

# Leading the way

Avatâra Ayuso attends the Women in Dance Leadership conference held in New York from January 18 to 20



Choreographer and performer Yin Yue.

New York, 2018, women, dance and leadership. There seems no better time than now to bring all these terms together onto the table. We are in the middle of a revolution, one that brings together social, political, cultural and artistic discomfort, but that promises to be the beginning of a transformation. What better way to start the year than attending the only conference in the world dealing with all those terms at once: the Women in Dance Leadership Conference.

Sandra Shih Parks was head of the conference, held at New York University Tisch School of the Arts. Over three days, a series of panel discussions, masterclasses, dance films, paper presentations, meet-the-artist sessions and performances by female choreographers took place. A total of 230 presenters and participants from 16 countries attended, of all ages and cultural backgrounds. There was good representation of UK-based artists and academics, including Shantel Ehrenberg, Ella Mesma, Sophie Laplane, Laura Vanhulle, Sonia Sabri

and myself. Ninety-five per cent of the participants were women, all ready to exchange their expertise, concerns and experiences about why women are not supported in their career development to become leaders in the dance sector.

Park's motivation for the conference was to celebrate female leadership: those women that, despite the difficulties, have already made it to the top and support those on their way up. She also wanted to programme the work of female choreographers, providing a platform to showcase their work, as they have far fewer opportunities than their male counterparts. Needless to say, we in the UK are very aware of this issue.

The conference commenced with some inspiring reflections by Liz

Lerman, an award-winning visionary artist whose critically acclaimed work includes choreography, performance, writing, teaching and speaking. She is well known for her Critical Response Process, a method for artistic feedback. Three key ideas established the basis for further reflections during the conference: First, that women are not fragmented, it is the world that is fragmented; Second, that our actions need to take the form of choreographic thinking, not only on the stage but also in our engagement with the world; Third, instead of thinking in a vertical, hierarchical way (for example, good versus bad), let's learn to manage multiplicity in the world with flexibility, allowing different choices to co-exist.

The most thought-provoking sessions >



came from the panel discussions "Define Female Leadership in the 21st Century", and "The Future of Female Leadership", as well as the presentation on "Women Leading Dance: Practice into Theory" by Jane Alexandre, whose book *Dance Leadership* was published by Palgrave Macmillan last year.

The most insightful contributions came from a variety of experts: Christal Brown (chair of Middlebury College Dance Department), Alejandra Duque Cifuentes (programme manager at DanceNYC), Lori Belilove (artistic director of the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation), Blakeley W McGuire (principal dancer with Martha Graham Dance Company), Diane Jacobowitz (executive director of Dancewave NYC) and Miriam Ciguere (chair of Drexel University Performing Arts Department).

One of the first discussion points was the fact that women have to learn to take ownership of their leadership potential and be aware they can change things. Jacobowitz, reflecting on how leadership for women has changed over her 30 years' experience, said, "This is the greatest moment for women, right now". The dance sector needs to use

the current times to empower women with aspirations to lead and take greater responsibilities. Helping women make the most of their artistic, management and executive potential is a key element for the development of any dance sector.

Ciguere made an interesting remark linking choreography and leadership: dance and creative education at an early age can teach many leadership skills, transferable to any professional life. Problem solving and group work teach the basics of leadership. She considers that teachers have the responsibility to break the cycle of how they have been taught and find new ways that are relevant to the times we live in.

In answer to the question of why women don't get to the top more often, there were differing answers. One panellist mentioned an imbalance in confidence between men and women, that women doubt their capacity and don't put themselves out there. Others considered this not the case at all, that this answer was just a patriarchal justification to the issue unrelated to how female dance leaders are in the 21st century. From personal experience,

as an artist and director of my own company, having worked on projects around the world (including Africa and Asia), I can affirm that the women I found in the dance sectors are brave, confident, buoyant and extremely resilient. They have developed a new style of leadership to manage their careers, a style not yet recognised as valuable by the established systems. What seems to be stopping them is a lack of opportunities for women to thrive, not a lack of determination.

**H**ow do we prepare the next generations of female leaders in the dance sector? Answers fluctuated between preparing them with multiple skills and encouraging them to ask for help if needed, to the importance of mentoring and role models as essential support. Women at the top need to support the development of other women, serving as examples to inspire and stimulate younger generations.

