[re] generation

philadelphiadanceprojects
LOCAL DANCE HISTORY PROJECT
Michael Bello and Ishmael Houston-Jones “What We’re Made Of” (1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

[re]generation
contemporary dance | past meets future
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[Left] Michael Bedd “Into The Light” (circa 1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

[Right] Agape improvising at PMA
Wendy Hammarstrom, Elizabeth Luft and
Susan Yimaha O’Connor
Photo: Steve Holden
The impetus for this project was practical. Several card boxes had been following me around for over 30 years from place to place to where I now live, and it was time to clean and clear spaces. The contents of the boxes marked “archive” were a jumble of disintegrating papers and odd video formats, slides, photos and super-8 film reels. I decided, as I am far enough away from my performing artist days, to take a look. I don’t know how to begin the task of preparing for a formal archive, but was sensing that this was my ultimate goal. How to begin? So I did what I have always been doing when it comes to getting art out and about, and that is, to invite others into the fray.

I decided that an arbitrary starting point might be with the artists who appeared in the Dance & Dancers concert at the Harold Prince Theater in 1980. Thirty years ago I had invited some of my dancer friends and colleagues to join me in presenting our work in a formal theater. At the time there was no local dance presenter other than those in converted storefront galleries. (Etage, Painted Bride and Nexus, for example). Many of us had taken to the streets and parks quite literally. I felt it was time to place our work on a real stage and see how we fared. The Painted Bride helped us get support from the PA Arts Council. The two weekends of “post modern” artists at the Harold Prince Theater at Penn’s Annenberg Center sold out. Only the Alternative press took notice, (since there were no dance critics at the three daily papers at that time).

The choreographer/dancers featured were: Jano Cohen, Wendy Hammarstrom, me plus Ishmael Houston-Jones who collaborated with Michael Biello (who was also a “performance” and visual artist) and musician/composer Dan Martin, along with two other dancers Tonic Guerra and Jeff McMahon. Actually, some of the other works were collaborations with other dancers, musicians and visual artists, as well. So, I contacted Jano, Wendy, Ishmael, Dan and Michael to see if they were game to look back at that time and reconstruct or present in some way something of what we were doing then. They were all up for it. And so Philadelphia Dance Projects’ Local Dance History Project came to be.

With a small grant from the PA Humanities Council, we began planning. Further into the process The Pew Center for Culture and Heritage through Dance Advance awarded the Project a large enough grant to make it happen.

We five artists met over several months in 2009 along with Lisa Kraus and Anna Drozdowski, whom I had invited for their exemplary skills at articulation, and who would moderate discussions around the Forum and performances.

We kept Wendy, who is on the West Coast, in the loop via e-mail. We discussed the charge of delivering some sort of semblance to the work and flavor, and temper of those times to a new generation of artists and to contemporary dance-going audiences vis-a-vis reconstructed excerpts of works to be performed as part of Philadelphia Dance Projects Presents 2010. I hoped that the performances and the forum day would answer some questions I frequently get from younger artists who are curious about what “came before” on the Philly dance scene.
The audition, rehearsal process and the organizing and administering of all the logistics around the project continually built toward the suspense of its realization. For me, the doing of all this never hinted at how fulfilling seeing the works in performance would actually be. To see the consummate performers in “He & He,” “What We’re Made Of,” “DEAD,” “The Wonder of Living Things,” “Snow Falling on Waves,” and “Stolen Poem,” was gratifying in every way. The works emerged fresh, alive—full of vigor, humanity and beauty.

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The Project has also brought to the surface very meaningful and important aspects of being creative dance artists that we seldom give voice to:

what do we mean by a dance community?
what styles and creative pursuits are innovative or experimental?
what is the value of intergenerational exchange?
why is it important to share our history?

This catalog is meant to reflect on the past and the present as seen through the process and fruition of the Project. The Project models a way to the future in terms of to share and to keep a history. We hope it will serve to extend the conversation about the curated programming. In this way, as with a visual art catalog, the experience of the live event is given context and a home outside of the frame of the theater. Despite the technological advances of media, dance is predominately passed down in the same method as oral history. To capture that history in this catalog format gives weight to the ephemeral we endeavoured when it all came together. It will become something to hold onto beyond the paper program, and enrich the experience of those who were there, as audience or performers, as well as illuminate the event for those who were unable to participate.

