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## Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

The world of Samuel Miller,  
a leader in arts management in the U.S.



Mr. Samuel A. Miller

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Samuel A. Miller has had an exceptional career as a presenter, producer, leader of arts funding organizations and consultant in the not-for-profit field of the arts. From 2004 to 2009 he served as President and CEO of Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC). Before that he served as Executive Director of the New England Foundation for the Arts for ten years. During that tenure, Mr. Miller pioneered a number of nationally significant programs, including the National Dance Project and the Cambodian Artists Project. Under his leadership NEFA also launched important new projects in New England like the Creative Economy Initiative (a project gathering information about the contribution of NPO arts activities to the New England economy to confirm the importance of these NPO activities) and Expeditions (a program which disseminates information and uses arts support funding to support touring of interdisciplinary arts projects in the New England region). Prior to NEFA, Mr. Miller served as Managing Director and then Executive Director and President at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (1986-95), one of America's leading summer festivals. Last year he resigned his position as President and CEO of LINC to take the position of President of the Board while pursuing a new career as a freelance producer and consultant. In this interview we spoke with Mr. Miller about his past, present and future activities.

(Interview: Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director of Japan Society, NY)

You have accomplished so many things in your career, and probably there must have been threads of coherency along which you have done things, so I would like to begin by asking you how you started your career in the arts in not-for-profit field.

OK, just quickly (laughs). I grew up in Providence in Rhode Island. My parents were involved in funding a local theater company called Trinity Repertory Company. I studied theater, then worked as a stage manager. I switched to the field of dance early on thanks to, my younger brother Adam who is a choreographer and was a dancer. I worked for Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia. Then, I worked for Pilobolus in Connecticut, and then Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts, where I worked for 10 years. Then I went to the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA). While I was there I was able to keep working on dance projects. In 2004, I left NEFA to work for Leveraging Investments in Creativity (LINC). Then, just last year, 2009, I shifted from serving as President and CEO to President of the Board, and in July started my own company and am doing different kinds of arts projects, either as a consultant or producer.

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So talking about “threads,” I’ve been really interested in dance now for close to 30 years. I’ve been working internationally—actually my first international work was bringing Pilobolus to Japan in 1984. I’ve kept doing both things for the last 25 years, particularly during my 10 years at the Jacob’s Pillow and 10 years at NEFA. My work in dance has been primarily in contemporary dance, and my international work has been primarily in Asia.

### Would you tell us more about the involvement in Asia?

When you look at the modern and contemporary dance in the U.S., a lot of key influences are Asian. When I was at Jacob’s Pillow, people were going and seeing things, there was a fair amount of traffic in those days back and forth between the U.S. and Europe, and there was less traffic and less exchange between the U.S. and Asia. But I just feel like some of the really influential artists were based in Asia and some of the more interesting younger artists I thought would be emerging from there. Artist’s creative development is strengthened by exposure to new information, so I thought it would be important to support exchange between the U.S. and Asia.

While I was at Jacob’s Pillow, I became very involved through the JACCC (Japan America Cultural and Community Center in Los Angeles) with their Japan-US Performing Arts Collaborations Project, led by Jerry Yoshitomi, then JACCC’s director. And I became more committed to international exchange. One of Jerry’s lessons was that you need to do this for a long term: you couldn’t just drop in and out. I learned the importance of the “long-term” in terms of building knowledge and relationships. In the early 90s, two other things happened. I developed with George Kochi (Tokyo) and Ralph Samuelson (New York), both of ACC (Asian Cultural Council), and the Saison Foundation (Tokyo) the Triangle Arts Project, which was an exchange between the U.S., Japan and Indonesia, and it continued for 15 years. About the same time, starting in 1990, I began to work with artists from Cambodia – partnering with ACC, Asia Society and some key partners in Cambodia, with support from Rockefeller Foundation. We have been working with them for 20 years. The relationship between the U.S. and Japan and other Asian countries became a centerpiece for me in the late 90s through early 2000s. I worked hard to involve my colleagues from each region – Indonesia, Japan, the U.S., and other places like Singapore – into the network.

