

ENCORE

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FEATURE

An Outrageous Satire, A Plea for the Arts

Felice Lesser Dance Theater presents *Funding the Arts*

by Isabelle Bonney | Apr 19, 2010



Djassi DaCosta Johnson and Victor Oniel Gonzalez in "*Funding the Arts*" by Felice Lesser

The Felice Lesser Dance Theater will celebrate its 35th Anniversary with a spectacular convergence of animation and choreography in *Funding the Arts*. The world premiere of this spy-spoof combines humor and athleticism with technical innovation, featuring live dancers performing simultaneously with animation sequences. The plot follows a group of ex-C.I.A. agents who have taken dangerous measures to keep their beloved dance company afloat. But, upon returning to the United States, they are faced with the struggle of keeping a non-profit organization alive in economic times that prevent art from flourishing. Felice Lesser enlightened elements of the creative process of bringing this piece to fruition in an interview for *Encore*. In effectively utilizing resources, Lesser succeeded, "at a fraction of the cost, in creating the sensation of a Broadway musical."

How did you establish the concept of *Funding the Arts*? Was there a specific inspiration?

There were a few things — I had wanted to do a spy spoof. And I had also been in a number of choreography competitions and felt those experiences deserved some sort of comment. But the real inspiration was that I had always wanted to choreograph a Broadway show. But since no one was knocking at my door, I went ahead and did my own low cost version of one.

Describe the process of bringing it to fruition in terms of your position as writer, director, and choreographer?

This project is really the story of my attempt to find a way to bring the magic and spectacle of Broadway productions to the non-profit concert dance stage at a fraction of the cost. In my many years as a choreographer I longed to create large-scale, multi-media works, combining dance with theater, music, and art. Unfortunately this desire was for many years an unrealistic goal as my small NYC-based dance company simply lacked the financial resources. As I worked along in the early 1980s, the personal computer entered our landscape, and I started imagining the possibilities... Could it somehow provide a cast of thousands, when I only had a small ensemble of dancers? Could it be used to create sets, perhaps of real locations, when there was no money available for a set designer, crew, and materials? And what about choreography? Could the computer be used to extend the existing movement palette? But my questions were academic, for the early computers were too expensive for a company our size, struggling with the very basic issues of space, money, and too few performance opportunities. What I didn't realize then was that those obstacles were about to point me into new creative areas, which would profoundly affect my work, and eventually even let me find a way to reach my goals.

Unable to secure adequate funding for my company, I went off on my first detour in 1990. I started to write. Writing fulfilled my deepest need to create, but unlike choreography, was something I could do alone, without renting space, or hiring dancers. My real-life frustrations took form as a fictional play, *Running Backwards on the Treadmill*, about a choreographer trying against all odds to mount a dance concert. The second detour into technology — the place I had earlier dreamed of exploring, came a few years later. By the time the script of *Running Backwards* was finished, computers had come down in price, and finally having the opportunity to own one, I began looking for answers to my old questions. Could an independent choreographer/playwright create the equivalent of a Broadway show on a non-profit sized budget, using technology to compensate?" My professor at Barnard, the dance critic, Walter Sorell, once wrote, "The greatest artists of all times are able to reach us across many centuries only because — whatever their theme has been — they created it out of the spirit of their own time." It seemed natural to me that technology would become the "paint and canvas" of the coming twenty-first century, and I started using a computer to compensate for what I couldn't afford to buy, beginning with set design and animation. Life Forms software's dancing stick-figures were projected onto screens behind live dancers in performance, making it appear as if they and their live counterparts were dancing together, and giving the real dancers colorful backgrounds against which to move. In 1995 my company premiered *Running Backwards* with a cast of eight dancer/actors, supplemented by the animated Life Form figures performing as the "voices" in the choreographer's mind. (Jennifer Dunning of *The New York Times* wrote: "Ms. Lesser knows her dance world, and her ear for dialogue is acute. She also has a delicious sense of humor. And she makes fascinating use of computer-generated dance figures, projected on a panel hanging midstage in moments of fantasy.")

The next step came in 2000, when for my work, *New York, NY*, I started filming and editing video of the city into an hour-long "moving set," which ran simultaneously with live onstage action, making the dancers appear to be dancing on the streets, in the parks, or on the bridges of New York. I continued developing what I had begun to call "living movies," as they told stories while bringing live action and filmed elements together onstage.

After the dark *New York, NY*, and later the "live documentary" I AM A DANCER (about the lives of contemporary freelance dancers), I set off in another direction — making people laugh. Going back to a theme I had touched on in both *Running Backwards* and I AM A DANCER — the lack of funding for the arts in America — I wrote another play, a comedy called *Funding the Arts*. I had always enjoyed satire and spy spoofs, and felt that the best way to get people to deal with a serious subject was not to hit them over the head with the idea, but to let them see it through humor.

