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DANCER VOICES

What Are the Implications of Offering Free Dance Online?



Barry Kerollis



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From mid-March into early April, dance communities around the world experienced a seismic shift as performance seasons were canceled, training programs were suspended and physical contact outside one's home was mandated unsafe. As dancers, we are taught to problem solve in real-time, so it came as no surprise when streamed performances and classes began popping up almost immediately.

Dance Magazine

asked six voices from our national dance community to share their thoughts regarding the swift distribution of online content. What are the implications of sharing our art form for a fee versus free, especially during a time when dancers are struggling financially?

Peter Boal, artistic director, Pacific Northwest Ballet





PETER BOAL

Angela Sterling, Courtesy Pacific Northwest Ballet

"Our communications team has been hard at work keeping up PNB's presence [online](#). We recently announced the release of a series of performance and rehearsal videos we ha



gotten permission to share. PNB social has ramped up content, Zoom classes are everywhere, and individual dancer posts have been widespread. Creativity is thriving, just in a new format.

“Right now, most content is available to subscribers, ticket holders and donors, but we also have many offerings that are free. Our school is currently conducting 52 classes per week, for current students and paid open classes, and we hope to add more. The first week of the shutdown, I taught a free open class online where 400 people ‘attended.’ It has now leveled off to more normal numbers since we started charging \$11 per class.

“Every organization will need to find their way. Some may be encountering resistance from unions or artists. At some point, all organizations will need to figure out how best to reopen revenue streams in order to survive. Though we do need revenue (somewhat urgently), everyone is hurting, either financially, emotionally or both, and our primary purpose is to lift people up, offer perspective, beauty and inspiration.”

Celia Fushille, artistic director, Smuin Contemporary Ballet



CELIA FUSHILLE



Chris Hardy, Courtesy Smuin Contemporary Ballet

“Smuin Ballet had to cancel its annual gala with an anticipated revenue of \$500,000. At the very last minute, we turned it into a virtual gala and are pleased that our supporters came through with \$267,000 in revenue.

“We have also implemented free [Hump Day Ballets](#) where previously recorded works from our archives are available for 48 hours every Wednesday. These screenings allow us to stay in touch with our patrons and provide some relief and joy during this unprecedented time. All parties involved (choreographers, designers, union crew, theaters and music publishers) have worked with us to make these offerings possible. If we were benefitting financially from streaming, some of those groups might require compensation, and this would make streaming cost-prohibitive and likely impossible. I'm encouraged reading feedback that while people are enjoying our streamed videos, for most, it can't replace the experience of live performance.

“Our organization has also pivoted to offering classes through Zoom. At present, they are pay-what-you-can, and most people do contribute something. With a recent move into a new building, we were in the process of growing public classes. Zoom classes allow us to continue to introduce people to our offerings, as well as engage our patrons.”

Paul Michael Bloodgood, creative brand producer & licensing manager, Ballet Austin





PAUL MICHAEL BLOODGOOD



Holland Angel, Courtesy Paul Michael Bloodgood

“Given the fragile circumstances we are all experiencing, I don’t believe there’s a panacea that will suffice for each and every nonprofit regarding online content. While I value the significance of ensuring that art continues to be shared and spread, what are the long-term ramifications of offering that art for free? As an industry, we’re in truly unexplored territory. In the history of dance, there have never been so many companies and schools collectively focused on creating online content.

“Offering paid content online might become a part of every nonprofit’s future business model. Does it replace the experience of seeing a live performance? Absolutely not. People will return to the theater like they will return to live sports and concerts. As for offering free content, that’s a bridge that I believe should be crossed with caution, but could still be of enormous benefit. For example, an online performance could be underwritten by a sponsor, which ultimately translates to ‘free’ for the viewer. Creating sustainable business models where organizations can compensate the artists behind the art is one of the challenges our industry is facing.

“My concern for our dance industry lies in the online security of where they choose to offer their content. YouTube is the most popular site for consumer uploaded videos, but it is also one of the easiest to hack. You can always remove the video you’ve uploaded, but you’ll never know how many people might have illegally downloaded your intellectual property.”

Margaret Selby, president, Selby/Artists Mgmt





MARGARET SELBY

Michael Benabib, Courtesy Margaret Selby

“Our industry is based on the principle of experiencing performance live and in person, so we must acknowledge that technology can be both an incredible and dangerous tool. We need to strike a balance of maintaining connection with our artistic communities while still protecting the intellectual property rights of artists and the value of seeing it live.

“During this pandemic there is an opportunity for dance companies to create content that will educate audiences on the process of creation, getting to know individual dancers, artistic directors and freelance choreographers. A deeper dive into technique, costume design, lighting design, working with composers can give audiences an enticing purview into the creative process.

