



## Local Fellowship Gives Dancers a Bar To Lean On

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Grants keep both choreographers and hopefully the community afloat

Step by step, Miami is getting the message out: Dance is to be had in this town, and it is good.

As a dance community, Miami is best known outside of its borders for the Miami City Ballet. But there is a program working to change that, the Dance Miami Choreographers Fellowship Program, or DMF, sponsored by Miami-Dade's Department of Cultural Affairs, whose purpose is to provide grants on a competitive basis to local professional choreographers.

A panel of renowned experts in the field from across the country gathered here a few months back and studied the video submissions of the candidates, choosing three participants that exemplified the diversity and talent this city has to offer: Augusto Soledade, founder, resident choreographer, and artistic director of the Brazz Dance Theater company, which blends Afro-Brazilian and contemporary dance; Cuba-born choreographer and artistic director of the ERE.Bistoury company Alexey Taran; and independent choreographer and Miami native Letty Bassart.

The fellowship, literally, can mean the difference between jumping for joy, or dragging one's meant-to-be-dancing feet. Just ask Soledade.

"It is an absolutely essential program in this county, and my understanding is that there are not too many of this kind throughout the country," says this three-time winner of the DMF grant, who originally established his company in Massachusetts in 1998, and moved it to South Florida in 2004 when he got hired by Florida International University as an assistant dance professor. Now, as FIU has scrapped its dance department, Soledade will no longer have a job there after this year, thus the fellowship has become even more indispensable to help him keep the company going.

"Initially, the Dance Miami Choreographers Fellowship was a \$5,000 award, but that specific year of my award, 2005, it started to be a \$10,000 award," remembers the Bahia native, who's in his mid-40s. "So I was one of the first choreographers to benefit from this. And it was incredible, because dance as a discipline really survives on the generosity of supporters and grant programs."

There's a specific reason for that, Soledade believes: "Our artistic product is not, usually, as commercial as a lot of other artistic products. So the help from the fellowship, for me, really reflects an excellent understanding of the kinds of costs that choreographers face in order to be able to produce any kind of dancing." Which is precisely why the program exists, says its director, Adriana Pérez, responsible for the selection of the panelists involved in the fellowship-granting process.



“Our mission is to have the artist create new works. We try to foster them, give them the opportunity. We are not going to limit what they can do with those dollars,” explains the Projects Administrator for the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs. Pérez, on her third season in charge of this program begun in 2000, is gung-ho about dancers in Miami and what the fellowship can accomplish to put the spotlight on them.

“I think outside of Miami, people don’t know much about what companies exist here and what is being created, other than Miami City Ballet,” she says. “The fellowship can allow them to attend dance conferences and meet and network with other dance companies nationwide and be able to start collaborations outside of Miami. International cultural exchanges can be facilitated. And it helps them to just create, create, create.” The fellowship is only available for residents of Miami-Dade, but applications from other areas have come in, a testament to the recognition the DMF has garnered.

#### Panelists Point of View

“I was very impressed not only by the quality and the diversity of the artists, but also by the way the panel conducted the process and how it was organized by Miami-Dade. It was notably fair and rigorous,” says New York panelist Gina Gibney, choreographer and artistic director of Gina Gibney Dance, a pioneer in taking dance to communities by working with abused women and children and HIV patients. “It is very rare for a county, for a government entity, to create fellowships as these. The kind of trust that they put in the artists is unique,” continues Gibney. “I’m not surprised that they get artists from outside the county wanting to be a part of it, because what people really need is financial support, and it doesn’t have to be a lot, but it has to be enough.”

Although the panelists – which also included Aubrey Lynch, choreographer on Broadway and former dancer for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; and Michael Uthoff, artistic and executive director of Dance St. Louis, Missouri – reviewed applicants with many different backgrounds and styles, there are certain elements that they must all share in order to be selected.

“When you look at a performer, is there a commitment to excellence? Is there a commitment to the art form as a whole? And then, within the structure, is what they’re showing of the creative strength that needs to be sponsored?” asks Uthoff, originally from Chile, who is familiar with the local scene thanks to working over the years with the New World School of the Arts and with the Dance Now! Ensemble. Uthoff adds that no matter how creative or original the dance presented, it must connect with the audience. And in such difficult economic times, that is more essential than ever.

“Is this something that will bring more audiences to the theater, or will it basically make people run away and never come back?” he analyzes. “Very often, grants are given to individuals who show a great deal of originality, and perhaps in three-years time, they will develop something that works for the theater. But right now, we need to focus on how do we fill those houses. That was the argument that we had.” The resolution of that argument, at least this year, resulted in faith in all of the above, for not one but three talents.