

Dance Weekend 101

Organizing a weekend dance event

Adam Broome, Jaige Trudel

Ever thought of organizing a dance weekend? Come explore the ins and outs of what it takes to streamline a successful event.

Adam and Jaige have run the “Ooh La La” dance weekend in Quebec for nine years. With their guidance, workshop participants designed an imaginary dance weekend, and learned some of the nuances involved in the process.

The workshop included rich discussion about topics related to organizing dance weekends. We also began an exercise to create an imaginary dance weekend of our own.

Where to begin?

- Start with a vision. A weekend often has a particular “hook” that sets it apart – perhaps a time of year, or special theme, or geographic locality. Ooh La La combines contra dancing with local Quebecois culture and locally sourced food.
- Check calendar in order not to compete with other events. Find your niche.

Next... Logistics – consider things you may have to pay for (in order to create budget)

- Venue. Once you find a hall, check it out. What is its capacity (specifically for dance; how many dancers can comfortably use it)? What’s the bathroom situation? Heat? Wiring okay? Kitchen available? Other spaces in the facility? Guidelines for use? What will it cost?
- Accommodations. Where will people who have travelled to your weekend stay? Camping? Local billets? Hotels?
- Food. Will this be on site, and if so how provided (catered, volunteer cooks)? If participants will be fending for themselves, are there local markets and/or eateries to send them to?
- Insurance. In the U.S., you can get group insurance rates through CDSS. Sometimes insurance can be through the hall or municipality
- Professional sound. Note that “professional” doesn’t necessarily mean they will understand our music. If you work with an existing dance series, they will have experience that may help. Different bands have different needs, some much more complex than others.
- Advertising.

Now the moment of truth: Can we create enough attention (attract enough dancers locally and regionally) to make it work? (Note that although some weekends attract participants from great distances, this is the exception, and certainly not where you’d want to start.)

Project your expenses, realistically estimate how many dancers you think you can attract, and figure out a ticket price based on this information. Jaige and Adam recommend setting a price such that the break-even point is about 80% of your capacity, so that you are less likely to lose money if the weekend does

not fill. If it does, you will have a small nest egg to launch the next weekend. Check your math both ways: that is, set a price based on projected expenses, but expenses depend on your choices, and you can base spending choices on what you think people are willing to spend. Note that the more complicated the options you choose, the more difficult it is to plan a budget. There are great advantages to keeping the design of the weekend simple, especially at first.

Other topics we discussed

Programming

- Make sure no one performer is being asked to do too much
- Consider exchange of weekend ticket for working at one workshop; good showcasing opportunity for newer musicians/callers and also added variety and saved money on the budget
- If it is your second year (or later), really pay attention to evaluations
- Focus on keeping the quality of performers really high; be sure those you invite are at an appropriate level for a weekend. After all, participants are giving up their entire weekend and paying you for an experience, so quality really matters.
- Don't feel like you have to cram as much as possible in; a more relaxing schedule has great advantages.
- Build in transition times around sessions and meals, for both performers and participants – helps things start and end on time
- Tap the interests and talents of the performers you have invited
- Consider camper led sessions (group singing, jams, etc.)
- Look at last year's program

Advertising

- Email lists. Ask other organizers in your region
- Flyers. Consider putting 4 per page and cutting to make 1/4 sized flyers, which are cheaper to produce and easier for dancers to put in the pocket.
- Website. Go for clarity; online registration is very useful.
- Facebook page. Make sure someone actively maintains it.
- Contact regional dance communities and get on their radar.
- Perhaps run ads in the CDSS News or other newsletters.
- Make it easy for potential performers to spread the word (i.e., hand them a stack of flyers), suggest they add your event to their online schedules or FB pages if they have them.
- Is someone on your committee a dance gypsy? Deputize them to promote the weekend!

Miscellaneous Topics

- Size of committee: Don't allow your committee to get too big at first. Three to six is a good number.
 - A smaller committee can be more nimble and efficient.
 - The size of committee varies based on the nature of the weekend. You may or may not need a food person, or a billeting person. You must have a programming person.
 - Should the same committee that does a local series also do the weekend? There are advantages to separating these roles, although some overlap is often helpful.
- Volunteers: Consider allowing participants to volunteer in lieu of payment for part or all of the program. Possible volunteer tasks include sweeping, set-up/tear-down, dishes, etc.). This makes

your event affordable for some folks who might not be able to come otherwise and encourages youth participation.

- Festive decoration: Highly recommended. Make the space your own; this makes a weekend more special.
- Seed money: CDSS will provide seed money or safety net money for first-time events in the U.S. or Canada.

Ideas that emerged as we started to design our imaginary weekend

We want a mostly local event for people in our region. Good idea, to keep the costs lower.

Our theme: Community Gratitude. We want it to be accessible for young people and keep it affordable for them. Our vision might go beyond dance (to be determined), in order to make connections between our dance/music interests and other community needs.

People we know own a property that we can use, with a hall in a rural setting, but near an urban center. Accommodations will need to be off site.

Food – we want to eat with those we dance with, and use community talent for food preparation. This fits the theme of the weekend, and is also somewhat necessary, since the hall is not easily accessible to options for eating out.

Single hall dictates that everything in the program happens in one strand. Therefore topics should be of general interest, rather than cater to more specific interests.

To be continued at a dance weekend near you...