

Basic Rights  
for  
Egyptian  
Dance Artists

(BREDA)

a Manifesto

Participants:

Adham Hafez  
Ahmed El Gendy  
Alexander Thompson  
Dalia El Abd  
Ezzat Ismail Ezzat  
Hala Imam  
Mona Gamil  
Nada Sabet  
Shahd El Khattabi

Basic Rights for Egyptian Dance Artists (BREDA) is the result of a week of workshops with Egyptian dance artists in Cairo. The purpose of this week of workshops was to bring various stake-holders in the dance community in Cairo together to discuss common challenges facing independent dancers in today's Egypt. The focus is on the rights of independent dancers, who are not under the umbrella or protection of any official structures.

The need for this week and this Manifesto was prompted by reports of several case studies of dancers regarding problems that arose during production processes in 2013. The dancers felt that their rights were compromised and wished to situate these problems within a larger context of contemporary dance in Egypt. These specific instances, though they may be the result of basic financial and temporal limits of a production process, are symptomatic of a larger problem. Within the arts world in Egypt and elsewhere, dance and performance seem to be situated at the bottom of an artistic hierarchy, seen as inferior to other art forms such as literature, film, music, and the visual arts. Likewise the dancer seems to be situated at the bottom of a hierarchical structure within the creative process of a contemporary dance or theatre production. This troubling reality needs to be addressed, in order to shed light on other larger and more urgent problems that have to do with the infrastructure of the cultural scene in Egypt at this particular moment in time. We hope to raise questions about how value is constructed and how this trickles down to all levels of the production process, manifesting in rights and responsibilities for dance artists.

This project was made possible through a partnership between Ezzat Ezzat Contemporary Dance Studio and the American Embassy in Cairo. The workshop and presentation was facilitated by Ezzat Ezzat and Alexander Thompson.

**Ezzat Ezzat** is an Egyptian Dancer/Choreographer. He is the founder of [Ezzat Ezzat Contemporary Dance Studio](#) which conducts an annual Contemporary Dance Night program to support new works by Egyptian dance artists and to connect Egyptian dancers with their counterparts from the Middle East, America, and Europe.

**Alexander Thompson** is an American Dancer/Administrator. He is the Associate Artist Program Manager at [New York Live Arts](#) where he provides support to movement and body based artists in New York, and serves on the [Dance/NYC Junior Committee](#), a volunteer organization which strives to address challenges facing dance artists in New York.

We begin with the premise that art is valuable. It is valuable as a means of processing and understanding the human experience, of mapping cultural identity and the historic here and now, of cultivating empathy, compassion, and understanding, and of generating meaning and purpose. It also has the added benefit of building and nourishing vibrant communities and stimulating local and national economies, although it should be noted that these are not the primary goals or concerns of the arts or of artists.

If art is valuable, then it follows that artists provide value. As providers of value, and as human beings, artists should be subject to certain basic and inalienable rights. These rights include, but are not limited to a safe and respectful work environment, reasonable working hours and expectations, and basic considerations of health and overall well-being in any and all situations one might find oneself in during the course of their artistic work. This includes reasonable financial compensation for labor and services provided, access to health care and insurance, and consideration of retirement needs.

Over the course of the past week we have attempted to outline what we believe to be a core set of considerations affecting dance artists in Egypt. This is by no means an exhaustive list and is intended to be a living document and an ongoing conversation. Let it be clear that this is the beginning of something, not the end. Our hope is that not only will Egyptian dance artists continue the conversation we have started, but that other artists will follow in our footsteps. Our hope is that Basic Rights for Egyptian Dance Artists will become Basic Rights for Egyptian Artists and Dancers - that BREDA will become BREAD. These issues are situated within a larger struggle for basic rights and social justice for all Egyptians.

We acknowledge that dancers are part of a larger ecology and that change cannot happen without active collaboration and participation across all segments of the arts ecosystem. We hope that funding entities and producing and presenting organizations will join us in building a system that is more just, more sustainable, more vibrant, and more inclusive.

There is an opportunity here to support and nourish Egypt's brightest lights and creative voices, to increase Egypt's participation in a global dialogue, and to allow the world to see and to know an Egypt that is flourishing, an Egypt that is thriving, an Egypt that is brimming with energy and ideas and possibility, an Egypt that is more than just relics of its rich and significant history, but is home to some of the most thoughtful, relevant, and contemporary artistic voices in the world.

## **What is the context?**

It is important, in the investigation of how we want things to be, to understand where we are now. If we are saying that dancers' pay should be an essential part of the overall budget of a project we need to understand the funding structures that are enabling or inhibiting the realization of that goal, and of others.

We could only identify three foundations that support contemporary dance in Egypt, though there may be others (Mawred, AFAC, YATF); these foundations are also responsible for funding the visual and performing arts in 27 other Arab nations. As an Egyptian dance artist applying for funding from any or all of these foundations, you are not just competing against other Egyptian artists; you are competing against artists from every one of those 28 countries. The most that any one artist can receive from a grant from one of these foundations is 70,000 EGP, but receiving this amount for one project does not guarantee that an artist will receive the same amount for another project. It is also important to note that the age limit for many of these applications is 35, as they focus on "emerging artists," but there is not significant funding or support for "established" artists in Egypt, so artists who are 36 years of age or older have few options to support the development of new work.

