



## On the Road Again

NPN's popular *Doin' It On the Road* workshops hit the highway again in April with two opportunities to attend this free workshop designed for touring artists, new or experienced.

On April 1, the workshop will be at The Light Box at Goldman Warehouse, hosted by Miami Light Project. To register, contact [rebekah@miamilightproject.com](mailto:rebekah@miamilightproject.com).

On April 9, a Washington, DC workshop will be offered at the Edgewood Arts Center hosted by Dance Place. To register, contact [sarahk@danceplace.org](mailto:sarahk@danceplace.org).

Both workshops are 4-6:30 p.m.



## Mentorship Grant: Two Views

Roya Amirsoleymani of Portland Institute for Contemporary Art and Marielle Allschwang of Alverno Presents agreed to engage in professional development together, thinking and talking about contemporary performance. The two attended the NPN Annual Meeting in New Orleans and Arts Presenters' annual conference in New York, seeing dozens of new performances and connecting over marketing ideas, educational activities and audience engagement. Their shared learning was supported by a grant from NPN's Mentorship & Leadership Initiative, funded in part by Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, American Express, MetLife and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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## Resilience: the Secret Ingredient

Elizabeth Doud has seen dozens of dance companies from all across the Southern hemisphere in her capacity as program coordinator for NPN's Performing Americas Project. A recent performance by Companhia Urbana de Dança from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, inspired the following reflection. The dance company is now touring the U.S with upcoming performances at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN (March 24-30); Dance Place in Washington, DC (March 31-April 6); and Carpetbag Theatre in Knoxville, TN (April 7-13).

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## One Perspective...

by Marielle E. Allschwang, Theatre Operations Assistant, Alverno Presents

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After a year and a half at Alverno Presents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my understanding of the performing arts world has already expanded considerably. The [Mentorship and Leadership Initiative \(MLI\)](#) award gave me the opportunity to further expand my knowledge of presenting and allowed me to meet with my peer mentor, Roya Amirsoleymani of PICA in Portland, who has proven to be an invaluable source of support and growth.

Active, experiential learning has undeniable efficacy over the more sedentary, spatially limited options available. This became increasingly clear to me during my travels to NPN, Arts Presenters and the various dance and theatre festivals surrounding them.

My job at Alverno Presents involves the frequent use of social media to develop and expand our audience. Digital media and electronic communication have powerful benefits for a presenting series, and while social media has never been a habit of mine, I appreciate it now and have fun with it on the job, doing my best to use it effectively. But in the end it is a communication tool — the real communication and the real experiences we aim to create are live. Our goal is, hopefully, to make an audience feel alive. Digital tools ultimately assist us in bringing people together in an environment that encourages the same live experiences and discussions that we pursue or are privileged to access. Tweets and posts can get people into the

theatre, but our ideal role is engaging that audience, drawing from our own experiences as spectators.

I was in on meetings with dance company managers, agents, artists and fellow presenters who clearly put a lot of creative energy and thoughtfulness into their work. It was inspiring to engage in conversation with presenters who work artfully to pull together complex, challenging, joyous and moving experiences the way a musician considers (maybe even agonizes over) the tone of a song and how their set list should progress.

One thing was clear to me throughout these encounters: presenters bear a responsibility to understand and balance various perspectives on value. How do we ascribe value to a project? What concrete number do we put on it? How can we make artists feel valued? How do we optimize the value we create for our own organization and local community through the presenting process?

I loved hearing about new modes of presentation, about how different generations have approached this field and its cultural and economic challenges, what disparate audiences have responded to, how we assign value to a work, the degree to which culture is or is not tied to community, how artists are compensated through our organizations and what new presenting practices are developing.

I returned to the Alverno Presents office only to find an inspiring essay by Michèle Steinwald ([Noticing the Feedback...](#)), whose name I recognized from encounters with her at NPN and Arts Presenters. This led me to other thought-provoking reads: the [Brooklyn Commune Project report](#) and [Alastair Macaulay](#) and [Andy Horwitz's](#) critiques of American Realness, helping me further evaluate my impressions from NPN and Arts Presenters.

