



Sharon Luckman on Strategic Planning, Branding, Development, and Keys to the Ailey Company's Success

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By Karyn D. Collins

On Jan. 25, 2012, the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation announced that its executive director, Sharon Gersten Luckman, would be stepping down in 2013 after 16 years as executive director and 20 years with the Ailey organization. Dance/USA's From the Green Room asked Luckman to reflect on her accomplishments as well as challenges facing the Ailey company and the dance world.

Dance/USA: How has the landscape changed for dance companies in the years you've been executive director?

Sharon Gersten Luckman: On the good end, I think that dance has become extremely popular with all these television shows. And we see that at Ailey. We have so many non-professional adults who come and take classes. We've had 48,000 come through our doors. So dance, in the general landscape, is very popular. Some of the Broadway shows have a lot of dance. People seem to care about dance and they like it. So, on the positive end, that's part of the landscape. That's great.

On the more difficult end, there's a lot of competition for people's entertainment resources and how they want to spend their time, not just with other dance, but with everything that's happened.

As far as our landscape goes, Ailey is a touring dance company. That's our mission and we're global ambassadors [but] the world has changed so dramatically. For touring dance companies, the landscape has changed in a way that makes it much harder to tour in the United States and globally. And that has to do with a lot of things.

In the United States, fewer theaters and presenters are presenting dance. They're undergoing financial challenges. They're getting less government money themselves from their cities, states, and downtowns. They'll bring in a Broadway show or other things and bring in less dance. So that's been hard in the U.S.

Globally there seems to be a trend where the countries around the world, who were very anxious to get American companies to perform, are now putting money into their local companies.

D/USA: What's been the biggest challenge you've had to deal with and how did you meet that challenge?

SGL: I've noticed that many of the dance companies now have become more savvy at marketing. We've gotten better and better at that. We know the latest digital marketing. We are better at figuring out our target audience and how to get them. We're very strategic in how to market and where to put our money. I think the hard challenges have made it necessary to do those things. We're very strategic in how to market and where to put our money. I think the hard challenges have made it necessary to do those things. That's how we've dealt with it.

And we've also built our brand globally so that a presenter or theater owner or someone is going to think about us when they are deciding what to present.

The big challenge that I've had in my years here, and one of the things that I'm proudest of, is really building this building in New York and our endowment. Our endowment was zero when we started the campaign to build this building. So to raise the money to not only build a building but also to have an endowment to ensure financial stability was really the biggest challenge I faced.



The second biggest challenge, in a very positive way, was how to celebrate Ailey's 50th anniversary in a way that wouldn't just be about that one year but would really take the name and the brand and have the anniversary help us build the brand globally.

D/USA: The Ailey company has been particularly successful in establishing its brand. Talk about the strategies and methods the company used in building and maintaining the brand. What has worked and what has not and why?

SGL: I think the word strategic is the word I keep using for everything. At Ailey, we really think about a lot of what we do in terms of how it affects the brand. The easy, simple way to describe it is to look at our marketing materials — and I learned this at a lecture at Dance/USA. Someone said you should be able to blink your eyes and have the look of the company stick in your mind. In Ailey's case, what we have are these gorgeous bodies in gorgeous dances. The Ailey look has to do with that beautiful body in some sort of dynamic movement, usually flying through the air. The look says Ailey is exciting, Ailey is powerful, the dancers are beautiful.

The other part of the Ailey brand is about the Ailey family. People don't like Ailey, they love Ailey. It's a family. People who come to see us have been bringing their families for years. All of our dancers, even a lot of our students and administrators, are ambassadors for that message. If you come to see us in New York and walk into our building, you feel very warm and welcomed.

We talk to our staff about that. We have orientation with the volunteers who work here behind the various desks. With the Ailey 2 dancers, it's part of what they learn, to present themselves in a certain way. And what I find is that the students see it and they emulate it and copy it, not all of them, but a lot of them. When we're choosing students to represent us, it's really the ones who are articulate and warm and have passion for what they do. So all of that goes to the branding, not just the materials.

It was very much a goal of mine to use the 50th anniversary, not just to pat ourselves on our backs that yes we made it to 50, which we did and we deserved to say 'wow,' but also to build the brand.