Talking about New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), for 10 years when you were there, many important programs were created and launched. The presence and influence of NEFA became more significant as a result. What was the background behind your move to NEFA, and what was your mission regarding what you thought you would be able to do, or what you would have to do?

Because I was working at Jacob’s Pillow, which is in New England region, I admired and knew of NEFA’s work. It was during the time that NEFA was directed by Holly Sidford. NEFA was really a very important resource to all of us presenters in New England. When Holly left for Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, I had a sense of what they need to do and could continue to do. One of the things that attracted me to it was that during my last couple of years at the Pillow, I had been involved in the development of MassMoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). Originally MassMoCA was conceived as a straightforward museum for “big art.” It was Thomas Krens’ idea (who later became the director of Guggenheim Museum). But when Tom

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left, Joseph Thompson who worked for Tom came up; and Joe and I worked together. What I added was the performing arts partnership, which changed the nature of the project a little bit (laughs). In other words, it was not just about “things” but about “people making things and showing things.” It became not just any exhibition space but a producing and performing place, and that led to the partnership between Jacob’s Pillow, Flynn Theater in Vermont, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, JACCC in Los Angeles and BAM in New York.

I realized at the end how hard it is to both run an institution and build and run the partnerships that the organization needs to participate in. So I went to NEFA because it’s their business to support, to build and run partnerships in arts exchange primarily for performing arts. Presenters, artists and curators needed to be supported through networks and strategic partnerships. I wanted to do that. And one more reason that I wanted to do that was, I became more and more interested in international work, which is hard because it takes time for building relationships.

When I got to NEFA in the mid-90s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was in the midst of the so-called “Cultural Wars,” which led to significantly reduced funding to individual artists. It was a tough time. Dance was vulnerable, because touring programs and fellowship programs were at risk and deconstructed.

### Is NEFA’s the main purpose to support arts performing arts?

It’s not exclusively performing arts. But the reason for the establishment of six regional funding organizations (established under the guidance of the NEA and including the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, Arts Midwest, Mid-America Arts Alliance, , the New England Foundation for the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, and the Western States Arts Federation) is because some agency needed to make it possible for performing artists, primarily, to go and perform from a state to state. A state wanted them to go to other states but they don’t want to write checks to other states. So the support that NEFA gives allows the states and NEA to support of exchange within the U.S. and between the U.S. and other places.

So given that mission and given the dangerous state of funding for dance in 1995 and around that time, we started the National Dance Project. That changed the profile of NEFA because the National Dance Project became – and still is – the primary program that supports the commissioning and touring of contemporary dance in the U.S. Historically, there had been regional and federal programs supporting dance touring. But many of the previously existing programs had not linked to the development of the work and distribution overtly. So the National Dance Project was influenced by what was going on before but it was built differently than the previous programs. And it became the centerpiece of what NEFA is doing.

### Knowing that your personal interest and passion has been in dance, it is not strange at all that you started National Dance Project. But wasn’t there any discussion among your colleagues or board members concerning why the program had to be exclusively for dance?

Yes, there was (laughs). It was an issue but it was a moment in time when it seemed to be an alignment of my passion with what was needed, because New England has a strong dance-presenting community in such facilities as Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, Dartmouth College’s Hopkins Center for the Arts Wesleyan University’s

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Center for the Arts, that is active nationally and depended on artists not just from the region but also from outside of the region. So this was part of their cultural economy – an ability for commissioning and presenting contemporary dance not just within the region but from around the world and around the country. The need was there.

The other thing about dance is that many of the choreographers who we care about don't have fully developed institutions supporting them. Each of them are dependent, in part, on relationships with presenting organizations, to help them, not just be to share and show their work, but also make it. We want to make sure that complex relationship between the choreographer and the institutional partners is built up.

Then, what does dance need? Dance needs to be supported, in a multi-regional context, which to me is international context: the more interactions the better.

So we were able to make the case that in order to achieve the regional goal, we needed to create a national framework. It wasn't the indigenous issue – not one of, "We just need a dance company from Vermont to go to Maine." It was that we needed companies from California, New York and France and Japan to come to New England. In many ways it was what NEFA – in my mind – was built to do, but they had done such things in dance at that scale.