When I completed the script, I submitted it to competitions, and when it placed as a Semi-Finalist in the 2003 Writers Network Screenplay & Fiction Competition, I thought it might be ready for production. But I didn't have connections, an agent, or a clear idea of what to do next to get my work further along to either Hollywood or Broadway (where such an "extravaganza" really belonged, and where I hope it might ultimately end up someday). Since I couldn't get it to the big time yet, I thought about mounting a smaller production myself. The plusses were that there would be many artistic challenges — designing a multi-faceted full-length work set to music I'd arrange from two of the classics — *Coppélia* and *Swan Lake* (albeit with sound effects of guns, sirens, and dogs barking), choreographing in different styles and idioms (as the work is set at a Choreography Competition), staging a few scenes entirely in movement, and breaking down traditional stage boundaries (as performers frequently intrude into the audience's space, blurring the lines between

actor and viewer). The sole minus came when I thought about the cost. My lighting designer at the time observed when I showed him the script, “The props in the first scene alone will cost you more than your entire production of New York, NY.” It wasn’t just the props. How on earth could a small dance company with a budget of under \$40,000/year pull off a production with a cast of almost forty actors and dancers, a myriad of locations, and many special effects? (Well... How about using a computer again? But I’m jumping ahead...)

In 2005 my company was invited to perform in The Flea Theater’s “Dance Conversations” (a series in which choreographers show short works, followed by feedback from the audience). This offered a way to get a brief section of the work up in a “bare bones” production without having to commit to producing the entire thing until I could see if it were feasible or not. So with an abbreviated cast of eight we performed the first scene. During the discussion that followed, Sean Curran, the evening’s moderator, said something like, “Felice, you’ve heard of minimalism. Well, you’re a maximalist.” He wasn’t wrong. The first scene alone contained terrorists shooting at the audience, a ballerina performing fouetté turns as a guerilla soldier used her as a shield, the first Iraq War’s “smart” bombs used to try to kill the main characters, aging spies with Alzheimer’s, ballet-dancing robots, the Enron Scandal, and more. The audience response was very encouraging. But it still remained too daunting and expensive a project. During the next few years I rewrote and updated the work, but its large cast remained a problem, even when I halved the number of actors by doubling the roles each would play. I looked for ways to cut it further. One day a friend who had read the script said she found the “cartoon-like” characters very effective. Bingo! Since the characters were actually “cartoons” (even the Russian spies were named Boris and Natasha), why not use my “living movie” form, and make *Funding the Arts* a “living cartoon” with the live actors interacting with videotaped cartoon animations? I rewrote the script as a combination of stage and screen, which finally reduced the live cast to a manageable size, and using Final Cut Studio assembled the score, prerecorded characters, sets, props, and special effects within one structured foundation.

Now I just had to find someone who could make cartoons... Contacting two well-known animators I was told, “This kind of animation costs about \$5000... per minute.” With a 90-minute piece, that put the animation budget at \$450,000 — not including any of the other expenses. To find an animator I started playing “Six Degrees of Separation” with everyone I knew and kept looking for someone who would work for what we could afford to pay (which wasn’t much), but ultimately struck out. One day I was whining about it to my friend, Seymour Barab, and he said, “Felice, why don’t you just do it yourself?” So eventually that’s what I had to do. With a combination of LifeForms, Anime Pro, and Final Cut Studio all of the animations were constructed entirely on my computer.

You use video/computer animation in *Funding the Arts*. How does the cast relate physically to the animated “set”?

The cast often interacts with the animated “set.” Many animations serve as props. For instance, one of the characters “lifts” a bag off the bed onto the floor, or tosses knitting needles into a trash can. The beginning of the play starts off with a dead body seeming to stick through the upstage curtain. That body soon magically disappears. A filmed character dances with a live one. There are sets that do not have to be built with wood, or anything else for that matter. Bookcases lift up, doors swing open, rockets blast off into space. Anything is possible.

Is there a specific message you hope audiences will garner from the piece?

I want people to go and enjoy themselves, and have a good time, but I also want them to see that beneath a work that pokes fun at everything from James Bond to American Idol, there is a serious foundation — urging greater commitment by the public and politicians to supporting art. Especially in these bleak economic times, people need to see the arts as vital to our spiritual well-being. In my work I present this plea through bizarrely outrageous satire, but nevertheless it is a serious message I very much want to put forth. I think *Funding the Arts* will have wide-ranging appeal and may be a particularly good project for bringing people who generally do not attend art events, into the theater as it will be readily accessible, relevant, and entertaining to all. And the work’s underlying theme of how a passion for something can press people to try to reach for their goals, beyond what they think they can do, is one to which everyone can relate. And one I surely encountered in making this work. I think what I learned by doing this project was that if you want to do something, just go ahead and do it. Any way you can. Just do it. No matter how impossible it seems.

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