PDP’s Local Dance History Project could become an impetus to create mechanisms for people who want to access information about local dance artists and their history. I can envision a next-phase of making all the information and documentation that this Project has engendered readily accessible, as the assemblage of images and words in this catalog is commemorative but by no means complete.

The Local Dance History Project is getting a jump start on my cardboard boxes. Materials have been digitalized and on the way towards a 21st-century archive. It was so much more pleasurable and richer sharing this experience with everyone, of “re-membering” (to conjure the original root meaning of re-constituting the body back together) both physically and philosophically. To be continued….

[April 2010]
Anna Drozdowski formulated seven questions for performers in the Local Dance History Project. How has working on this project affected your idea of “local”? 

HEATHER: I thought I knew most of the dancers here in Philly, but I was happily surprised to be cast with ALL folks that I have never performed with, and have actually only seen few in other performances. My sense of the local scene was expanded by this experience, and I know the Philly modern dance community, now, to be larger than I had originally thought.

SCOTT: Having lived in Philly for the past 6 years, the local dance community can, at times, seem very small and all too familiar. However, after completing this project, I have a different perspective regarding those who make up the local dance community. I first met Dan Martin and Michael Biello at their gallery three years ago, during the Fringe Festival. However, only after PDP announced the Local Dance History artists did I realize that they are performers and have been making work here for over thirty years. This project has certainly made me wonder what other inspiring artist are just beyond my “local radar.”

GREG: It was so great to connect to the local dance community from that era, because you saw so many continuities, as well as feeling the distance of time. It’s hard to understand how “sub-culture” is transmitted, because we hear about socialization as happening in homes/from parents/mainstream institutions. When was I socialized as a phily dancer? Yet I feel so at home here with the morest and priorities and ideals....

JOHN: Can’t say that it has...

WILLIAM: Since graduating UArts I have stayed relatively close to my connections established at the school, professionally doing most of my work with the professors I had there. I have been living in Philadelphia for six years now and have only made superficial connections with some of the wonderful “local” artists here. This project has affected my idea of local drastically, in that it has introduced me deeply to the local network of artists and my place within this community.

ALIE: I don’t know, honestly. Someone wrote Movement Brigade’s show up this week as “local” and I thought, yeah, we’re local. I still feel like I am becoming "local." I guess to me that means work that comes from the energy of Philly and people living and making work here now.

Tell me what I’m missing….What you most want to talk about regarding your involvement in this process?

HEATHER: This was awesome….let’s bring folks together again in these awesome, framed arrangements that might not otherwise happen…. Thanks for doing this.

WILLIAM: I just wanted to thank you and Terry for having this series. I thought it was great and I look forward for things to come.

THERESA: What I’d like to talk to most is how important that funding projects such as this are in our community. I find it upsetting that so much funding for the arts has been cut in our community. There is so much to learn and experience from dance and I feel sorry that those that make the decision as to how much funding the arts get (or don’t get) don’t appreciate dance enough to give organizations enough money to make performances like this possible.

ALIE: I don’t know, it was very enjoyable. The dances didn’t seem “old” to me. They seemed fresh. It seemed like to me this could have been work that was now. I loved Dan and Michael’s work. The playfulness of it was so inspiring to me. I guess the whole show made me think about dancing—that’s too dancey? What isn’t dancey? Do people like dances? Do they like anything? And also, I should note. This show made me feel like I was kind of part of the dance community in Philly, which has a very closed feeling to me usually. Meaning, it’s small and a little insular and maybe hard to connect into at times. Somehow, through working on this show, I felt like I was not such an outsider all the time. And that was a very nice feeling.
Acknowledgements

There are many to be thanked.

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Terry Fox, PDP Executive Director

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...supporting contemporary dance through projects that encourage artists and audiences to more fully participate and engage in the experience and pursuit of dance as an evolving form.

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Ishmael Houston-Jones and Michael Biello, “What We’re Made Of” (1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

(right) “Snow Falling On Waves” (2010)
Photo: Brian Mengini