance heroes worked in a bookstore. I couldn't believe it. When I got old, wasn't I going to be able to do this full-time?



## Rhonda Baker

I recognize and have respect for the amount of work that goes into running an organization, company, school, studio. However, I feel there can be a misunderstanding around how much preparation occurs before a dancer, teacher, choreographer, etc., steps into a studio. Especially in the case of artists who are not on salary, there is no quantifiable supplement that will ever be compensatory for that. **There would be no greater repayment than one that indemnifies the work of the dance artist through a collaborative transparency of intent.**

## Aria Evans

It is hard when you work for and with your friends – things slip. There is always that looming 'small community' feeling where you don't want to be difficult because news spreads fast. I have my values and I have been in enough negative creative spaces to know how I want my collaborators to feel, **but it is a constant struggle moving between friendly and professional.**



## Jasmyrn Fyffe

I realize that I need money to live and survive. But I also need to be grounded and fulfilled. Finding this balance is tricky. **I don't want to hustle fifty different jobs and run around like a headless chicken anymore.** I want to place priority on partaking in projects that are fulfilling and enjoyable. But when do I have time to put things in order with the business side of things that will help me to do what I want more and more? If I had admin/manager support, I feel I would be able to have a more consistently successful career doing all that I want to do. But where is the money to get such support? I have had friends help me over the years, but I need consistency to get to the next level. I am generally just more interested in how to make my practice more effective in terms of energy and time.

## Tina Fushell

I need health benefits that are affordable and more presenting platforms that actually pay the artists a respectful fee.



## Nicolas Patry

I've been working as a professional dancer for eight years. I've never negotiated a contract! I've never thought that I could get better work concessions because mostly what I hear from employers is that they don't have enough money for their production. **I guess I am usually scared that if I ask for a better salary they would say, 'Well okay, I'll ask someone else who could do the same thing for less money.'** For me, being an independent artist always puts me in the unknown: Will I work for this choreographer again? Am I part of the permanent team? I have to find arguments to prove that I'm worth a raise. One problem is I don't know the salary of other dancers. We never talk about salary. For me it feels weird not knowing that, not knowing where should I stand in comparison to others in my field of expertise.