However, at the National Dance Project we have to show the substance of our results both quantitatively and qualitatively. There are many competitors seeking grants and support, and we also have the responsibility to explain the results to the givers of those grants and support. That is why we are extremely conscious of the need to be prepared to be able to explain results.

Talking about "supporting commissioning and touring," National Performance Network (NPN) has been doing that for about two decades, though theirs is not dance-specific. How do you define the uniqueness of the National Dance Project? Is that the scale, or dance-specificity?

The National Dance Project could be designed in the way I designed it because NPN existed. In my mind, it was complementary. NPN was built in a network of small and medium size presenters and organizations in the U.S., helping them develop the project in the performing arts "within" each other, whereas the National Dance Project was not a network. In other words, it wasn't a project we developed "for and between" the people at the table, it was a project where we developed one small table available for any presenters who had an interest in dance. Being focused on dance, the National Dance Project encourages presenters to support artists not just in presentation of their work but also in development of their work; and it is meant to encourage as many presenters as possible to keep supporting dance; and to help presenters with risk management because dance was scary for some presenters in terms of knowledge and economic reasons. Also, you need to make a case for dance and say, "Here is what's happening." So it was designed differently from NPN.

National Dance Project is overseen by 12 leading presenters across the country. They would look at the applications from artists in dance; and they are often in partnership with presenters. We support those presenters and we promote partnerships to the rest of the field. Through that effort, it might reach 100 or more presenters, and over years it might reach to 300 or more presenters. So it is different from NPN in this scale, and it is complementary. They both continue to be essential parts of the performing arts infrastructure in the U.S. Both also have a history of international rela-

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tionships.

I think there are two kinds of presenters. One is those who always care about what is the best for the artists' development of works, and presentation of their work. The other is those concerned more with providing "event" types of things to public, rather than being concerned with ways to support artists and their career.

Presenters who put work on the stage should have some concerns for how the work gets there. Then, unlike theater industry where most theater people own their buildings and do produce, making and showing in a same building is rare in dance. So you need these dance centers, where the presenters have are committed not just to the presentation of the work but also to the development of the work that precedes the event.

When I went to Jacob's Pillow working as managing director with Liz Thompson and then by myself as I assumed her position of Executive Director, the primary resources at the Pillow were "presentational" and "educational." Historically, that was what it has been, like festival and school. We shifted those resources. We made studios useful for three seasons and we added more housing that was artist-friendly, versus student-friendly so that development of the work in residencies became possible. And we built the Studio Theater, which was the development space. The missions do not have to be changed; they just have to be re-interpreted for the time in which you live.

Was your concept of supporting dance – that presenters should be involved in not only presenting but also in the art-making process – a product of your own job experiences in Pilobolus, which is a dance company; and Jacob's Pillow, which is dance presenter?

From the beginning I was interested in how to support artists, helping them to make their work. Many of the artists I was interested in could not afford a full-time manager. The great thing when I shifted to Jacobs Pillow was that the new job enabled me to work with 30 artists a year in some fashion – sometimes pretty deeply such as with Ralph Lemon, and Judith Jamison before she took over Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. It was great that I could work with artists over time without having to be a manager for each of them, which would not have been practical. And, it was dance. (laugh) Then, the NEFA thing came and I thought, "How can I keep doing this?" The National Dance Project is primarily the result of that. It also addressed further issues such as what choreographers need to make really a good work and connect to audience around the country?

Your career transition from NEFA to LINC (Leveraging Investments in Creativity) seems to be the transition from "providing support for artists' art making" to "preparing fundamentals for artists." Has your interest shifted to addressing more bottom-line issues for artists' survival in the society, to enable them to be creative?

When you start out your career, you are, or should be, interested in specific artists, saying, "I really like your work and I would like to support you." So you will work for them as a manager – that's how it was for me at the Pilobolus. But when I shifted to Jacob's Pillow, I was in a position where you can't just build a season based on those artists you loved. You have to work with more artists. That is, you have to build a

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bigger system in order to support the artists you loved and all artists that need to be supported and need to connect audience. The artists you care about would benefit from that.

