

# Do you know what you are worth?

*If you want to enter the professional dance field, it pays to know about rates, resources, and standards*

by Kasi Kirkpatrick

Have you seen the photo of the iceberg where the top sticking out of the water shows the simple statement of "dancer on stage," but below in the water, it shows the profound realities of the lives of dancers and what people don't see? Hours of practice, dedication and training, knowledge, rejections, injuries, sacrifices, fatigue, self-doubt, research, and consistency, to name a few. The outside world hardly considers or witnesses the effort and hard work required to be a dancer.

In 2020, a study was done using the Occupational Information Network data, which analyzed the top 20 most physically demanding jobs in the United States. A dancer was number 1 on the list. Proper payment and attention to dancers' minimum needs and working conditions have been a systematic issue for decades and something I have experienced firsthand, along with many others in the field. Dancers have fallen into the role of "struggling artist" because there hasn't been a system or definitive in place that they can rely on for guidance. "To be clear, not paying dancers is abuse," says author and dancer Brit Stigler, "Dance is a job, and its workers—like all workers—should be compensated. But many are still pressured to work for exposure in the underfunded, undervalued dance world."

As a green 22-year-old just starting out in the professional dance world, I struggled to find guidance on where to go for resources and information about jobs, rates, and payment standards for the career I had worked and trained so hard for. Over time, I gained experience through various jobs, learning from different perspectives and making mistakes that helped shape me into the dancer and person I am today. My aim is to provide insight and resources for dancers and those outside the field, ensuring fair treatment and adequate pay for their time and talents. I want to empower dancers to understand their worth both emotionally and financially and provide support for their journey as freelance artists. It's important information to advocate for fair compensation and higher expectations for dancers in the freelance dance field.

## Resources

Learning to navigate the dance world as a freelance artist can be incredibly rewarding. Access to valuable resources can open doors to incredible opportunities as you move from job to job, gain



unique experiences, and expand your networking skills. It may be challenging at times, but being informed about available organizations and support can be a game-changer, propelling your career in exciting new directions. I'm excited to share some resources that have contributed to my success as a dancer in Los Angeles, California. I hope this list can offer a fresh perspective and serve as a helpful guide for dancers embarking on their journey on the West Coast. I encourage dancers to utilize these resources, do their research, and remain open to discovering other groups and organizations that advocate for dancers. You never know; someday, you may become a valuable resource for future dancers, offering guidance and contributing information to help them navigate the challenges they may face.

*Resources (websites listed below)*

1. *Dance Resource Center* is a non-profit organization based in Los Angeles that has existed since 1987. Its goal is to “help the dance community thrive in the art of business and dancing.” I have attended many of their events, and they have provided me with options for finding a dance therapist, raising money, finding grants, and offering fundraising programs to help dance projects reach their financial goals. I would suggest signing up for their email list to familiarize yourself with events, workshops, auditions, and any other opportunities they have for dancers. Know that most of these people running the organization are or were working dancers, which can provide pearls of wisdom and a perspective of their personal experience as a working freelance dancer.
2. *Dancers Alliance* is a Los Angeles-based volunteer organization that was established in 1990. Their mission is to be the unified voice of the national dance community. They “advocate for equitable rates and working conditions for non-union workers and represent the dance community on union boards and committees.” They also work with specific unions and companies in the industry. I have relied on this resource to determine the typical and minimum rates and working conditions recommended for any independent projects I am working on. They hold monthly meetings to discuss and educate dancers on payments, issues they are facing in the field, how to handle contracts, and to gather input from the community and help with any questions and concerns that can unify dancers to make a more substantial impact. Attending meetings allows you to network with other working dancers and reinforces the commonality among dancers who can support one another.
3. *The Entertainment Community Fund*, based in Los Angeles, offers workshops, support groups, online resources, and emergency financial assistance to all who work in the performing arts and entertainment. My roommate used this resource as a dancer when she needed healthcare and health insurance for an injury. You sign up online or in person to become a member, attend an in-person orientation or meeting, and have access to everything they offer. They have also been associated with SAG- AFTRA, a union and guild protecting people in the entertainment business since the 1930s. As a freelance dancer, you can work some union jobs (depending on the stipulations), and after a certain

number of worked hours, you can qualify to become a union member. Being in a union can be a great stepping stone in maintaining financial stability with benefits as a dancing artist.