We had an Ailey Barbie doll. We had the Hallmark cards. We had two books that came out. We offered programs in some of the black churches like Abyssinian, where we danced "Revelations" right there in the church. The idea was if you never heard of Ailey before, hopefully by the end of the 50th you'd heard of Ailey. You saw the Barbie or you saw us on "Oprah." And, of course, if you knew us and our history then you knew this was an important anniversary. We did a lot of different programs. Around New York we did free programs in every borough. We didn't just want people with money to participate. We gave free performances. We had a block party with free classes and performances. Target gave us money to offer special Target nights where the tickets were \$19.58. We really used the 50th anniversary to take the Ailey brand and spread the word.

The key to our success, when push comes to shove and you're looking at the whole thing, is we have three legs to the stool that are all fabulous and do great work and they all are working together: the board, the staff, and the artistic end of Ailey. All three of those are really good and we work together as a team and don't waste any energy.

D/USA: When it comes to board development, how has Ailey gone about doing this? What steps does Ailey follow? How may this differ from what other companies are doing?

SGL: I don't know if what we do is different, but we do go about developing our board in a very deliberate way. Back in the early days of the company, most of the board members, and I know this is true of most places, were personal friends of Alvin's. They cared a lot about the company. One of them did the actual accounting for the company. Another one developed the t-shirt. They were very hands-on and that was actually what was needed at that time.

After Ailey went to the next level, we had professional staff doing some of these things and what we needed from our board was people who had access to finances. Either they had their own or they had access to finances or they had some skill that really could help move Ailey forward in some way. We've remained very deliberate about it.

We have so many Ailey fans; that's the good news. On the board we want someone who is definitely an Ailey fan. In my opinion, you don't want someone who has money and skills but doesn't really care about you. We want people who are passionate about Ailey but also have something concrete they can bring to the board. With some, it's money; with some it's connections to certain corporations; with some it's expertise.

We do target certain companies in looking for board members. But even more than that, we have a grid, which the nominating committee looks at I think twice a year. And it has things on it like how many board members are men and how many are women. It has how many are African American and how many are Caucasian. It has how many have connections to corporations and how many don't. It even has who lives in New York and who doesn't. The actual makeup of the board is analyzed and then the committee talks about what is needed. If we don't have anyone connected to a media company, wouldn't it be great if we had someone with that connection. Or we go to Atlanta every year. Who might be connected to the market in Atlanta?

D/USA: In 1991, the Ailey company had an operating budget of \$6.5 million and an accumulated deficit of \$1 million according to *The New York Times*. For 2007-8 the budget was \$24 million, with an endowment of \$22 million and according to the *Times*, the company has operated without a deficit since 1993. How, first of all, did the company manage that feat? What strategies were utilized? What was the learning curve?

SGL: I wasn't actually executive director when the eliminating of the debt happened. I came in as the development director as part of that campaign to eliminate the debt. I was brought in by Michael Kaiser [current president of The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.]. At that time, we had a special grant from the National Arts Stabilization Fund. Many of the New York arts organizations of color received one of these. The gist of the grant was if we could wipe out half our accumulated deficit, they would give us money for the other half.

How did we build after that? Again, the word is strategic. That and prioritizing are things we have done well. To me it's very, very important not that we run like a business, because we're not in the business of making money. But we look at the finances of every program that we do. For instance, we have the Ailey Extension, which is open to the general public. That program is meant to make money so we can take that money to give scholarships to our talented teenagers. The scholarship program is going to lose money but the plan calls for us to get that money from fundraising and also from the Extension program.

In our school, we give very few scholarships in the junior division. Mostly we charge tuition at that level. That money helps us to offset the programs that we know are going to lose money. It's having a strategy and being very deliberate so we don't lose money anywhere where we don't want to lose it. We monitor it very carefully.

The new building was an enormous opportunity. We have 12 studios. So we could offer all of these classes. When we were renting, we were using all the studio space we had to train talented dancers. So there wasn't a lot of space and free time. The idea of analyzing the programs was to not just analyze the quality, which has always been fabulous and wasn't an issue for us. The idea of analyzing was to figure out the finances of the program and where we could make money and how much we could safely lose in other programs.

Meanwhile, the other part is fundraising. Like all big companies we work very hard at fundraising. The programs that don't make money, we still need to keep them going.

When we were planning the new building, this was part of the plan. We were analyzing costs for the new building and trying to figure out where we would get our earned income. We saw we could bring in money renting the studios, so we built that in. I got lucky because it was an idea of mine that we would have this Extension and that when our studios were not used by the first or second companies or the school that, rather than renting a studio just to an outsider, we would have our own classes for the general public. Where I got lucky is that idea came before "So You Think You Can Dance" or "Dancing With The Stars." Once those were in place, the media wanted to feature us and our programs and we were featured so much. I mean Gayle King [Oprah Winfrey's best friend] took a dance class. People were just so interested and this program took off in ways I couldn't have ever imagined.