With NEFA the same thing is true. You don't build the National Dance Project or other regional programs to exclusively serve the artists you love. You build them to serve the passions, needs and aspirations of a lot of other people, including the artists you love. So you are doing more in order to do the thing you care about most. Then, you say, "OK, who needs to do what?" Not everybody who cares about dance needs to go to NEFA and do the National Dance Project; some people should be managers and presenters. So different roles need to be played.

When you look at the artists that you care about, you realize that some of the challenges that they face are not specific to their discipline or their industry. They are things that have to do with the conditions that exist in the society – such as lack of affordable health care, lack of affordable space, lack of professional development opportunities, lack of individual support or markets. Since those challenges are not exclusive to dance, the solution is not simply, "I'm going out to find health care for the choreographer I love." The solution has to be, "How can I develop the strategies that make health care more affordable to ALL artists, including the artists I love."

That is what the LINC is about. LINC was my last version of this – stepping back and saying, "Look, given what artists need, and my particular talent, which is about building partnerships and attracting resources, what do I need to spend my time for in order to affect change and improvement in the conditions faced by artists, including those I care about." NEFA, through National Dance Project and other programs, is operating nationally or even internationally in some cases, but primarily serving performing artists and presenters; whereas LINC is dealing with issues that involve two million artists living in the U.S. – a much larger population.

### Who established LINC?

Holly Sidford set up LINC, and I am one of the authors. It's a little complicated. In 2003, the Ford Foundation made a grant to NEFA when I was there to help Holly design LINC and to intervene as necessary. But for personal reasons, she chose to step away. Since I had contributed to its design and implementation, it made sense that I would be the one to replace her as LINC's President.

### It seems that your achievements and influence at NEFA were more visible than those at LINC.

NEFA is probably close to 40 years old by now. They have been doing great work before me and after me. I didn't found it just like I didn't found Jacob's Pillow or Pilobolus. You come in to those organizations; and you build on what was there and take it into the next level – which is fun to do. On the other hand, LINC is only 5 years old – it's a different thing.

LINC was designed to function for a 10-year period. LINC's job, which is to improve conditions for individual artists in the U.S. through partnerships at the local, regional and national levels, in a way that could be sustained after LINC's investment. So it was built as a kind of institution that was rather to be seen as separate from the success of our partners, which would have the success. The scenario of LINC was that all its functions would be distributed and taken over by all partner organizations after

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10 years.

We wanted to improve the perception of individual artists; we wanted to make them visible and valued, and we wanted to improve the conditions under which they worked. Most of the infrastructure of this country prior to LINC was built to support arts organizations, such as service organizations and funding programs – all are geared toward arts “institutions.” And the role of and contributions made by individual artists were not really understood. So, the idea of “support” was that, “If you support arts institutions, they will support the individual artists.”

**Especially after NEA cut the individual funding.**

Yes. So we built a set of programs based on the issue of how your programs can be more supportive to and inclusive of individual artists if you are a local arts council or state arts agency or community foundation serving the arts in your community. We are just finishing the first five years of the program. During those years, we have worked in 15 communities around the country – regions, states, cities –and they really changed the way that artists are seen, valued and supported in each of those communities. We changed the way that information on health care is organized and offered to individual artists. We changed the way that people looked at community development, such as low-income housing, with understanding of the needs of artists. Then, all those things could be replicated by other communities.

**What is specifically new about in LINC? When the New York Foundation for the Arts was established 40 years ago by New York State’s agency (New York State Council on the Arts), the idea was to support individual artists, and their programs provide individual artists with grants, health insurance, loans, and affordable spaces, etc.**

LINC didn’t want to create a separate infrastructure, like setting up organizational support and setting up support for individual artists. As you said, NYFA does a lot of that in some professional development for individual artists. Creative Capital makes grants and supports professional development; United States Artists is making grants, so does the Guggenheim Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Herb Alpert Foundation and many others. Yes. These are important supports that have been out there.