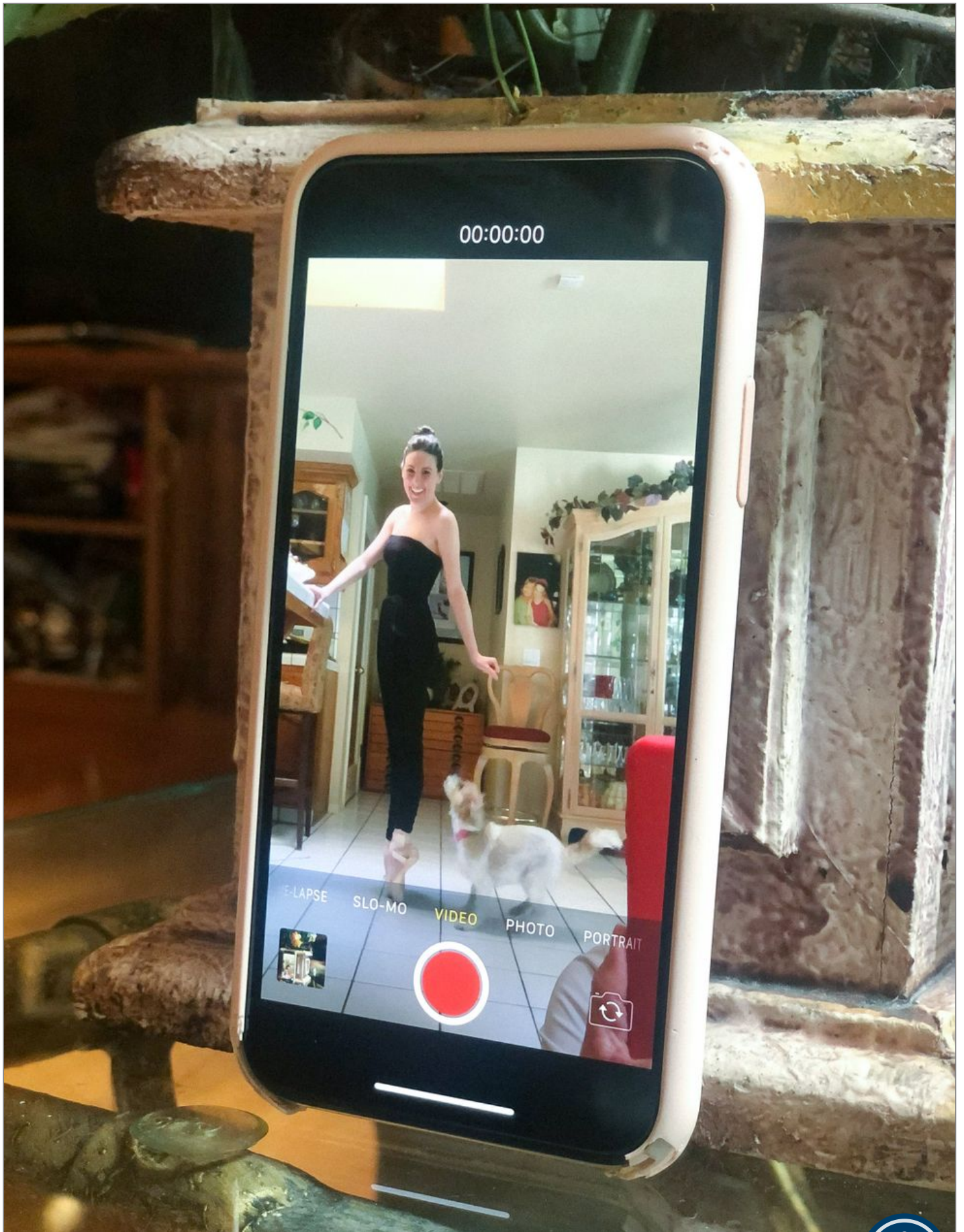
“Videos should incentivize audiences to buy tickets and return to theaters for the ultimate experience of seeing the narrative, motivation and artistic visions come to life onstage. There is too much free content of full stage performances on the internet. That is not beneficial



dancers or presenters who will need to sell tickets in the future. It is okay for audiences to miss full stage performances. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Tiler Peck, principal, New York City Ballet





TILER PECK TEACHING FROM HOME



Courtesy Tiler Peck

“At New York City Ballet, we almost immediately lost our spring season and a tour to Washington, DC. So, I decided to head home to Bakersfield, California, when the international travel ban was announced. Within days, the state of California shut down. Almost immediately, I started teaching free [classes on Instagram Live](#). Now, I teach an advanced level class almost daily.

“Teaching these ballet classes came about very organically for me. I was going to be giving myself class every day, so I thought I might as well let whomever wants to dance along with me join in. Instagram is the only social media platform I use regularly, so it made sense to stream from there. Between 1,000 and 15,000 dancers have taken my class daily (which remains live for 24 hours), and I have been asking dancers to hashtag #turnitoutwithtiler so I can offer corrections. I am grateful that New York City Ballet is still paying us for our spring season, so I’m able to do these classes out of love. It benefits me because it’s a way to stay in shape. It’s the one thing I look forward to every day.”

Denise Caston-Clark, founder and director, Tap Dance Detroit and Motor City Tap Fest





DENISE CASTON-CLARK PERFORMING WITH EDWARD TOLVE

Dori Sumter, Courtesy Denise Caston-Clark

“Right now, I am working on building a robust online business, which has been on my mind for the last year. The pandemic has been a catalyst. As Michigan began to shut down, I started offering [prerecorded tap classes](#) for all levels. Customers pay what they can for access. At first, there was a deluge of free classes online, which felt highly frustrating because ‘Why buy the cow...!’ I stood by my first instinct to charge for content because it takes time to craft each class.

“I record classes alone in my studio, edit them and upload footage to unlisted YouTube links. I like this format because it avoids delays and potential technical issues that happen with live classes. And dancers like that they can do the classes any time, rewind if they want to catch so



again and repeat classes as often as they'd like. I create new classes regularly for different levels and keep a spreadsheet of who gets what. Anyone who has paid previously receives new classes at their level as I continue to develop content.

"If a dancer wants a sampler platter of different artists, it can be fun to take free livestreams, but this doesn't always add up to quality training. Though, I don't think free classes have taken away from what I am offering. At the beginning of this shift, I felt like the odd one out for charging. But I no longer feel that way. I have my own point of view and approach, and there are people this will resonate with."

CELIA FUSHILLE

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DANCE ONLINE

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