People can see those classes from the street. Speaking of the brand, that was not an accident. When we talked about this building, we talked about making the community feel comfortable, that this would not be a fortress and that people could walk in. Now it's this place where people can stand or sit outside and watch. That is marketing. That is branding.

D/USA: What is the company's current financial situation and how has the organization managed this, even during the recession?

SGL: We're healthy. We're in the black. We're stable. I'm not saying it's easy. It's not easy. As I mentioned before, we're a touring company and it's really hard. The fees that we're paid to perform are not going up, but our expenses are going up. Not only is travel going up and salaries are going — and should — but how about the fact that we have all these

people traveling and we have to pay for bags now. It's awful for our company. So our expenses are up and the fees aren't. It's hard to get those up. It's certainly a challenge. There is no doubt things are harder. We're just working harder, frankly. And we're trying to say to people who care about this, "Hey, we really need your money."

D/USA: What processes and philosophies are in place? What's been key to the organization's success?

SGL: The main thing that's key to our success, when push comes to shove and you're looking at the whole thing, is we have three legs to the stool that are all fabulous and do great work and they all are working together: the board, the staff, and the artistic end of Ailey. All three of those are really good and we work together as a team and don't waste any energy. And, this isn't just being Pollyanna, we don't waste any energy on fighting. We have a common goal and we have great leadership. We have people here at Ailey who have been here a long time. I've been here 20 years. There are people who have been here 30 years. We have people here 15 years. We have some new blood but we don't have a huge turnover so that means we can build on our success. We don't have to keep starting over.

Even if you look at how we managed when Judi left, there was a smooth transition. When Denise Jefferson passed, we weren't expecting that, but we did have people ready to take the reins. All those things help the organization move forward so you're not in a crisis mode and you don't waste time and energy on infighting.

D/USA: What do you see on the horizon for the dance world and for the Ailey organization on the business side?

SGL: I think it will get tougher. It's tough now, especially for a dance company like ours that tours internationally, because we're all part of this global economy. So it's definitely going to get tougher. I do think, not just Ailey, but I think many of my colleagues from Dance/USA are just getting better and smarter and more savvy. We're learning from the for-profits. We're learning from other non-profits. We're studying best practices.

D/USA: What are the key challenges to be faced? Are there some unique challenges for the Ailey organization that other companies may not face?

SGL: I think the only challenge we may face more than others is the touring because we tour so much more than any other company and Ailey 2 also tours a lot. That's what we have a harder time with than other companies.

D/USA: Is there any unfinished business that your successor will have to inherit once you leave?

SGL: One thing they won't have to inherit is that Ailey became a principal dance company at City Center and we have a 10-year agreement with City Center. That was important because we don't have our own theater. So I felt good that before I left there was a permanent arrangement in place. They won't kick Ailey out at Christmastime because they want to bring in a Christmas show.

As far as the next challenges that I'm going to start but I won't finish, I really want to provide housing in New York City for our dance students. It's one thing to give scholarships, but people come to New York and the housing situation is so expensive and we do and will do more of giving them housing stipends. But it's not just the money. It's the experience of living together and having a residence life person there to help them through the New York experience. We have housing for our program with Fordham. The BFA kids live in a dorm and you see how wonderful their experience is. They live in a dorm and have counselors and a support system. Then you look at our other students who are not in the BFA program and they're just all over New York and it's a big difference. So that's something I will start working on but won't have finished when I leave.

Another thing is we're really looking into film, movies, a film about Mr. Ailey's life. I won't have that done in a year. We're also expanding our work in the community. We do so much community work now as Mr. Ailey wanted us to do, but I want to expand our work with senior citizens.

D/USA: What advice will you offer to your successor?

SGL: I think the only advice would be to just nurture and support the people here. Nurture Robert Battle, who is fantastic. He's fabulous. Nurture and support him. Nurture Tracy Inman and Melanie Person, who are running the school now. Nurture Troy Powell, who will take over Ailey 2. Nurture and support the people who really make Ailey great. By nurture I mean take care of them. Take care that they have what they need to continue and that's financial support, that's encouragement, that's good marketing, that's clean studios, that's everything.