Additionally there are only a handful of festivals that commission and produce work. We identified 6 festivals in Cairo and Alexandria that assist with production costs. Commissions from these festivals range from 1000 EGP to as much as 25,000 EGP.

It is also possible for Egyptian artists to receive funding from other entities such as foreign embassies and institutes, but these opportunities are limited and not accessible to all Egyptian artists.

This landscape is a difficult one to navigate for a contemporary Egyptian choreographer. Commissioning and presenting funds need to cover the choreographer's and dancers' fees, rehearsal space, costume, set, and lighting designers' fees, fees for musicians, travel and transportation, any other materials necessary for the production (costumes, props, set materials, etc.), the cost of any administrative support staff, venue costs, and any number of other miscellaneous costs of building a production. Due to the lack of available funds significant sacrifices tend to be made - productions are scaled back, choreographers take on an unreasonable workload, and oftentimes dancers end up working for free. As a field, funders, producers, and choreographers need to find a way to meaningfully support and sustain the vibrancy and growth of an exciting and emerging contemporary dance community.

During the course of conversation we also identified that there is an urgent need for spaces to rehearse and adequate options for technique training for dancers at the professional level.

This document is intended to address a small part of what is a much larger and more complex problem - dancers' rights and compensation are connected to many other considerations related to funding and politics that we cannot address here. Our intention is to start by addressing something that is immediate and tangible, and to use this as a starting point for a larger conversation. We would also like to acknowledge that these issues are not confined solely to the dance community, and we hope that this can catalyze similar conversations in other fields.

It is important, too, to acknowledge the challenge of addressing these issues at this particular place and time, when so many things are changing or uncertain. Is it possible to discuss artists' rights without addressing workers' rights in general? How can we make meaningful progress on cultural issues in Egypt

when the Minister of Culture has changed 8 times in the past three years, requiring every conversation about cultural progress to begin again with the new administration? We ask these questions not because we have answers, but in order to highlight the wider circumstances under which we are working. We also have questions about who this document is intended to address: Artists? Funders? Presenters? Government officials? Our hope is that it will speak to all of the above in different ways and for different reasons. How can we implement the proposed rights contained here? It is only possible through collaboration across the sector and with the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders that these rights can gain real meaning, and thus more potency and momentum.

## **What are the rights of a dancer?**

We want to acknowledge that every piece and process is unique and that the needs of a choreographer and their dancers will change from production to production. Rehearsal time and space are subject to availability, the requirements of a site-specific work are very different from those of a piece on a proscenium stage, and the exigencies of any production sometimes call for commitment above and beyond those of a standard rehearsal process. Given this fluid nature it is impractical to prescribe strict and immutable standards and limitations.

With this understanding, we would like to put forward a series of suggestions and proposed guidelines based on our collective experience that we feel it is reasonable to expect during a production process. Many of these terms can be made-to-measure; that is, they can be discussed and negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Because, in Egypt at this time, contractual situations are often ambiguous, nonexistent, or not completed prior to the beginning of an official working relationship, especially between dancers and choreographers, it is vitally important that there is transparency throughout the process, clear and open communication about conditions and expectations by both parties, and that all conditions are mutually and consensually agreed to prior to the commencement of projects. This is the only term that should be applied ubiquitously and without exception to any and all circumstances.

We believe that there should be reasonable limitations placed on the number of hours that a dance artist is expected to work in a day, and on the total number of consecutive work days. This is to protect the artist from injury and fatigue. We also think that rehearsals should include ample time to warm up and physically prepare for the creative process, and that there should be reasonable breaks throughout the day. We also believe that artists should be expected to show up on time and mentally prepared to work. Attendance policy, rehearsal etiquette, and artist fees should be clearly outlined and discussed with the artists beforehand (e.g. will artists be paid hourly, weekly, or in one lump sum, and how much will he or she be paid).

Because spaces are not standardized and conditions cannot always be guaranteed, it is important that the conditions of a working space are communicated clearly to the dance artists before beginning the rehearsal process (floor, size, location, etc.). The specific aspects of the space will vary depending on the project, but in general a space should be clean, safe, accessible to everyone, and reasonably quiet/private (though some projects may not have this particular requirement).

We believe that all aspects of performances should be clearly outlined, discussed, and agreed to well in advance of the performance date. Elements to be mentioned include the number of performances, the number of performances per day, the duration of the performance, the number, location, and schedule for technical rehearsals, general rehearsals, and run-throughs, and the payment an artist is to receive for each performance.