But what wasn’t happening was the work with different kinds of service providers, both in the arts and outside the arts, to address the needs of the arts community in Washington State or the Bay Area, or in Chicago or New York; adding these issues around somebody’s core issues. So the idea was, again, “complementary” –while acknowledging that artists are still competing effectively for direct support; through partnerships we would be getting to issues around health care, space, information, training, those sorts of things. To address the question of what artists need, and how to respond to their needs; the strategy was not to create a whole new set of permanent institutions. It was to influence the behavior of the existing institutions.

**I see. That is why LINC was planned for a 10-year period? Because once LINC successfully set the issues to be addressed for artist support within the existing organizations, it would then remain for them to be addressed by those organizations without LINC?**

That’s right. When I went to LINC in 2004, I took with me Judilee Reed, who worked

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with me for NEFA. And we got close to the half-way point of the 10-year period, I realized that she was more capable than I was and should be responsible for the next five years. So I spoke to the Board that I wanted to step up to the board and shift the responsibility and the leadership to Judilee. I've done my job for the first 5 years –the same-old thing I have always done: build partnerships and raise money necessary to support those partnerships. But the next five years should be about really perfecting it.

I made that shift partially because I wanted to get back to dance (laughs), and also to get back to international work. For LINC, we were able to create the way to continue to work on the Cambodian project. We also had the program for the first five years on artists and global society, having some interactions in Japan, Australia and the Netherlands. But it wasn't a primary mission of LINC to work internationally. It was dealing with the needs of U.S. artists. I didn't want to dilute the mission, so now I am back to my interest: dance, performing arts and international projects primarily with Asia.

**Are you referring to the Eiko & Koma's Three-year Retrospective project that you just started?**

The Eiko & Koma project that I started to work with Wesleyan University and other partners on is one of a number of things. Through the past year from February to November I worked as a consultant for the Mellon Foundation for their funding strategies on dance and theater. That was interesting. I have worked also with Wesleyan, and we are launching a graduate program –an institute for curatorial practice in performance. We do need very professional development for presenters and curators of dance. Also I am working with a theater in Great Barrington in Massachusetts, called the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center and developing some new programs for them. And I was just in Indonesia, Cambodia and Japan last November working with out longtime partners in these three countries to build another exchange project. It is to try to bring together the two major projects of my work in Asia: the Cambodian Artists Project and the Triangle Project; into a single effort.

**Would you explain about Eiko & Koma's Project? At this moment few Japanese people know about this big retrospective project on this two U.S.-based Japanese artists.**

I am producing a retrospective with Eiko & Koma, which is the three-year project. One of the aspects of that is how can this body of work be developed and shared not just in the U.S. but in Asia as well. Clearly Japan is the centerpiece in that because Eiko & Koma are artists who were born and raised in Japan. But they have developed and presented work outside Japan. How can this project that will look at their entire body of work be best shared with particularly younger people in Japan? So I was there to investigate that idea.

**I guess the Eiko & Koma project can also relate to the Cambodia and Indonesian projects that you are working on.**

Yes, partly, because Eiko & Koma have worked in Cambodia recently and in the past have been working in Indonesia as well. So we are talking in a sense about a tour, but nothing should be that simple. We are also talking about residencies that would

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allow some of the artists who have collaborated with them in Cambodia and/or Indonesia for instance, to come to Japan; and work with them and share some of their work with the Japanese arts community. It's a kind of model of what I want to do, to work with "historic" partners I have worked with in the past, such as the Japan Foundation and the Saison Foundation, to bring artists for non-bilateral exchange: not just US-Japan but multi-lateral. Also it is not simply about performance but about process and context. So that is why it looks to me like a good exchange program. With the historic partners, I think we can play out not just a single project but a series of projects over the next three to five years.

So, freelancing now you have more freedom to focus on what interests you, and focus on the artists you love.

Having more freedom, I think more of history. People like Ralph Samuelson (former director of Asian Cultural Council in NYC) and Jerry Yoshitomi (former Executive Director of JACCC) clearly taught us that only long-term relationships are going to be valuable, as you gain knowledge and trust. It is silly to get into a relationship if you are just going to handle it in short-term on a single result basis. You really need to figure out what you can offer in 10, 20 and 30 years.

Thank you very much for you time and your very interesting story.