4. *Casting Networks* is an online profile that helps performers find jobs and roles around California while allowing industry professionals to find talent. *Casting Networks* enables you to create your profile, upload photos and videos, and submit for jobs. *Casting Networks* is the website most dance agencies use to submit their clients. The specifics, details, and payment information for each job are included, so you can submit your profile for a possible opportunity to audition, or sometimes a direct booking can occur. I have used and still use *Casting Networks*, especially when I first moved to LA and even between gigs in my later years, as this is a great resume builder, keeps you up to date on the types of jobs happening in your area, can allow for a broader audience to find your photos, and can be a distinctive entry point into the entertainment world to meet people in other areas of the field to network with.

### **Rates and Working Conditions**

Dancers are often taken advantage of, and it's essential to establish industry-wide standards to address the issue of proper payment and working conditions for dancers. I believe in empowering dancers to take charge of their careers and set boundaries. If a job doesn't offer fair pay or proper working conditions, it's okay to decline it. Saying no can encourage others to do the same and send a strong message to the industry. By standing together, we can demand better treatment and fair compensation. While everyone's situation is different, it's essential to prioritize our worth and principles over accepting unsatisfactory jobs.

Most dance jobs should compensate dancers for rehearsals, costume fittings, travel, show days, food (if on set), and reimbursements for necessary maintenance to enhance the dancer's look during the performance. According to Dancers Alliance rates in 2024, the minimum rate for a 4-hour rehearsal is \$250, and for 8 hours, \$450, which means the minimum hourly rate is between \$62 and \$56. Keep in mind that these rates are the minimum. Show days and performances should be paid at double or triple the rate of your rehearsals. It is required to have a 12-hour break between the end of one working period and the start of the next. Dancers should have access to an adequate warm-up space and proper dressing rooms. Additionally, specific jobs should provide lunch and a break every 6 hours. Always ensure that you are dancing on level surfaces to avoid injury. If you encounter unsafe conditions, be prepared to find solutions, ask for adjustments, or say NO!

As professional dancers, there are several aspects to consider when on a job. It's surprising how many show organizers don't fully understand what's involved or try to lowball us. I want to inspire dancers to be well-informed, ask questions, and carefully review any paperwork before signing. If there's no paperwork provided, consider preparing your own documents for the

organizers to sign. Perhaps it's time to shift our perspective and recognize that they work for us, not the other way around. Taking ownership of our needs and requirements is essential and benefits the entire dance community. If something doesn't feel right, it's okay to walk away.

That's why it's vital to educate ourselves and others about the level of care required, advocate for fair payment, and refrain from settling for anything below minimum standards. Not only does this help unify the dance community, but it is a more significant step toward equitable pay for dancers and respect for the minimum requirements as workers.

As dancers entering the field, looking for work, and trying to break into the industry, it may seem like a good idea to work for a low rate or offer your time for free. However, this won't benefit you or the dance community in the long run. Dancers must recognize their worth, trust their instincts, and make use of available resources. The lack of awareness about payment and working conditions for dancers is a significant issue that needs to be openly discussed and supported by dancers everywhere. It's important to remember that turning down a job or walking away won't harm your career. There will always be other opportunities waiting for you. Suppose dancers collectively demand minimum rates and standard working conditions and actively engage in resource groups. In that case, we could make significant progress in preventing companies from undervaluing, underpaying, and under-appreciating the dance community.



*Kasi Kirkpatrick is a multidisciplinary choreographer, performer, and educator trained in various dance styles and approaches and has her 200-hour Yoga teaching certification. Kasi creates work for multiple stages, community performances, screendances, festivals, musical artists, and dance companies and has been featured in numerous music videos, commercials, TV shows, and films.*

## Resources

Casting Networks

<https://www.castingnetworks.com/casting-calls/>

Dancers Alliance. Rates and Working Conditions. 2024.

<https://www.dancersalliance.org/rates>

Dancers Resource Center

<https://www.danceresourcecenter.org/raise-money/member-campaigns/>

Hamilton, Linda. 1998. *Advice for dancers. Emotional Counsel and Practical Strategies*. Jossey-Bass Publishing. San Francisco, CA

Marion, Julien. 2021. *How much do Dancers Make?*

<https://www.morehandancers.com/posts/how-much-do-dancers-make>

Shrock, Madeline. 2020. *Dance Ranked Most Physically Demanding Job in the U.S.*

<https://www.dancemagazine.com/most-physically-demanding-jobs/>

Stigler, Britt. “Lose Your Self to Dance: American Ballet, and Its Labor Practices, at the

Breaking Point.” *The Baffler*, no. 57 (2021): 96–103. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27087328>.

The Entertainment Community Fund <https://entertainmentcommunity.org/services-and-programs/healthcare-and-health-insurance>