I feel grateful to have Roya Amirsoleymani as my peer mentor. She has had more direct event organizing and presenting experience than I have, and ideologically, we seem to be on the same page in many respects. Roya's responsibility for [Field Guide](#) is and will be similar to the work I'm currently undertaking with Alverno Presents' [Solo Flight](#) panel and community outreach objectives. She has managed Field Guide for a few years in a row, and I am confident in approaching her with questions and challenges knowing that she

has relevant knowledge which comes from her recent experiences and can help me over a significant learning curve that I will surely face in the coming months. She will also attend Solo Flight in Milwaukee in April. I promise not to abuse her expertise.

Both the connections I made and the dialogues I took part in opened the door for my own engagement in problems and strategies that I hadn't even considered previously, mostly because they were outside my reach or radar. Interestingly, no one at NPN or Arts Presenters said, "Read this. Study this. Look up this artist" directly — I met individuals, exchanged personal experiences over dinner, saw more 2-minute video excerpts than I could keep up with and was a very attentive audience member for a week of performances I had never seen (I have my colleagues and cohorts to thank for such a well-'curated' trip), some of which altered my ideas about the arts and their potential effects entirely. From these impressions I have pursued, or even half happened-upon, a course of questions and interests that enrich my understanding of the arts, culture and community, and motivate me to be more mindful and confident about my actions as I develop my role in the field.

## ...and Another

by Roya Amirsoleymani, Community Engagement Manager, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art



As part of a 2014 NPN [Mentorship and Leadership Initiative \(MLI\)](#) award, Marielle Allschwang and I have been attending key field gatherings to strengthen our

understanding of live arts programming and its connections to audience and community engagement practices. Last spring, while Marielle was researching program models to advance some of Alverno Presents' engagement activities in connection with their new Solo Flight Festival (April 2014), she came across several of PICA's new public programs and audience engagement initiatives I've helped to design and implement in partnership with PICA's artistic staff. Sensing the similarities in our work, she approached me with the idea of collaboratively applying for an MLI grant. I was immediately curious about the possibility of receiving funding for a self-directed, co-learning experience with someone I'd never met.

After speaking by phone for the first time, we realized that our positions and points in our professional development run parallel: in our late 20's/early 30's, we are new to program teams at institutions presenting contemporary performance, working to develop and manage new public programs, audience engagement, and education methods never before pursued or provided by our respective organizations. As part of program staff, yet still removed from curatorial and artistic programming, we both desire more exposure to its overall life cycle — from research to presentation. Yet, we lack organizational and individual capacity to travel to sites most fruitful for this kind of on-the-ground, in-depth transmission — which is how the MLI grant has been most supportive.

We agreed that working remotely alongside each other, with the help of our existing mentors (Rory Trainer at Alverno and Erin Boberg Doughton at PICA), would enhance professional development outcomes and experience by permitting a generative exchange of skills, content, research, challenges, and new ideas as peers in the field. Thanks to the internet, we're able to stay in touch about our experiences and share resources as activities progress; and thanks to NPN, we've met twice in person with our mentors at core sites of learning and sharing — the 2013 NPN/VAN Annual Meeting in New Orleans and the January performance festivals in New York (COIL, Under the Radar, American Realness).

In reflecting on the NPN/VAN Annual

Meeting, Marielle and I both found the Idea Forum, Then *What? Taking a Long Look at What You're Doing* with artists Emily Bivens, Michael Premo, and Steve Lambert, to be most resonant. We were struck by the shift in field-wide culture marked by this discussion — that of arts administrators turning to, and directly adopting and adapting from, artists and their creative processes for engaging communities in meaningful ways. To hear artists talk about how they plan for public participation — from considerations of space to designs for post-project surveys — made us think not about artists as institutions (or the professionalization of artists), but about institutions more thoughtfully and intentionally looking to artistic process, particularly when charged with re-imagining or re-interpreting best practices and methods for designing and measuring programs with open-ended results, or those for which deep engagement matters more than numbers. This session was a reminder of an increasingly dynamic and reciprocal flow of knowledge, power, and practice between artists and institutions.

In discussing what feels most valuable in today's professional arts landscape, it is the notion of in-person connection to which we both continue to return. Concrete community experiences are at the heart of PICA's programs and our annual TBA Festival, as they are for Alverno's programming and most presenting organizations invested in live arts. Yet for arts managers, it seems rare these days for that kind of encounter to transcend email and web — especially for junior and mid-level staff, who often aren't able to travel, given nonprofit salaries and budgets. We typically don't see new work until our own organizations present it, limiting the benefit of an immediate and visceral experience of an artist or piece prior to developing public programs, outreach, or audience experiences in connection with it. We also go without much of the real-time networking, skills-sharing, idea generating, and social engagement afforded by both the formal and informal exchanges at the NPN/VAN Annual Meeting and some of the January festival activity, such as the Under the Radar Festival Symposium.