One of the most noteworthy discussion points was the participation of men, and it was agreed men must be brought into the conversation. Men and women need to become allies, develop empathy and understanding of each other's issues, as well as see the value in sharing leadership responsibilities. It seems young and middle-aged generations of men are much more aware of these issues than their predecessors, and, as Angela Davis has said, "Progressive men need to take the initiative themselves, ➤"

Below: The New York skyline.  
Inset: Avatara Ayuso.





they don't need to be invited".

Their support will mean artistic and leadership equality can be achieved more quickly, leaving behind 19th- and 20th-century perspectives on what the role of women should be. Both women and men need to work together to shape the future of an exciting, enriching and diverse dance sector.

This led to the most important and relevant discussion, which was about leadership models. It was agreed that new models of leadership in the dance world are required, that both adapt to the challenges of the 21st century and embrace the female gaze. Women do not need to follow traditional leadership structures based on the male gaze. New paradigms can be developed, where the female leader's voice finds its uniqueness, overcoming simplistic notions of women leaders as nurturing, traditional and risk-averse.

**T**he second aim of the conference was to programme the work of female choreographers. Dances from women of different ages (from 20 to 70 years), backgrounds and nationalities were presented. The performances gave an exciting glimpse of how rich any dance sector can be if female artistic voices are heard. I mention here the names of those that made a strong impression on me because of their inventiveness, courage and choreographic craft: Vendetta Mathea, Yin Yue, Sidra Bell, Marguerite Donlon, Dagmar Dachauer, Ella Mesma, Tiffany Mangulabnan, Jordan Miller, Amy Saunder, Lori Belilove, Soles of Duende and Tzveta Kassabova.

So, where are the female choreographers? The simple answer is that many are certainly there, but until they are given the opportunity to show their work, their imaginative, brave and inspiring choreography will be left in the shadows. We are missing out on fantastic talent by not giving them a platform to communicate with an audience.

The city of New York seems to be making an admirable effort to programme choreography by women: during the same week Twyla Tharp showed her work, The Joyce Theater (regularly programming work by female choreographers) presented the exciting Cuban Malpasos Dance Company in pieces by Aszure Barton



and Sonya Tayeh (see page 57), and the conference itself showcased the work of 19 choreographers. In North America there are other initiatives (all run by women) such as CounterPointe, led by the UK-US based Julia Gleich, Outlet Dance Project led by Donia Salem, or the Lumberyard in the City Winter Festival. When it comes to ballet, however, things are clearly not working: big ballet companies in North America are almost exclusively programming works by male choreographers, and artistic directors seem to live in a bubble that doesn't allow them to see female talent.

The existence of this conference has made the debate on women in dance more powerful and less isolated. Many interesting things were discussed informally in between sessions, and a clear need to keep the debate alive was there. What is undeniable is that if the will is there, simple steps can be taken to address this imbalance. Some solutions might take longer, as they imply shifting inherited ways of viewing women in society, but other actions can be easily implemented: more leadership mentoring and shadowing opportunities are needed in order to establish role models and foster a personal leadership style among future female leaders. Opportunities should be given early on in a professional career because, as Christal Brown says, "We have multiplicity of gifts but we need infrastructures to use those gifts in the most useful way." Change must happen

at the top, from the ones that have the power to impact society on a large scale such as programmers and artistic directors. They need to make a serious effort to see the work of emerging and mid-scale choreographers, and develop a dance sector keen to share diverse voices with its audiences. The sector must stop calling adult female professional dancers "girls" in the workplace (and, for that matter, stop calling men "boys"). Funding bodies need to do better in enforcing diversity and inclusion in their publicly-funded organisations, even if that means quotas (which, as we know, do not produce lasting change but instigate action). More men need to be a part of this conversation. Finally, the sector must change the discourse and stop blaming women for not getting to the top, because women in dance are ready to take on leadership responsibilities.

The next Women in Dance Leadership conference will take place in Philadelphia in the autumn of 2019. The debate is not over, because more topics and strategies for change need to be discussed. A revolution has started and there is no way back. We know that any dance sector will flourish by including the female perspective, and it is time to start applying solutions. Let the debate expand into the reality of the 21st century. ■

**Avatâra Ayuso wishes to thank Dancers' Career Development for sponsoring her conference attendance fee.**