Likewise all aspects of touring should be clearly outlined, discussed, and agreed to beforehand. The itinerary and daily schedule should be clearly communicated well in advance of any travel. Accommodation and travel should be arranged and paid for by the choreographer, sometimes in partnership with a producing or funding entity, unless an artist requests or requires an exception, which should also be clearly discussed and agreed to beforehand. If an artist requests an upgrade or alternative means of travel or accommodation they should be responsible for any difference in cost. All conditions of accommodation should be communicated and agreed to by all.

Dance artists should be made aware of any residency activities above and beyond rehearsals (e.g. classes, workshops, demonstrations, informal presentations, etc.). The type of activity and associated pay should be clearly communicated and agreed upon.

Choreographers should be conscientious about fatigue associated with travel and should avoid work on travel days when possible, and adhere to reasonable limits on consecutive work days. Per diem and items that qualify for travel reimbursement should be discussed and agreed to beforehand.

This is not, and cannot be, a comprehensive list of considerations, but we have attempted to address issues that are vitally important as well as issues that may be easy to overlook. In Appendix I, attached, we have specified, where possible, elements of a working agreement that we think are reasonable, though we want to reiterate that these are not prescriptive or set in stone, as various projects and productions may exhibit different conditions and requirements. We hope that this document is a starting place for a continued, rigorous conversation, a conversation that we hope will expand beyond those of us who participated in this week's workshop.

## **In Conclusion**

The challenges that face the Egyptian contemporary dance community are numerous, nuanced, and complex. We believe, however, that on a fundamental level these are not intractable issues, that these challenges can be met and overcome if there is a concerted and coordinated effort by all members of the dance community, including those who fund and present dance. And, it should be noted, there are those working already to address some of these challenges in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

The Cairo Contemporary Dance Center offers comprehensive vocational training opportunities, including classes in composition and technique as well as lectures on dance, to young artists, and holds open morning classes, addressing a need in the community for continued technique training. SEEDS program is attempting to meet the need for comprehensive contemporary dance training by educating teachers in anatomy, nutrition, pedagogy, history, theory, and practice, and providing teachers with the tools necessary to train Egypt's emerging dance artists.

Additionally there are several nascent festivals that present contemporary dance, including three that are dedicated solely to dance, the first of which is TransDance, founded in 2008, followed in no particular order by Contemporary Dance Night, Nassim Al-Raqs, Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, 2BContinued, and Spring Festival. These may very well represent a new wave in an Egyptian cultural renaissance, but they are not enough to support and sustain Egypt's growing dance community.

There is a desperate need for accessible, dedicated dance spaces. To date, there are only two spaces in and around Cairo dedicated to dance: Ezzat Ezzat Contemporary Dance Studio and Cairo Contemporary Dance Center. There are other spaces that include dance in their general programmatic interests, such as Studio Emad Eddin Foundation and El-Warsha in Cairo, as well as other spaces that are used to rehearse in, but they are often not adequate to the needs of choreographers and the well-being of the dancing body (spaces are small, the floors are not sprung, etc.).

As the contemporary dance community grows there is a vital need for increased funding support from both the public and the private sectors (national, international, corporate, and individual funders). There is an ever present danger that funds will be diverted from dance and the performing arts to other media, such as independent film or music, which is the result of the historical and economic presence and power of the film and music industries in Egypt. We argue not that film and music are less important than dance, but that dance is not less important than film and music. While film and music may have the potential to impact a higher number of people due to the nature of the medium and the way it is disseminated, the immediacy of dance and the performed arts, and the power of physical presence and shared space/experience have the potential to have a greater impact on the individual. Because dance has a physical, geographic component it also has the heightened potential to impact the neighborhoods and communities it takes place in beyond just its audience. We believe that these things should be taken into consideration when deciding how to allocate funds.

There is an opportunity and an invitation here for artists of all mediums to collaborate on establishing our collective basic rights to strengthen Egypt's cultural identity as a whole. Each medium has its own urgent and specific issues and needs, but there are some concerns that are universal.

Given Egypt's unique and specific cultural history, where support of the arts shifted from a philanthropic model to a state-run model during the years of nationalization, which left many gaps to fill and discrepancies to remedy, this project of discussing the basic rights of dancers, and eventually all artists,

does not dismiss or disregard other problems of infrastructure, visibility, inequality with regard to how work emerges and is visible in an international context, or issues dealing with Egypt's position in a global discourse. Our aim is that by dealing with one clear and tangible symptom of a systemic set of problems we might also begin to be able to evoke and articulate the full scope of our needs and challenges. In addition to this manifesto there are plans to produce several appendices, supplementary documents including a contract template and specific proposed guidelines for artists' working agreements.

It is our hope and our belief that we all share the common goal of supporting dance in Egypt as a crucial element of a large and diverse arts ecosystem. We understand that funders and presenters face their own unique and significant challenges, but we also believe that by working together we can help each other find solutions to these challenges. Each of us has a unique perspective, particular resources, and relevant personal experience and ideas that, if shared with one another, can help illuminate a way forward. We hope we can work in partnership with funders and presenters to ensure that artists have space to work, that they are paid adequately and fairly for their work, and that there are opportunities for that work to be shown, seen, and experienced so that, together, we can build and grow a vibrant, thriving dance community.