These occasional convergences of artists, presenters, curators, and programmers are

still the most direct means of accessing some of the most forward-thinking people and ideas in the national and international field in one room. In both New York and New Orleans, the MLI grant allowed us to see dozens of shows, familiarize ourselves with as many new artists, and connect with arts leaders and change-makers while shadowing our mentors and downloading together in the brief moments between packed schedules. Interactive dialogue, the chance to put faces to names, and the challenging and honest discussions that can only arise in person were highlights of both trips.

Our travels have also allowed us to witness the rigor of presenting and programming up close, encompassing conversations, questions, and phases of project development to which we aren't always privy in our day-to-day roles. With our mentors, we've been able to observe curators, programmers, and artists in conversation; better understand the finances, logistics, and innumerable steps involved in bringing a piece to a site, city, or festival; and recognize how each organization wrestles with both unique and common challenges relative to its mission, vision, identity, community, and resources. To gain a sense of other institutions' struggles and successes, and to be embedded in lived moments that merge not just organizations but individuals across such divides, has proven insightful and inspiring.

Most importantly, our MLI process is helping us to more clearly visualize the broader performing arts landscape and to place our organizations within it — culturally, aesthetically, programmatically, and operationally. As we continue piloting public programs and refining new engagement initiatives, we can draw on a wealth of expertise through expanded national networks, while more conscientiously considering the complexity of our communities.

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MetLife Foundation



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## The Ecology of a Dance Company

by Elizabeth Doud, Program Coordinator  
Performing Americas Program

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A performance ensemble is a living organism that responds to its environment as a matter of course, and hopefully adapts and evolves through time to stay vital and relevant. Just like most organisms in the biosphere, it's at risk for extinction at any moment. As a complex system of factors and disease affect its survival: not the least of which, in the arts, is funding, the world cultural market, and the essential raw materials in the form of creativity and physical fortitude of the directors and performers.

I was thinking about the biological analogy this week, because I just had the very good luck of spending five days with Companhia Urbana de Dança (CUD) in Miami — the first stop on this Brazilian dance company's eight-city U.S. tour — which is one of the touring projects of NPN's Performing Americas Program this year. The first half of the tour included stops at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; The Joyce Theatre, in New York, sponsored by 651 Arts, Brooklyn; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco; and Myrna Loy Center in Helena, MT.

Besides being impressed by the quality and singularity of CUD's work *again* (we met the company back in 2012, and have been in conversation with them since), I was struck by what it takes to sustain their special brand of beauty: the hard work and generosity over time, in very difficult circumstances, with an unreasonable amount of conviction and high levels of uncertainty. I always knew they were great, but in a world where great isn't a guarantee of endurance, what other ingredient is needed? What does this Brazilian hip-hop, contemporary Rio street-dance ensemble have that allows it to be — on its worst day — humble and stunning at the same time, in spite of the odds against its survival? How has this unsuspecting



Photo: Miguel Renato Mangolin

choreographer and company survived and thrived for almost a decade of marginalization and turmoil to shine in exacting truth like a funky, elegant and brazen hip-hop church hymn capable of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the ranks of the best, smiling and sweating from the heart, again and again?

Resilience.

This term is being used a lot now in the environmental movement to describe circumstances or species that will outlive the harsh and pitiless shifts of climate change. What will dictate who survives these cataclysmic modifications that are hard to predict and accelerated beyond our estimation? It's a thing that they call *resilience*, and it is what we think it means, and more: organisms and systems that have resilience bounce back from difficulties more easily and more intact. They are more elastic and not only survive, but evolve and thrive more readily because they have practiced biological grace in the face of unpredictability and environmental warfare.

I loved hearing Artistic Director and Choreographer Sonia Destri Lie's account of the company's journey (read her interview in Time Out New York here). She has taken a group of young people and created — with them collectively — a community of artists who know exactly who they are and what they are doing at every turn, while still being in a state of inquiry and growth. They are redefining the world *favela* in the psyche of Brazil and the world by making their dance and their daily work a political, as well as aesthetic, response to their environment. They are doing it with the physical poetry that our species is so good at. They are here to teach us a little bit about the international soul of hip-hop, and resilience, along the way.